Pale Fire

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Vladimir Nabokov was born the first of five children in a wealthy family of Russian nobility. Nabokov's father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, was a lawyer and journalist, and his mother, Yelena Ivanovna Rukavishnikova, was the heiress of a successful gold mine. Nabokov enjoyed a privileged childhood on his family's Saint Petersburg estate, and he developed an early love for literature and writing. Nabokov published his first book of poems, *Stikhi* ("Poems"), in 1916 when he was just 17 years old. His father was a prominent leader of Russia's Constitutional Democratic Party, and when the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, Nabokov and his family were forced to leave Russia for Crimea. No one expected the revolution to last long, and the family assumed that they would return to Russia; however, by 1919, the entire Nabokov family was exiled in Europe. Nabokov went to England, where he enrolled at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, to study zoology and language. Nabokov was a gifted student, consistently testing at the top of his class, and he earned a BA in 1922. After college, he moved to Berlin, where the rest of his family was exiled. Nabokov stayed in Berlin for several years and became a popular poet. In 1925, he married Véra Evseyevna Slonim and their only child, Dmitri, was born in 1934. In 1937, Nabokov and his young family moved to France, but they then relocated to the United States in 1940 due to World War II. The Nabokovs initially arrived in New York City, but Nabokov accepted a teaching position at Wellesley College in Massachusetts in 1941. Nabokov published his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, that same year and later became a United States citizen in 1945. As a lepidopterist (an expert on moths and butterflies), Nabokov was the curator of lepidoptery at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology. He also taught Russian and European literature at Cornell University in New York from 1948 to 1959, where he had several prominent students, including future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and writer Thomas Pynchon. The success and financial security that followed the 1955 publication of *Lolita* allowed Nabokov to step away from teaching, and in 1961, he relocated to Montreux, Switzerland, and began writing full time. Nabokov wrote several novels, nonfiction works, and books of poetry while in Switzerland, including *Pale Fire* in 1962, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* in 1967, and *Carrousel*, which was published posthumously in 1987. He died in 1977 at the age of 78 after a lengthy and undiagnosed illness. Nabokov is widely accepted as one of the finest writers of English prose, and many critics and scholars count both *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* among the best novels ever written.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pale Fire's narrator, Charles, tells of the Russia of his childhood, a "different Russia" that rejected tyranny and inequality, which is a reference to Russia prior to the Russian Revolution. The Russian Revolution began in 1917, when the monarchy was abolished, and the Russian Provisional Government seized control of the country based on the interests of wealthy capitalists and aristocrats. Working class militias known as Soviets sprang up and opposed the Provisional Government. For a time, both the Provisional Government and the Soviets controlled Russia—the Provisional Government had control over the country as a whole, and the Soviets had power over the middle and lower classes—but this system of dual power did not last long. The Bolsheviks, a group of socialist Soviets led by Vladimir Lenin, formed the Red Army and gained control of Russia. Under the Bolsheviks, a new government was formed, and Russia was reborn as a socialist state. Of course, civil war followed and pitted the Bolsheviks' Red Army against the White Army of counterrevolutionaries. The Russian Civil War finally ended on October 25, 1922, in favor of the Red Army and the Soviets, which officially ended the Russian Revolution. The Soviets retained control of Russia and exerted power over the nearby countries of Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which effectively created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Postmodernism began in the second half of the 20th century, and it was generally a rejection of modernism and traditional notions of art. One of the ways postmodernists like Nabokov reimagined literature was through metafiction, a type of writing that draws attention to the construction and creation of a literary work. *Pale Fire*—in which the narrator, Charles, constantly points out the creative process—is widely regarded as a prominent piece of metafiction, along with Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. *Pale Fire* is also known for its vivid description of exile and the longing for one's country that often accompanies it, a theme that is also explored in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald, and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon. Lastly, *Pale Fire* examines sexuality and bias against the gay community, which can also be seen in Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Pale Fire
- **When Written:** 1962
- **Where Written:** Montreux, Switzerland
- **When Published:** 1962
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** New Wye (a town in the United States) and Zembla (a fictional country near the Russian border)
- **Climax:** Jakob Gradus kills John Shade.
- **Antagonist:** Jakob Gradus
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Literary Irony. At a social event in 1916, Zinaida Gippius, a famous Russian writer and philosopher, reportedly said to Nabokov's father, "Please tell your son he will never be a writer." Gippius made her request after Nabokov published his first book of poetry, and Nabokov went on to become a celebrated writer of both poetry and prose.

Accidental Death. In 1922, Nabokov's father was shot and killed in Berlin trying to shield Pavel Milyukov, a fellow exile and leader of Russia's Constitutional Democratic Party, from an assassin's bullet. A similar tragedy is seen in *Pale Fire*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Pale Fire is a novel written in the form of a scholarly work: the annotated edition of the poet John Shade's final poem, "Pale Fire." As such, the novel consists of the text of the poem itself, plus a Foreword, Commentary, and Index written by Shade's colleague and neighbor, Professor Charles Kinbote. As the poem's editor, Kinbote's job is to help readers understand Shade's poem by providing analysis and context—a task at which he comically fails, since he devotes most of his Commentary to telling unrelated stories of King Charles the Beloved, the deposed king of Kinbote's native country of Zembla.

Pale Fire has, in a sense, two plots: the apparent plot (which is what the delusional Kinbote *tells* readers has happened) and the true plot (which is what *actually* happened, although it takes a lot of careful reading to discern). In the novel's apparent plot (the storyline that Kinbote earnestly believes and narrates to his readers), Kinbote and Shade are close friends and neighbors in the college town of New Wye. On their frequent nightly walks, Kinbote tells Shade true stories about King Charles of Zembla: his reign, the revolution that overthrew him, and his daring escape from Zembla. Kinbote believes that the poem that Shade is working on will be all about Zembla, incorporating these stories about Charles the Beloved. As Kinbote reveals more about King Charles, it becomes clear that Kinbote believes that he *is* King Charles—he is merely disguised as Charles Kinbote, a professor of Zemblan at Wordsmith College, to avoid the extremist Zemblan assassin Gradus who is trying to hunt him down.

On the day that Shade finishes his poem, Kinbote invites Shade to dinner. As Shade and Kinbote cross the street, Gradus appears on Kinbote's doorstep, pulls out a gun, and accidentally kills Shade while attempting to murder Kinbote (whom he knows to be King Charles). In her grief, Shade's diabolical and conniving widow, Sybil, grants Kinbote permission to edit Shade's final poem, but when Kinbote reads the poem, he's devastated to find that it's not about Zembla—it's actually an autobiographical poem about Shade's family, the natural world, and his obsession with the idea that human consciousness can survive death. Nonetheless, as Kinbote re-reads the poem, he realizes that Shade has subtly inserted many references to Zembla and to Kinbote's stories about King Charles, and Shade has even predicted the approach of his own assassin, Gradus—this is miraculous, since Shade knew nothing of the man until the moment he died. Kinbote blames Sybil's nefarious influence for the fact that Zembla isn't more explicitly at the center of "Pale Fire," and he devotes his Commentary on the poem to explaining how the poem is actually about Zembla.

Of course, this is not at all what has happened—Kinbote is a delusional megalomaniac and his narration is completely unreliable. In fact, his name is not even Kinbote; the novel's narrator is actually the professor V. Botkin who believes himself to be the exiled King of Zembla living in disguise as Charles Kinbote. A careful reader can piece together Nabokov's clues and arrive at the novel's true plot, which is as follows.

V. Botkin is a Russian-born language professor at Wordsmith College. He's not well-liked by his colleagues because he's unpleasant, eccentric, thin-skinned, self-centered, gay, and a pedophile—not to mention clinically insane, suffering from delusions and hallucinations that he cannot control. Botkin is renting a house from Judge Goldsworth, a local judge with a reputation for being excessively punitive, and the house happens to be across the street from where John and Sybil Shade live. Botkin admires Shade's poetry, he's desperately lonely, and he's deteriorating mentally, so he becomes obsessed with the notion that, if he tells Shade stories about his homeland of Zembla (which is not a real place—it's part of Botkin's delusion), then Shade will incorporate those stories into a masterful poem.

Believing that he and Shade are close friends, Botkin relentlessly badgers Shade for attention, and, whenever he gets it, he prattles on about Zembla and King Charles, failing to ask Shade anything meaningful about himself or his life. While

Shade finds Botkin to be annoying and even occasionally offensive, he humors his neighbor out of kindness, since he knows how lonely and distressed Botkin is. Botkin speaks of King Charles in the third person to try to disguise what he believes is the truth: that he himself is King Charles, living in disguise in New Wye. Shade knows that Botkin believes this, but (perhaps out of kindness) he treats these delusions as though they're real.

Throughout the month of July, Shade is working on a poem, although he won't tell Botkin any specifics about it. Certain that the poem is about Zembla and unable to contain his excitement, Botkin obsessively spies on Shade. He looks in the windows of his home and even once barges in through a back door unannounced. Meanwhile, his mental state deteriorates further, and on the day that Shade finishes his poem, Botkin hallucinates that Shade is standing behind him telling him to come over that night.

Botkin does go to Shade's house that evening, and he finds Shade crying quietly and carrying the newly finished manuscript of "Pale Fire." Shade agrees to go to Botkin's house for some celebratory wine, and Botkin grabs the manuscript—ostensibly to steady Shade as he crosses the street. On Botkin's doorstep is a stranger, and this man turns around and fires a gun at Shade, killing him instantly. When the police arrive, the murderer tells them the truth: that his name is Jack Grey and he's an escaped inmate at a facility for the criminally insane. He hitchhiked to New Wye to kill the judge who sentenced him: Judge Goldsworth, who owns Botkin's house. It was previously mentioned that Shade resembles Judge Goldsworth, so this was a case of mistaken identity—Grey believed that Shade was the judge. Botkin dismisses this story as a cover story meant to disguise the politically inconvenient fact that an assassin came so close to killing a former king.

In the wake of Shade's death, Botkin manipulates Sybil into signing a contract giving him full control of the publication of "Pale Fire." However, Sybil and the members of the English department at Wordsmith quickly realize that this is a terrible idea—Botkin is completely unqualified to edit the poem, as he's mentally unhinged and he's not even a scholar of literature (he teaches in an unspecified foreign language department). It's too late, though—amidst all this local unpleasantness, Botkin flees New Wye to an isolated cabin out west where he holes up to write his Commentary on "Pale Fire." Once he's finished, Nabokov implies that Botkin takes his own life.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Narrator/Charles Kinbote – Charles Kinbote is the narrator of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. He is a professor at Wordsmith College, and he lives across the street from John Shade. Kinbote is a desperately lonely man who is narcissistic, unpleasant to others, and has pedophilic tendencies. In addition, he is insane—he has strange delusions and even hallucinations, which means that his version of events rarely aligns with the truth. According to Kinbote, his true identity is King Charles the Beloved, the former king of Zembla who has been exiled to America in the aftermath of a revolution. However, as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Zembla is an imagined world in which Kinbote can be the man he wants to be: a beloved and admired king, powerful and competent, and at the center of all events. (Actually, it seems that "Kinbote" itself is an imaginary identity—Nabokov subtly but repeatedly implies that his novel's narrator is, in truth, the Russian-born professor V. Botkin who genuinely believes that he is King Charles disguised as Kinbote.) During Kinbote's time at Wordsmith College, he tells Shade relentlessly about Zembla, hoping that Shade's newest poem will be all about King Charles's escape—however, after Shade is murdered on the street in a case of mistaken identity, Kinbote gains possession of the manuscript of "Pale Fire" and realizes that the poem isn't about Zembla at all. After manipulating Shade's widow, he becomes the editor of "Pale Fire," and he writes a bizarre and self-centered Foreword, Commentary, and Index to the poem, all of which argue that the poem—while appearing to be about Shade's family and love of nature and interest in the afterlife—is subtly all about Zembla. Kinbote also advances the conspiracy theory (which he genuinely believes) that Shade was shot by the Zemblan assassin Gradus who was aiming for Kinbote, attempting to kill the disguised King of Zembla. Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Kinbote is in tremendous distress, both because of his loneliness and because his mental health is deteriorating. At the end, it is implied that Kinbote takes his own life.

John Shade – John Shade is a distinguished poet and English professor at Wordsmith College in New Wye. He is Sybil's husband and Hazel's father, and he lives across the street from Charles Kinbote, a deranged acquaintance whose company he sometimes tolerates out of kindness. Shade lives his whole life in New Wye, in the very house in which he was born. After his parents died when he was an infant, Shade was raised by his eccentric Aunt Maud and he married Sybil, his high school sweetheart. Shade is a genius, but his life is simple and ordinary—his greatest pleasures in life are poetry, his family, and learning about nature. In the final three weeks of his life (before being murdered in a case of mistaken identity), Shade writes the poem "Pale Fire," which details his lifelong quest to learn what happens after death, his grief over his daughter's suicide, his love for nature and for his wife, and his abiding belief that the universe has a beautiful design that is mostly imperceptible to human beings, but which points to the likelihood that human consciousness survives death in some form. On the day in which Shade nearly completes his poem,

Kinbote invites him over for wine. As they cross the street, Shade is shot by an escaped lunatic who mistakes Shade for Kinbote's landlord, Judge Goldsworth (although Kinbote insists that the Zemblan assassin Gradus murdered Shade). Some scholars believe that Shade's consciousness persisted after his death and helped Kinbote to write his bizarre Commentary to "Pale Fire"; other scholars believe that Shade and Kinbote are the same person (that either Kinbote is an invention of Shade's and Shade himself wrote both the poem and the Commentary, or that Shade is an invention of Kinbote's).

King Charles – King Charles the Beloved is the former king of Zembla. Recently overthrown in a revolution, he escaped to America where he lives in disguise as a professor. Charles Kinbote, the novel's narrator, believes that he is the exiled King Charles living in disguise, but Nabokov implies that both King Charles and Kinbote are actually delusions; Zembla does not exist, and the novel's protagonist is, in truth, the mentally ill professor V. Botkin who sincerely believes that he is the exiled king of a nonexistent nation. Despite being imagined, King Charles has a robust backstory. He grew up in the ornate Zemblan palace and knew from an early age that he was gay. His extravagant affairs with uncomfortably young boys were an open secret in Zembla that didn't generate much scandal. While he married Queen Disa because he felt obligated to produce an heir, he was unable to consummate their marriage and, after treating her cruelly, he sent her back to her home in the South of France so that he could continue his lavish affairs. When leftist revolutionaries toppled the Zemblan monarchy, they held King Charles captive in a lumber room in the palace. After realizing that he knew of a secret passage in the back of the room's closet, however, Charles fled the palace and escaped Zembla with the help of his friend Odon and hundreds of admirers who all dressed like the King to throw off the police. After relocating to an American university and assuming the disguise of a professor, King Charles was hunted down by the Zemblan extremist Gradus, although Gradus was too incompetent an assassin to kill Charles; he missed and hit John Shade instead.

Jakob Gradus – According to Kinbote, Jakob Gradus is one of the extremists who takes over Zembla and overthrows King Charles, after which he tries to hunt down the exiled King and kill him. In Kinbote's account, Gradus is incompetent to a humiliating degree; he's stupid, fanatical, uncoordinated, and utterly inept at his one job, assassination. Nonetheless, Kinbote narrates at length Gradus's long journey from Zembla to New Wye, synchronizing the story of Gradus's travels with John Shade's progress on "Pale Fire." While Kinbote is utterly convinced that Gradus killed John Shade while attempting to kill Kinbote himself, Nabokov suggests that this is utterly delusional. In fact, there is no such person as Gradus (Zembla itself is a delusion of Kinbote's); Shade's murderer is a man named Jack Grey whom Judge Goldsworth (Kinbote's landlord) once sentenced to an asylum. Grey escapes from the asylum and hitches a ride to New Wye where he intends to kill Goldsworth. Since Shade looks a bit like Judge Goldsworth, Grey mistakes him for the judge and kills him. Kinbote claims that he interviewed Gradus in prison where Gradus recanted the story about being Jack Grey, but his story doesn't add up. Grey ultimately kills himself in prison.

Sybil Shade – Sybil is John Shade's wife and Hazel's mother. John and Sybil have been married for 40 years, and they're profoundly in love; Sybil is the only person in the world with whom John shares his drafts, and they share a deep appreciation for nature and domestic life. Like John, Sybil is devastated when their only child, Hazel, commits suicide as a teenager, and the couple struggles to make sense of what—if anything—her death means. Throughout the novel, it's clear that Kinbote and Sybil do not get along. Kinbote is deeply misogynistic and he thinks that it's Sybil's fault that he and John aren't closer (it doesn't occur to him that John doesn't like him very much and that Sybil protects her husband from Kinbote's badgering presence because of that). After Shade's death, when Kinbote reads "Pale Fire" and realizes that it isn't about Zembla, he blames Sybil for that, too, claiming that she censored the poem. Sybil and Kinbote fall out entirely after Shade's death, likely due to a disagreement over the manuscript of "Pale Fire." In the immediate aftermath of Shade's death, Kinbote's gardener falsely tells Sybil that Kinbote tried to shield Shade from the bullets, and Kinbote uses this to manipulate Sybil into signing over the rights to the poem to him. After she realizes how horrible an idea this is, she tries to insert two other Wordsmith professors as co-editors, which Kinbote finds outrageous. After this, they never speak again.

Hazel Shade – Hazel is John and Sybil's daughter who died by suicide as a young adult, just a couple of years before the action of the novel. While Hazel is described as smart and curious, one characteristic haunts her throughout her life: she is quite ugly, having taken after her father rather than her mother. This leads her to be excluded in school and, later, it means that men aren't romantically interested in her. In her loneliness, Hazel develops into something of an eccentric, particularly in her relationship to paranormal phenomena. After the death of her beloved Aunt Maud, it appears that Maud's ghost is haunting the Shade home, although Hazel's parents and her doctor believe that these disturbances are created by Hazel herself. Later, when rumors emerge that a nearby barn is haunted, Hazel doggedly investigates and claims to find a spirit there. When Shade's secretary, Jane Provost, sets Hazel up on a blind date with Jane's cousin Pete, the date goes horrifically; Pete is disgusted when he sees Hazel, and he invents an excuse to leave, which hurts Hazel so badly that she takes the bus to a nearby lake and drowns herself. The scholar Brian Boyd has argued persuasively that there is evidence in *Pale Fire* that Hazel's consciousness survives death and influences both her father's

composition of "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's invention of Zembla—see Boyd's book *Nabokov's Pale Fire* for more.

Professor V. Botkin – Professor Botkin is a Russian-born professor at Wordsmith College. While he is barely mentioned throughout the novel, the several references that Kinbote does make are conspicuous; taken together, they suggest that Kinbote is, in fact, Botkin. For example, apropos of nothing, Kinbote expresses his joy that Professor Botkin does not have to interact with the horrible head of the Russian department—but as a narcissist, Kinbote does not empathize with others enough to feel their joy, so his connection to Botkin must be more personal. Further evidence that Kinbote is merely a delusion of Botkin's comes in the index: aside from the Shade family and Kinbote himself, Botkin is the only resident of New Wye who rates his own entry. This suggests his paramount importance to the novel—he is, in fact, its narrator.

The Gardener – Kinbote's gardener in New Wye is a former male nurse who was looking to get into horticulture when Charles offered to give him a job and support him financially. Kinbote implies that he is sexually interested in the gardener and that he took the young man in to alleviate his own desperate loneliness. After having something of a premonition, the gardener appears conspicuously in the moment before Shade's death. This echoes a moment from Shade's childhood, in which he had a seizure (his first experience of death) while playing with a tin toy of a gardener pushing a wheelbarrow; in both cases, a gardener with a wheelbarrow appeared immediately before an experience of death. These kinds of resonances are proof to Shade of the universe being orderly and designed. After Shade's death, the gardener falsely tells Sybil that Charles jumped in front of the bullet trying to save John's life, and she is so impressed with Charles's heroism that she agrees to give Charles the legal rights to "*Pale Fire*."

Gerald Emerald – Gerald Emerald is a member of the English Department at Wordsmith College and Kinbote's nemesis. According to Kinbote, Emerald and other Wordsmith faculty are cruel to him because they're jealous of his close relationship with Shade. However, it's clear that Kinbote and Shade are not actually very close, and it seems that Emerald is primarily mean to Kinbote because he is gay. While Emerald is cruel to Kinbote, Kinbote is also unpleasant to Emerald in return. Gerald Emerald wears a conspicuous bottle-green velvet jacket, which links him with the Zemblan extremist Izumrudov (also wearing a green velvet jacket) who informs Gradus that they have found King Charles's American address. In fact, *izumrudov* means "emerald" in Russian, and this concordance between Gerald Emerald and Izumrudov provides evidence that Zembla isn't real but is instead just a delusion in which Kinbote can construct the world more to his liking. On the day that Shade dies, Kinbote claims that Emerald gives Gradus a ride to Shade's house. This is obviously false, though, as Gradus's own story—that he hitchhiked with a trucker—makes more sense, and Kinbote himself admits that Emerald would never own up to having given Gradus a ride.

Judge Goldsworth – Judge Goldsworth is the owner of the house that Kinbote rents across the street from John and Sybil Shade. Goldsworth is a notoriously punitive judge, and Kinbote notes that he has left many men locked up and nursing revenge fantasies. It's also noted that John Shade slightly resembles Judge Goldsworth. Both of these facts become relevant at the novel's climax when a man shoots and kills Shade on Goldsworth's porch. Kinbote claims that this was the Zemblan assassin Gradus who was aiming at him but missed, but the truth is that Shade was killed by Jack Grey, a madman who escaped an institution and meant to kill Goldsworth—the man who sentenced him to the institution—but accidentally shot Shade instead, since the men resemble one another. Goldsworth himself never appears in the novel, since he's on sabbatical in Europe at the time.

Queen Disa – Queen Disa is King Charles's wife. She first meets King Charles when she is 19 years old, and the King agrees to marry her despite being gay because he feels pressure to produce an heir. Despite Disa's kindness, charm, and persistence, Charles is never able to consummate the marriage, and he is quite cruel to his young bride. He has very little empathy for her suffering and his affairs publicly humiliate her. While Charles doesn't feel anything for Disa in waking life, he often has dreams in which he loves her more profoundly than he has ever loved anyone and wants to tell her but cannot find her. His dreams indicate that, on some level, he knows how much she suffers and he sees her kindness in spite of it, but he is unable to express or feel any of this while awake. When their marriage fails, she moves back to her family's villa on the French Rivera, but she never stops trying to help the King. His whereabouts in the United States are discovered after Andronnikov and Niagarin break into her villa and steal his letter from her bureau.

Queen Blenda – Queen Blenda is King Charles's mother and King Alfin's wife. She dies of a rare blood condition exactly 33 years before John Shade's death. Charles and his mother weren't close and he has no love for her, but for a while he believes himself to be haunted by her ghost. This is likely due to his knowledge that his mother didn't approve of his relationships with men, although he refused to stop on her behalf.

Iris Acht – Iris Acht was a famous Zemblan actress and the mistress of King Charles's grandfather. To facilitate their affair, the King had a secret passage constructed between his dressing room and her dressing room at the Zemblan theater. Iris Acht supposedly killed herself in 1888, but it's common knowledge that Iris was strangled in her dressing room by another actor who was a member of the Shadows, Zembla's extremist group. In childhood, King Charles discovers the secret passage in the back of a closet, and this passage later

helps him flee the palace after the Zemblan revolution.

Odon – A Zemblan actor and filmmaker, Odon is King Charles's most loyal ally in the palace. After the Zemblan revolution, he pretends to be a revolutionary so that he can stay close to King Charles and help relay messages between the King and his followers. Odon is instrumental to helping King Charles to flee Zembla; he plans various aspects of the King's escape, transports him across the border, and even impersonates him to help throw the police off his trail. According to the novel's index, Odon is an alias for Donald O'Donnell; indeed, Odon is Sylvia O'Donnell's son, and he puts Charles in touch with his mother, who eases his transition to America by finding him a job at Wordsmith. After Odon and Charles flee Zembla, Odon moves to Paris to direct movies.

Sylvia O'Donnell – A wealthy socialite with several ex-husbands, Sylvia is Odon's mother and a trustee at Wordsmith College. At Odon's behest, she helps King Charles immigrate to America by picking him up when he parachutes into a field outside Baltimore, letting him stay in her home for a time, and then getting him a job at Wordsmith.

Andronnikov – Andronnikov is a Russian man working for the Zemblan extremists, and he is Niagarin's partner. Andronnikov and Niagarin are hired by the Zemblan extremists to find the crown jewels. They ransack the entire palace but do not find anything (the novel implies that this is because the jewels aren't in the palace at all). Andronnikov and Niagarin are also hired to break into Queen Disa's villa on the French Riviera and they steal some paperwork that reveals King Charles's whereabouts in America, which ultimately points Gradus to New Wye. Andronnikov is tall and handsome and Kinbote insists that he is a lovely man.

Niagarin – Niagarin is a Russian man working for the Zemblan extremists, and he is Andronnikov's partner. Niagarin and Andronnikov are hired by the Zemblan extremists to find the crown jewels, and they are later tasked with breaking into Queen Disa's French villa to steal paperwork regarding King Charles's secret whereabouts. Like Andronnikov, Niagarin is an extremely pleasant man. He is short and overweight, and he is quite charming.

Oleg – Oleg, the Duke of Rahl, was King Charles's favorite childhood playmate and, the novel implies, his first sexual partner. When King Charles first discovers the secret passageway in his grandfather's old dressing room closet, he explores it with Oleg. King Charles later uses the same secret passageway to escape the palace after the Zemblan revolution. By this time, Oleg is long-dead as a result of a toboggan accident, but Charles feels Oleg's presence in the tunnel.

Professor Hurley – Professor Hurley is the head of the English Department at Wordsmith College. After Shade's death, Professor Hurley circulates a memo around the English Department that claims that Shade's final poem, "Pale Fire," has fallen into the hands of a man "unqualified" to edit it, who also happens to have a "deranged mind." Of course, Professor Hurley is talking about Kinbote (whom the readers already know to be unreliable, which makes Hurley seem credible). Due to Hurley's credibility, it's worth believing him when he says that Kinbote's story about Gradus trying to assassinate the exiled King of Zembla is nonsense—according to Hurley, Shade was shot by an escaped lunatic who mistook Shade for Judge Goldsworth, which is a much more believable story than Kinbote's.

Aunt Maud – Aunt Maud is Shade's aunt who raised him after his parents died. A painter who loved the grotesque and morbid, Maud is something of an eccentric who likely scandalized the stodgy townsfolk in New Wye. During Hazel's teenage years, Maud's health deteriorates, she loses her ability to speak, and she dies in an institution. After her death, a poltergeist appears in the Shade home, and while it might be Aunt Maud haunting them from beyond the grave, the novel implies that the phenomena are actually caused by Hazel processing her grief.

Fleur – Fleur is King Charles's old friend and the daughter of Queen Blenda's favorite Countess. Before King Charles marries Queen Disa, Fleur moves into King Charles's room and tries to seduce him. Of course, King Charles isn't interested in women, and he ultimately rejects her. Fleur later ends up working for Queen Disa at her French villa.

Jane Provost – Jane Provost (pseudonymously called "Jane Dean" in the poem "Pale Fire") is Shade's secretary and typist. She sets Hazel Shade up on a blind date with her cousin, Pete Provost, which goes terribly awry. Pete ultimately rejects Hazel, which leads Hazel to drown herself in a lake. After Shade's death, Kinbote tracks Jane down and interviews her about the Shade family.

Pete Provost – Pete Provost (pseudonymously called "Pete Dean" in the poem "Pale Fire") is Jane Provost's cousin. Jane sets Pete up on a blind date with Hazel, but Pete is unimpressed with Hazel's looks and finds an excuse to leave. Pete is just one of many men who apparently reject Hazel, and after he rejects her on their blind date, Hazel walks into a frozen lake and drowns herself.

Oswin Bretwit – Oswin is a royalist ally of King Charles who lives in Paris. While Gradus is searching for the King, he tracks down Bretwit under the pretense of returning some valuable papers to him, hoping to glean some information about King Charles's whereabouts. While at first, Bretwit suspects nothing of Gradus, he ultimately asks Gradus for the secret royalist hand signal before divulging any sensitive information, and Gradus fails the test. Bretwit still doesn't realize that Gradus is an extremist, though; he merely assumes that the intruder is a nosy journalist and kicks him out.

The Countess – The Countess is Fleur's mother and Queen

Blenda's favorite lady in waiting. After Queen Blenda dies, the Countess moves in to the anteroom of King Charles's bedroom, presumably to keep an eye on him and ensure that he does not bring any men into his room. She also cruelly manipulates King Charles to try to get him to marry her daughter, although she doesn't succeed.

Conmal – Conmal is King Charles's uncle and Queen Blenda's half-brother. He is a famous Zemblan translator best known for his translation of William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, the play from which Shade gets the title for "Pale Fire." Late in the novel, readers learn that Conmal's grasp of the English language was actually pretty limited, making his translations quite poor.

Dr. Nattochdag – Dr. Nattochdag is the head of Kinbote's department at Wordsmith College. While the novel never reveals the specific department to which Kinbote belongs (Kinbote seems to believe that he's a Zemblan professor), it's likely that Nattochdag teaches a Slavic language. Kinbote is quite fond of Dr. Nattochdag and claims that the man is very kind.

MINOR CHARACTERS

King Alfin – King Alfin is King Charles's father and Queen Blenda's husband. He died during Charles's infancy while crashing his **airplane** into the side of a building. King Charles does not remember his father or his death.

Joe Lavender – Joe Lavender is a supporter of King Charles's posing as an art dealer in Geneva. He is also the cousin of Sylvia O'Donnell's husband, Lionel. Gradus crosses paths with Joe Lavender during his search for King Charles, but Joe does not reveal any information about the King's whereabouts.

Garh – Garh is a young girl who shows King Charles down the Bera Mountain Range after he escapes Zembla.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IDENTITY, DELUSION, AND LONELINESS

Pale Fire is a novel full of confused identities and deluded characters, but the primary mix-up of identity involves the narrator, Charles Kinbote, believing that he is the exiled king of Zembla. In fact, not only is the whole nation of Zembla a delusion, but the name *Kinbote* is a delusion, too—as the novel unfolds, Nabokov provides subtle clues that the deranged professor V. Botkin falsely believes that he is the exiled King Charles of Zembla living in America under the assumed name of Kinbote to escape assassins—a classic persecution fantasy of a megalomaniac. At the heart of Botkin's delusional belief that he is King Charles lies simple loneliness. By showing how isolation can lead a person to reject their identity in favor of a more bearable narrative, Nabokov shows the tremendous suffering behind Kinbote's stubborn desire to become someone else.

To understand how identity and delusion work in the novel, one must first understand the relationship between the novel's true plot and the plot it seems to advance. At first glance, *Pale Fire*'s plot seems to be as follows: shortly after finishing an autobiographical poem called "Pale Fire," the celebrated poet John Shade is murdered. Charles Kinbote—Shade's friend, colleague, and neighbor—is in charge of writing the scholarly commentary that will accompany the poem's publication. However, Kinbote's Commentary, Foreword, and Index all have little to do with Shade's poem. Instead, they tell a jumbled story of Kinbote's homeland, the nation of Zembla, where a revolution recently forced King Charles the Beloved into exile. It becomes clear that Kinbote *is* King Charles—he has fled Zembla and disguised himself as a professor to avoid being assassinated. Nonetheless, the assassin Gradus hunts the king down and, while trying to shoot him, misses and kills Shade instead.

Although this appears to be the plot of the novel, Nabokov drops hints throughout the book that Kinbote's version of events is untrue. A careful reader can piece together the true plot: V. Botkin is a Russian-born professor who is (due to his unpleasantness, insanity, and sexual predilection for underage boys) not well-liked by his American colleagues. He has rented a house from a local judge, Judge Goldsworth, that happens to be across the street from John Shade's home. Botkin, a desperately lonely man, becomes obsessed with Shade, spying on him and badgering him constantly for attention. Kind and generous Shade sometimes humors Botkin while he tells delusional stories about being the exiled King of Zembla—stories that Botkin erroneously believes Shade to be immortalizing in verse.

On the day that Shade is set to finish the poem he's been writing, Jack Grey—a mentally ill man whom Judge Goldsworth once sentenced to an institution—escapes from that institution and appears on Goldsworth's doorstep, not knowing that Goldsworth is away and Botkin is renting his home. Mistaking Shade for Goldsworth, Grey kills Shade, and Botkin gains possession of Shade's poem, convincing Shade's widow to let him write the scholarly commentary. The entire academic community realizes that this is a terrible idea, since Botkin is a lunatic who isn't academically qualified to explain the poem (he's not even in the English department), but it's too late—Botkin writes the Commentary, which is mostly about his Zemblan delusions, and then (probably) takes his own life.

The discrepancy between the apparent plot and the true one resides in Kinbote's genuine confusion about his own identity—he *believes* that he is the exiled king of Zembla, living in America under the assumed name "Kinbote." To understand why Kinbote has rejected his actual identity, one must see how lonely he is in New Wye. As a foreign-born gay man living in midcentury small-town America, Kinbote's identity and experiences aren't well-understood by his peers, leaving him socially isolated. There are more sinister aspects to his isolation, too; his pedophilia, of course, isn't socially acceptable, and his behavior is genuinely unpleasant and erratic (he's insulting, self-centered, and openly delusional). Between Kinbote's own personal failings and his town's hostility towards difference, he's left alone and insecure, which makes him reject his identity and invent a whimsical backstory that casts him in a better light—one in which he is Charles "the Beloved," an exiled king who brought peace and prosperity to Zembla and whose many friends and admirers helped him escape to America after he was unfairly deposed. Nabokov depicts Zembla as a sort of mirror-world (Zemblan is dubbed "the tongue of the mirror" and the name *Zembla* is said to derive from "semblance") in which Kinbote can be the man he wishes he were—competent, important, well-liked—rather than the man he is.

DEATH, MYSTERY, AND THE AFTERLIFE

John Shade and Charles Kinbote are both—in their own way—obsessed with death. In his poem "Pale Fire," Shade says that his life's work has been to try to understand death, particularly how a person or their consciousness might live on after they die. He writes at length about his relationship to mortality, both his own and his family's. Kinbote, too, is obsessed with death—sometimes this manifests as fear (his terror that assassins are trying to kill him), but at other times, Kinbote seems eager to die, since the afterlife might be preferable to the sufferings of mortal life. Of course, Kinbote is a maniac and a fool, while Shade is a kind and wise poet, so it makes sense that the novel takes Shade's view of death more seriously. Shade believes that death and life are inseparable, and that the universe is designed and orderly rather than chaotic and random. He is certain that an afterlife exists, although it is unknowable in its particulars. While the novel has many interpretive possibilities, Nabokov does subtly suggest that life transcends death in ways both beautiful and mysterious.

John Shade's obsession with death began when he was a child. Both of his parents died when he was an infant, but his first *personal* experience of death happened when, as a boy, he had a seizure that made him feel "distributed through space and time"—he felt simultaneously in the future and in the past, on a mountain and underground, in the sky and on the earth. This experience of losing his body but retaining some form of consciousness made him ardently curious about death—so curious, in fact, that he couldn't imagine how a person retained their sanity without knowing what happens after death, and he decided to devote his life to this question. After many false starts (a stint at the outrageously silly Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, a vision of a white fountain during a heart attack) and after suffering the most profound loss of his life (the suicide of his daughter, Hazel), Shade arrived at a belief system that made sense to him: that although some "accidents" and "coincidences" seem like "flimsy nonsense," the universe is actually a "web of sense."

To Shade, human beings are like chess pieces, played from afar by mysterious players who cannot be understood through human perception. In other words, something outside of humanity imparts order to the universe and controls human life. When unrelated things seem linked but Shade is unable to precisely say what the connection is, he finds this to be evidence of the mysterious "pattern" that underlies the whole world. Shade considers this to be proof that life is more than just individual consciousness, and that death of the body does not mean disappearance of that being altogether. This notion puts him at ease about his own mortality—he's fine with losing his body, or being reincarnated as a flower or a fly, as long as he retains enough consciousness to register beauty, which is what makes his existence meaningful. This also helps Shade find peace with Hazel's death. By the end of the poem, he states that he's "reasonably sure" that Hazel "somewhere is alive," although he doesn't expect her to spell her name on a Ouija board or speak to him through the sound of the wind. Life after death, he asserts, must be much more mysterious and strange than human beings could even imagine. He doesn't speculate about what form Hazel's presence may take, he just finds comfort in his belief that, somewhere, she's still there.

Kinbote's views on death are much less sophisticated and coherent. Sometimes, he seems to fear death. As he believes himself to be the exiled king of Zembla, Kinbote is constantly terrified that Zemblan assassins are going to break into his house and kill him. At other times, though, Kinbote seems to *embrace* death, suggesting that death is preferable to life. He feels this way in part due to his Zemblan-Christian faith, which insists that one should await the afterlife with a "warm haze of pleasurable anticipation." In writing about Hazel Shade's suicide, Kinbote says that the greater one's "belief in Providence," the more eager they are to "get it over with, this business of life," and he himself seems quite eager. He describes his "intolerable temptation" towards suicide, his "burning desire" to join God, and his "ecstatic" anticipation of the "warm bath of physical dissolution." This all makes sense; Kinbote does not find much pleasure in his life, as he is lonely, widely disliked by his peers, and tormented by his mental illness. It seems that he finds hope and comfort in the notion that the next life might be better than this one. Nabokov implies that, after finishing his Commentary to "Pale Fire," Kinbote succumbs to the

"relentlessly advancing assassins" inside him and takes his own life.

While both Shade and Kinbote speculate about death and the afterlife throughout the novel, scholars disagree about the extent to which Nabokov himself endorses the notion that consciousness can survive death. At the very least, *Pale Fire* includes enough strange, inexplicable events that supernatural interference on earth is a real possibility. The clearest example is perhaps the message that Hazel Shade receives while investigating paranormal phenomena in an old barn in New Wye; a dancing light (whose source is unexplained) spells out to her the message "pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told." The book doesn't explain this message (Kinbote is unable to make sense of it), but Nabokov himself translated it in a letter after the novel's publication. When read aloud, the message loosely sounds like an instruction for father not to cross the lane to the Goldsworth house to hear a tale of a foreign land—read this way, the light relaying the message knows the fate that awaits Hazel's father (he gets shot after crossing the street to Kinbote's house, which Judge Goldsworth owns). Due to the garbled nature of the message, it's possible that this is a message from Aunt Maud, who experienced extreme speech difficulty at the end of her life. Perhaps she is desperately urging Hazel to warn her dad about what will happen to him. If so, Shade is correct that consciousness survives death, although he believes that it's impossible to know with any certainty what form that would take. As Shade tells Kinbote, "Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one."

PATTERNS, FATE, AND COINCIDENCE

Various patterns and motifs repeat throughout *Pale Fire*: wordplay, the interplay of the colors red and green, and the notion of counterpoint, for instance. The book is so richly patterned, in fact, that it's impossible to pick up on everything that Nabokov is doing in just one reading. To Nabokov, writing a book that requires such careful re-reading isn't just a petulant demand that his readers keep up with his intelligence; it is, as scholar and Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd argues, a way of building Nabokov's own metaphysical ideas into the very structure of the novel itself. Namely, Nabokov saw in the universe subtle patterns and coincidences so numerous that he believed that they couldn't be random—they were evidence that the universe must be orderly and designed. (This is, of course, the central revelation of John Shade's poem "Pale Fire.") By building these same kinds of subtle patterns and coincidences into *Pale Fire*, Nabokov asks readers to delight in close observation and to pay attention to echoes and repetitions in order to discern deeper meaning. Uncovering the novel's subtle patterns, in other words, mirrors the act of uncovering truth about the universe, which (for Nabokov, at least) induces awe at the great beauty and mystery of life.

The text of John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" (written, of course, by Nabokov himself) holds the key to understanding this aspect of the novel. The third canto narrates Shade's inquiry into whether consciousness can survive death, and he determines (by coming to believe that the universe is designed) that it must. This revelation comes in the aftermath of a strange mix-up: based on a misprint in a news article, Shade came to believe that he and a stranger had identical visions of a white fountain during near-death experiences, which he thought proved the existence of the afterlife. However, when he learned that the stranger had *not* seen the same white fountain (as the article meant to say "mountain"), Shade isn't deflated. Rather than causing him to abandon his belief in the afterlife altogether, this experience reorients his search for the truth. This mountain/fountain coincidence, he writes, is *itself* "the real point"—he should be looking not at "text" but at "texture." (In other words, the fountain or mountain itself doesn't matter; what matters is the coincidental mix-up of their names.) In this coincidence, Shade finds not "flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense," evidence of the "plexed artistry" of the universe (or that the universe is a designed work of art). The real point of life is to find in the "correlated patterns" that are everywhere in human life, a "pleasure" similar to the pleasure that those who designed the universe must feel. Put another way, Shade finds beauty in mysterious patterns and coincidences, seeing this as evidence of the artistry that underlies the universe. To him, this is the real meaning of life.

To help readers understand the awe and pleasure that Shade feels when he begins to understand this, Nabokov wrote into his own novel intricate patterns, inexplicable coincidences, and numerous echoes across different sections. A major example of this is the novel's focus on counterpoint, a term that is musical in origin, referring to a composition in which independent melodies play simultaneously and complement one another. The novel plays with the notion of counterpoint in many different ways. There is narrative counterpoint, in which two stories (akin to two melodies) play at the same time while linking together in unexpected ways: Shade's poem and Kinbote's Commentary, as well as the story of Kinbote's semester in New Wye and Gradus's journey to America. There is Gradus's name itself, which references the book *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a groundbreaking 18th-century textbook on creating musical counterpoint. Then there is Shade's own use of counterpoint in his poem—both in the interplay of sound and meaning (Kinbote calls this, at one point, "contrapuntal pyrotechnics") and in his themes, as "Pale Fire" has the "contrapuntal theme" of life and death (two interlinked melodies that initially appear to be independent of one another but are actually, as Shade shows, profoundly connected). For Nabokov, structuring his book contrapuntally and then planting tons of references to counterpoint is meant to pique a reader's

attention, suggesting that there is more to the book than initially meets the eye. Counterpoint itself then becomes a metaphor for the order of the universe: it's a "web of sense" that shows how melodies that seem to move independently of one another (all the disparate aspects of human life) are actually beautifully linked.

For Shade, a love of poetry helps him to derive meaning from all the patterns he sees around him. Even if he doesn't know the source or meaning of those patterns, their very existence suggests that life—like poetry—is authored and designed. When he writes that the point of life is not "text" but "texture," he is arguing that human beings can never understand the "text" of life, since it's not a poem that they can read, because it's divinely authored in a language that human perception cannot understand. However, the "texture" of life—the prevalence of inexplicable patterns and resonances, like butterflies showing up at strange times—is itself evidence that there is greater meaning, even if that meaning remains a mystery. Of course, not everybody interprets coincidences as Shade does (Kinbote uses coincidence—such as the arrival of Jack Grey following months of Kinbote's paranoia about Zemblan assassins—to bolster his own delusions). However, the prevalence of coincidence and patterning in the novel, interpreted through Shade's own poem, points to Nabokov's belief in a universe that has deep order, even if it's barely perceptible.

LOSS AND LONGING

While *Pale Fire* is a novel about a murder, a delusional professor, and the fantastical escape of the deposed king of Zembla, at its center is something much more humane and universal: the experience of loss and longing. The novel's central poem, "Pale Fire," is about the poet John Shade's various losses (his parents, his Aunt Maud, and—most profound of all—his teenaged daughter, Hazel). Meanwhile, the novel's narrator, the lonely and delusional professor Charles Kinbote, has lost his homeland and, more importantly, he has lost himself. Kinbote suffers from severe mental illness that causes him to create new identities (Nabokov implies that Kinbote is actually the professor V. Botkin who believes himself to be the exiled King Charles of Zembla living in disguise as a man named Kinbote to escape assassins). In the face of loss, Kinbote longs for a new identity, a sense of community, and even death, while Shade longs for assurance that his deceased family is still with him somehow and that his own death won't mean the loss of everything that he loves. Reacting to loss with life-altering longing is a defining story of *Pale Fire*'s characters, showing how loss can change a life for better and for worse.

Kinbote's losses are somewhat difficult to define, since he's never lucid about his real backstory. He claims, of course, that his true identity is King Charles of Zembla, and that his losses include both of his parents, his crown, his homeland, his friends, and his position as a beloved and powerful figure. However, Nabokov hints that Kinbote's *actual* identity is professor V. Botkin, a Russian-born language professor who is universally disliked in New Wye. Reading closely, it seems likely that Botkin fled Russia after the revolution, losing his family, homeland, social status, and feeling of belonging. Furthermore, Botkin has lost his sanity, and he suffers from his inability to make friends and his taboo sexual preferences (he's gay with a tendency towards pedophilia). Regardless of the murkiness of Botkin's past, it's clear that he has suffered a lot of loss, and he reacts to this with destructive longing. He's so lonely, for instance, that he longs for Shade to have a heart attack so that he can rush over to his neighbor's house and try to save him, and he's so miserable in his life that he longs, almost ecstatically, for his own death. Since his reality is too painful for him to bear, his longing for a different existence leads him into delusion: he concocts a backstory in which he is the beloved King of Zembla who was so admired that his many supporters risked their lives to help him escape Zembla after a nefarious revolution. But believing this doesn't save him; after finishing his editorial work on "Pale Fire," Nabokov implies that Kinbote succumbs to his longing for death and takes his own life.

Shade, too, has lost more than most, but his reaction is quite different than Kinbote's. His parents died when he was an infant, and he was raised by his Aunt Maud, whom he lost a few years before the novel begins. He also lost his only child, Hazel, who died by suicide as a young adult. As a child, in the wake of his parents' death, Shade prayed for everyone else in his life to remain healthy. Then, as he grew older, he became obsessed with the idea that perhaps his losses weren't so final; maybe the dead lost their bodies, but not necessarily their minds, and maybe their consciousness stayed with him on earth somehow. Shade longed to confirm this theory, both to assuage his grief over the deaths of his relatives, and also to comfort him in the face of his own mortality; he loved being alive so much that he could not imagine death stealing his ability to perceive beauty or to feel joy and pain. This longing for affirmation of an afterlife obsessed Shade for his whole life, but it was a positive influence. His awareness of mortality made him treasure each moment of his life, and his desire to grapple with death made him look directly at all of his losses (even the devastating loss of Hazel), challenging himself to find meaning and beauty in his life regardless of what he suffered. The purpose Shade felt in the wake of his losses meant that he died at peace with himself and his beliefs; by all accounts, he was a happy man. Shade and Kinbote's divergent fates show that loss itself doesn't define a life—but the longing that follows can determine a person's course, sometimes catastrophically and other times for the better.

THE NATURE OF ART

Pale Fire is a fictional story told in the form of a non-fiction scholarly work: it's the annotated edition of the poem "Pale Fire" by John Shade, with a Foreword, Commentary, and Index written by his neighbor Charles Kinbote. While Kinbote writes in a traditional academic form, he himself is not a scholar of poetry and he lacks the focus, knowledge, and sanity to be a helpful critic of Shade's poem. The result is a zany narrative of a megalomaniac's delusions that just so happens to cohere into a novel now considered to be one of the greatest of the 20th century. Both parts of the novel—Shade's poem and Kinbote's annotations—share a fixation on the nature of art, raising questions about the relationships between art and life, critic and poet, and artist and god. Nabokov leaves many of these musings open-ended, although he does drive home that, for him, great poetry can be seen as a metaphor for the structure of the universe itself: beautiful, orderly, and consciously designed.

The title of Nabokov's novel (and Shade's poem) comes from a passage in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*: "The moon's an arrant thief and her pale fire she snatches from the sun." Timon is literally saying that, since the moon reflects the sun's light rather than producing its own light, the moon is stealing from the sun—but many interpret this passage as a comment on the relationship between critic and artist, with the critic merely stealing an artist's light rather than making their own. Nabokov's use of this title would initially appear to mock Kinbote, the hapless and deluded critic who completely misses the point of John Shade's great poem and instead hijacks its publication to tell his own bizarre stories of Zembla. However, as the novel progresses, this dynamic becomes more complex.

Shade is clearly a great poet, while Kinbote is an undisciplined thinker and writer, but Kinbote nevertheless creates something extraordinary in his Commentary. He tells the complicated and compelling story of King Charles's upbringing and escape from Zembla, which even Shade agrees is art (he tells Mrs. Hurley that the Zemblan stories—however delusional—are the "brilliant invention" of a "fellow poet"). Furthermore, at the end of his Commentary, Kinbote admits to his failings as an artist—that he's mostly an imitator of other people's prose rather than a true innovator—but he says that he shares one crucial thing with artists: he is not so used to the world around him that he fails to see its extraordinary nature. He's attuned, in other words, to the fact that both "the scientific and the supernatural, the miracle of the muscle and the miracle of the mind" are extraordinary and difficult to explain. Shade (who is undeniably a true artist) shares this quality; his genius is his ability to see the divine in everyday life and his openminded embrace of the world's mystery. In this way, both Shade and Kinbote are artists, mutually reflecting one another's pale fire.

While Kinbote does have some qualities of an artist, Shade's views on art are undeniably more coherent and also quite strange. For Shade, poetry is a metaphor for the structure of the universe, and authorship is a metaphor for divine creation. In other words, as Shade composes his verse, he is acting like a god and creating a beautiful, orderly universe. Shade emphasizes in particular that poetry is full of patterns; not only is there meter and rhyme, but also unexpected wordplay and the repetition of themes, images, and motifs. In reading "Pale Fire," one might not grasp everything at play in the poem, but readers will certainly pick up on the echoes between certain words and ideas: the repeated imagery of reflection, the fixation on butterflies, the allusions to illustrious poets who were also interested in surviving death. To Shade, this experience of recognizing a pattern but not quite grasping its significance or scope is exactly like the experience of life itself: everywhere, he sees evidence of patterns in the universe (strange coincidences or echoes between seemingly unrelated things), but he can't make sense of what they mean. To him, the meaning of life is to delight in life's complex patterning, seeing it as evidence that the universe is intelligently (and artistically) designed, but never expecting to fully understand.

Nabokov seems to endorse Shade's view, imbuing his novel with so many patterns, repetitions, and bizarre coincidences that readers find it difficult to make sense of them all. (In her famous review of *Pale Fire*, for instance, the critic Mary McCarthy noted that Nabokov was doing something with the colors red and green, but she didn't venture a guess as to what, since there was too much else in the novel commanding her attention.) The experience of reading the novel is *supposed* to be one of confusion, unexpected connection, and gradual revelation that ultimately leaves the biggest questions unanswered (Nabokov never outright confirms Kinbote's true identity, for example). For Nabokov, this experience of art mirrors the experience of life itself, and he's asking readers to appreciate the conscious, complex design of both his novel and their lives.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES

In *Pale Fire*, birds and butterflies are associated with the mortality of John Shade's family, underscoring the central concern of his poem "Pale Fire": whether human consciousness can somehow survive death. In the novel, birds are associated with Shade's parents (ornithologists who died when he was very young), while butterflies are associated with Shade's wife (alive) and daughter (deceased). The novel does not necessarily suggest

that Shade's dead family is directly reincarnated as birds or butterflies (he maintains that the afterlife is too mysterious to understand so clearly), but there are moments that suggest that birds and butterflies are perhaps conveying the presence of the dead.

Throughout the book, butterflies appear alongside mentions of Hazel and Sybil: there are butterflies drifting around the shagbark tree by the "phantom" of Hazel's swing, for instance, and Shade addresses Sybil as his "dark Vanessa" (referring to the Vanessa butterfly). There's a moment in the Foreword that illuminates how to interpret this: when Kinbote describes seeing Shade burning drafts of his poem (an autobiographical poem that is, in large part, about Sybil and Hazel), the burned pages (on which his wife and daughter presumably appear) turn into ashes that resemble butterflies. This imagery not only directly suggests that butterflies appear when a person's physical existence ceases, but it also mirrors the lifecycle of a butterfly. Caterpillars enter cocoons and emerge as butterflies, and Nabokov implies that death might be a transitional state just like a cocoon, turning a person's physical body (the caterpillar) into a form that persists even after that body is gone (a butterfly). In the moments before Shade's death, a Vanessa butterfly that is acting eerily humanlike lands on his sleeve, and many scholars believe that this is Hazel's presence wanting to either warn her father or at least be with him in this pivotal moment. (While Sybil was the one associated with the Vanessa, the scholar Brian Boyd posits that Hazel appearing as a Vanessa may indicate that she takes after her mother in death.)

As for birds, the fact that Shade's parents were bird enthusiasts links them generally to the birds that appear in the novel. More significantly, Shade's father having a type of waxwing named after him (the *Bombycilla shadei*) ties him specifically to the image of the dead waxwing that opens "Pale Fire." When Shade writes that "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain," he is literally describing seeing himself reflected in a windowpane where the corpse of a waxwing is stuck to the glass—it literally appears that he is the bird's shadow. But, on a deeper level, Shade is saying something about his relationship to his father (metaphorically the waxwing): even though his father was slain by his bad heart, Shade (whose name is a synonym for "shadow") lives on and carries his father's presence forward in the world.

Nabokov was notoriously hostile to the idea of literary "symbols," finding them reductive and lazy (he even nods to this in *Pale Fire*, when Kinbote relays a conversation in which Shade disparages students who try to identify symbols in literature), so it's worth taking care not to reduce birds or butterflies to a simplistic symbol of death or family. Birds and butterflies aren't just stock images that Nabokov brings up any time he wants the reader's mind to migrate to death—instead, Nabokov treats the novel's birds and butterflies with realism and rigor (no species appears in the novel that wouldn't actually live in the region where Shade lives, for instance) and the meaning of each reference is complex and layered. Despite this, the general pattern across the book is that butterflies and birds evoke the possibility that Shade's family members (and even Shade himself) can survive death in some form, which perhaps involves their consciousness merging with the natural world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Pale Fire* published in 1962.

Foreword Quotes

"Nay, I shall even assert (as our shadows still walk without us) that there remained to be written only *one* line of the poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each, and damn that music.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in Kinbote's Foreword, he gets defensive about Professor Hurley (the head of the English department in which Shade taught) claiming that it's not possible to know how long Shade intended "Pale Fire" to be—after all, the poem remains unfinished, since the last line that Shade wrote (the 999th) is missing its rhyming pair. Bizarrely, Kinbote takes it personally that anyone would suggest such a thing, and he pushes back by analyzing the symmetrical structure of the poem. The second and third cantos are the exact same length, and the first and fourth cantos would be the same length if there were one more line at the end of the fourth canto (the missing final rhyme). If Shade did in fact intend the poem to be structurally mirrored (with the axis of symmetry being the middle of the poem, the break between cantos two and three), then it would make sense that there would only be one line left, and also that the last line might match the first. After all, the first line does rhyme with the last line that Shade wrote (the 999th), which

implies that the first line could be what's meant to complete the couplet (and, besides, matching the first and last line would underscore the mirrored structure of the cantos). This is one of Kinbote's most lucid scholarly arguments—he's pointing to evidence that's actually in the poem, not making baseless claims or talking about himself—but it's still not possible to know for sure what Shade would have done.

There are a few other things worth noticing here. When Kinbote says that he's able to make this claim about the final line because his and Shade's "shadows still walk without us," he seems to imply that, despite Shade's death, he and Shade can somehow still communicate. Kinbote never literally speaks to Shade's ghost over the course of writing his Commentary, but some scholars do believe that Shade helped influence certain aspects of the Commentary from beyond the grave. There's evidence for this in certain inexplicable resonances between Shade's own interests and beliefs and Kinbote's stories and comments (including this one about their shadows still walking together), and, if true, this provides proof that Shade was right to believe (as he claims in "Pale Fire") that human consciousness can survive death. Further evidence for this reading comes from Nabokov's other works, which did sometimes include subtle indications that the dead were influencing the living without them knowing (see his short story "The Vane Sisters," in which the first letter of each word in the story's final paragraph forms a message indicating that the dead have been subtly communicating with the narrator).

It's also significant that Kinbote uses the word "wings" to describe the structure of "Pale Fire," as this conspicuously evokes a butterfly. Just as a butterfly has two wings that are mirror images of one another, "Pale Fire" has two sets of cantos that, in terms of their line lengths, mirror one another. The first and fourth cantos are 166 lines (including the 1000th line that Kinbote adds), while the second and third are longer—334 lines each. If one imagines this mapped onto butterfly wings, then the first and fourth cantos are the smaller tips of the wings, whereas the third and fourth cantos occupy most of the wing space. This resembles the Vanessa Atalanta butterfly, also known as the Red Admiral butterfly, which is a black butterfly with striking bars at the tips of its wings. The Vanessa butterfly appears throughout "Pale Fire," and some scholars believe that butterflies in this novel convey the presence of the dead.

Finally, when Kinbote interrupts his reasonably lucid structural analysis of Shade's poem to curse the music he can hear outside, it's jarring. This kind of commentary has no place in a scholarly work, and a writer with any discipline (or, frankly, sanity), would never include something so irrelevant to the task at hand. This is an early sign of what will become apparent: Kinbote suffers from delusions and hallucinations, and his mental state is rapidly deteriorating as he writes his Commentary.

❝ As a rule, Shade destroyed drafts the moment he ceased to need them: well do I recall seeing him from my porch, on a brilliant morning, burning a whole stack of them in the pale fire of the incinerator before which he stood with bent head like an official mourner among the wind-borne black butterflies of that backyard auto-da-fé.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In Kinbote's Foreword, he describes Shade's writing process, including his tendency to burn drafts once he had finalized a passage. Throughout his writing of "Pale Fire," then, Shade would burn his first drafts of finished passages, and Kinbote—the ever-creepy neighbor—would watch from his porch. This quote marks the first appearance of two significant motifs that will repeat throughout the book: butterflies and references to the Shakespeare passage from which the phrase "pale fire" comes.

This quote includes the exact phrase "pale fire," which is meant to draw a reader's attention to how the scene at hand relates to the title of both John Shade's poem and the novel overall. These titles are derived from a passage in Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*: "The moon's an arrant thief and her pale fire she snatches from the sun." Literally, what Timon is saying is that the moon, since it shines not by producing its own light but by reflecting the sun's light, is stealing from the sun. In noting that the moon only has "pale fire," Timon is suggesting that the moon's glow is lackluster compared to the radiant sun. This passage is often interpreted as a metaphor for the relationship between an artist and critic; the critic steals their "pale fire" from the artist, who is the truly radiant one. For Kinbote to invoke this phrase so casually shows his signature lack of self-awareness: as the critic responsible for introducing and analyzing "Pale Fire," *he* is the one stealing his glow from

John Shade. In fact, he does this in a much more extreme way than most critics—he essentially hijacks the publication of "Pale Fire" to tell his own delusional stories about Zembla.

It's also important that, when Shade burned the drafts, the pages produced ashes that resembled butterflies moving through the air. Throughout the novel, Nabokov associates butterflies with Shade's dead family members (particularly his daughter, Hazel). This image, in a way, helps readers know how to interpret the association between butterflies and the dead. Since a large part of "Pale Fire" is about the death of Shade's daughter Hazel, it's likely that these pages are about her. Then, when these drafts "die" (are burned), they produce butterflies—in a sense, it's like Hazel is living on in the butterfly ashes, just as Hazel seems to live on in the actual butterflies in Shade's yard. Throughout his life, John Shade has been obsessed with the possibility that human consciousness can somehow survive death, and the life cycle of the butterfly is a perfect metaphor for this—a caterpillar (the body) enters a cocoon (death) and a butterfly emerges (consciousness liberated from human form).

Finally, when Kinbote calls this ritual a "backyard auto-da-fé," he is referencing the term for burning heretics during the Spanish Inquisition. His implication is that the heretics were the drafts that Shade burned, which is meant as a jab at Shade's poem, since Kinbote believes that it should have been more explicitly about Zembla. In other words, just as the Catholic Church burned people who did not strictly adhere to Catholic orthodoxy, Kinbote is backhandedly criticizing Shade's poem for not adhering to Kinbote's own narcissistic orthodoxy: that he should be at the center of everything.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

These lines conclude Kinbote's Foreword to "Pale Fire," summing up his attitude towards his role as a critic: no matter what Shade would have thought or wanted, it's Kinbote's opinion that matters. Not only is this explicitly contrary to his job (to help readers understand what Shade's poem means), but it's also evidence of his incessant megalomania, which will plague him throughout the novel.

To say that Shade's poem has no "human reality" and is too "skittish and reticent" to be autobiographical is profoundly untrue, and that Kinbote would write this casts serious doubt on his capability as a reader and scholar. In fact, Shade's poem is entirely autobiographical, deeply human, and—far from being "skittish" or "reticent"—it is quite personal and revealing, as it includes the details of his daughter's suicide, how he met his wife, and a long sequence describing his aging skin as he shaves in the bath.

Kinbote's refusal to acknowledge the autobiographical content of Shade's poem is, of course, self-serving: by ignoring the obvious fact that the poem is about Shade's life and ideas, Kinbote can assert that "Pale Fire" is actually about *him*. That's what he's cryptically suggesting when he says that the "human reality" of Shade's poem must be based in Shade's "surroundings, attachments, and so forth," which "only [Kinbote's] notes can provide"—Kinbote's implication is that only he knows Shade well enough to illuminate the basis of his poem, and the Commentary then goes on to suggest that the basis of his poem isn't Shade's life at all, but rather the stories that Kinbote told Shade about Zembla. This is obviously wrong (for one, Shade and Kinbote were never close, and there are many people—Shade's wife of 40 years, for one—who would be much better able to explain Shade's life than Kinbote), and Kinbote even seems to acknowledge that he's saying something outrageous here. After all, he concedes that Shade wouldn't have agreed with him about any of this. But since Shade is dead and Kinbote has the legal right to be the poem's editor, it's his word—not Shade's—that matters.

Pale Fire: Canto One Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this iconic opening to John Shade's poem "Pale Fire," Shade describes looking out his window and seeing a dead waxwing stuck to the glass—the bird flew into the window because the blue sky reflected in the glass made the waxwing think that it was moving into open sky.

When Shade writes that he is the waxwing's shadow, he is literally describing his reflection in the glass—he sees himself reflected against the body of the waxwing, which makes him look like the bird's shadow. It's noteworthy, though, that when he sees himself as the dead bird's shadow, he sees himself "liv[ing] on" and flying into the sky, just as the bird thought it would do. In this way, Shade sees himself as the still-living extension of the waxwing, an image that suggests that, while the waxwing is dead, it lives on in some form. The image of the dead waxwing flying on is perfectly resonant with the major theme of the poem: Shade's obsession with the possibility that consciousness can survive death.

The image of the dead waxwing points to the possibility of surviving death in a much more literal way, too. Later in the novel, readers will learn that Shade's father was a bird expert who had a type of waxwing named after him (the *Bombycilla shadei*). Because of this, the dead waxwing becomes a stand-in for Shade's father, who died when Shade was an infant. By seeing himself as the shadow of his dead father, Shade is suggesting that his father has survived death through his son—Shade himself carries forward his father's genes and his memory, which is one way that a person's presence remains after they die.

This opening image also introduces the motif of mirrors and reflections that persists throughout the novel. Kinbote has already drawn attention to the fact that the poem's structure itself is mirrored (the first and fourth cantos are the same length, and the second and third cantos are the same length, making its axis of symmetry the midpoint of the poem: the break between the second and third cantos), and the poem contains other instances of reflective imagery (icicles, a shaving mirror, etc.). Kinbote's stories about Zembla are also full of reflections (Zemblan is said to be the "tongue of the mirror," and Kinbote claims that the word *Zembla* derives from "resemblance"). Tying Zembla to mirrors helps readers to understand that Zembla is a delusion of Kinbote's—like a word reversed in a mirror, Zembla is an inversion of Kinbote's life in New Wye: in Zembla, he is popular, important, and competent, whereas in reality, he is isolated, eccentric, and disreputable.

On a larger level, this mirror imagery draws the reader's attention to the echoes between Shade's poem and Kinbote's Commentary—ways in which the poem and Commentary inexplicably mirror one another. This includes Shade seemingly predicting Kinbote's fate when he writes in "Pale Fire" of a bilingual man dying in a prairie motel with colored lights flashing outside. Shade wrote that in July, but Kinbote didn't go to the cabin until August—how could Shade have known that bilingual Kinbote would end up in a prairie inn, suicidal and distracted by the flashing lights outside his window? Scholars interpret these echoes or mirrorings between the poem and Commentary in different ways, but it's clear from Nabokov's insistent evocation of mirrors that readers are meant to pay close attention.

> My God died young. Theolatry I found
> Degrading, and its premises, unsound.
> No free man needs a God; but was I free?
> How fully I felt nature glued to me

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

As Shade describes his childhood drift away from the Episcopal Church, he explains the confusion that he felt in developing his own metaphysics. A major reason that he wound up rejecting the Church was that he found the Christian notion of God to be "degrading"—in other words, Shade did not think that the Church sufficiently respected human dignity, particularly in its diminishment of human freewill.

However, as Shade began to think more deeply about his own humanity, he realized that he didn't entirely believe his own ideas. While he rejected the Church on the grounds that he was a "free man" who didn't "need a God," he also had to acknowledge that he didn't necessarily see himself as "free." From a young age, Shade loved nature—worshipped it, even—and throughout his life, he was attuned to how plants and animals behave, how ecosystems are interlinked, and how humanity fits into the natural world. Since Shade

saw humanity as being a part of nature and understood that all of nature is programmed by eons of genetic adaptations, he couldn't quite see himself as being "free"—the influence of "nature" within him was too strong for that. So, in a sense, Shade rejected the Christian belief that humanity isn't completely free because their fates and natures are somewhat determined by God in favor of a similar belief that humanity isn't free because their fates and natures are somewhat determined by biology. Significantly, though, Shade does not find this latter belief to be "degrading" at all. In fact, observing and appreciating nature and feeling himself to be a part of nature is one of the most meaningful things in Shade's life.

> My picture book was at an early age
> The painted parchment papering our cage:
> Mauve rings around the moon; blood-orange sun
> Twinned Iris; and that rare phenomenon
> The iridule—when, beautiful and strange,
> In a bright sky above a mountain range
> One opal cloudlet in an oval form
> Reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm
> Which in a distant valley has been staged—
> For we are most artistically caged.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shade uses a birdcage as a metaphor for the natural world, suggesting that human beings are trapped in the cage of nature, which both limits human freedom and provides transcendent beauty. Shade's loving attention to natural phenomena here—coining the term "iridule" to describe an opalescent cloud after a storm, or describing the light around the moon—suggests that nature is a source of joy and wonder for him. Because of Shade's tender attention to natural beauty, it's surprising that he simultaneously describes nature as a cage. When he says that human beings are "artistically caged," he means that life is essentially a gorgeous prison, but he doesn't seem at all distressed about it. He's at peace with the fact that nature limits his freedom because it brings so much beauty, too.

It's worth exploring the specific ways in which Shade sees nature as limiting human freedom. First, eons of genetic programming determine many aspects of human life, and this undermines the notion that human beings are fundamentally free to choose their own lives—this is nature restricting human beings, as though they're caged. Second, Shade seems to see nature as a temporary illusion that keeps people saturated in beauty during their lives and then falls away in death. Evidence for this interpretation includes his cage metaphor itself, which suggests that there is a reality outside the cage; nature simply keeps people from accessing it. Shade also calls the thunderstorm in a distant valley "staged," which implies that someone has caused the thunderstorm as a kind of theatrical production. This gestures towards Shade's belief, spelled out later in "Pale Fire," that there are faraway nonhuman "players" who control human life, although people cannot perceive or understand them. By saying that people are "artistically caged," Shade implies that these "players" have constructed nature as both a way of projecting beauty and a way to limit human power. The implication is that perhaps after death, a person is liberated from the cage of nature and their consciousness gains access to greater truth.

Pale Fire: Canto Two Quotes

> Space is a swarming in the eyes; and time,
> A singing in the ears. In this hive I'm
> Locked up. Yet, *if* prior to life we had
> Been able to imagine life, what mad,
> Impossible, unutterably weird,
> Wonderful nonsense it might have appeared!

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shade builds on the previous sections of his poem that describe his beliefs about life, death, and the universe. Here, he is specifically talking about what the afterlife might be like.

Just as he previously described human beings as "artistically caged" by nature, here he describes himself as "locked up" inside the "hive" of life, blinded by space and time. In other words, much like he implied with the cage metaphor, Shade suggests here that life is a temporary and limited condition that masks the truth of the universe. A person who is living cannot see beyond space and time to imagine what happens outside of human life, which means that imagining the afterlife is impossible.

Shade drives home how difficult it would be to imagine the afterlife by invoking a hypothetical: if a being that was *not* alive and had no knowledge of life had to imagine what "life" might be like, they would be taking wild stabs in the dark. It's almost impossible to believe that they would guess correctly, especially since life is so complex in its specifics and so varied for different people. And just as a nonliving being wouldn't be able to imagine the nature of life, a *living* being—a person—would be unlikely to correctly imagine the nature of the afterlife, since the afterlife is unlikely to be anything like life on earth. In this way, Shade suggests that human beings are blinded by life—our perception is too limited to imagine what something that isn't life might look like, so it's likely that human mythology of the afterlife is basically "nonsense."

> It isn't that we dream too wild a dream:
> The trouble is we do not make it seem
> Sufficiently unlikely; for the most
> We can think up is a domestic ghost.
>
> How ludicrous these efforts to translate
> Into one's private tongue a public fate!
> Instead of poetry divinely terse,
> Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse!

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

After naming several common visions of the afterlife (harps playing, speaking with the dead, etc.), Shade says that the trouble with these ideas isn't that they're too outlandish—it's that they're too normal to be plausible. These visions of the afterlife are essentially mirror images of what happens on earth, and Shade believes that if life is as strange and unpredictable as it is, then the afterlife must also be strange and unimaginable. For him, the most common human mythology of the afterlife is merely "domestic ghosts," or a banal rehashing of life on earth, when in fact we should expect something radically different from life on earth—death to Shade is transformative, and any vision of the afterlife that assumes that mortal life more or less continues seems to him to be absurd.

In fact, Shade suggests that the afterlife must be so strange that it's impossible to talk about. When he says that it's "ludicrous" to try to "translate into one's private tongue a private fate," he means that speaking in his own words about the "public fate" of death and the afterlife ("public" because it's a fate shared by everyone) can never communicate the truth. Language is too imperfect and particular to communicate about something so universal and strange—instead, Shade's words are "disjointed notes" that don't communicate the full picture, influenced by something so ordinary as insomnia.

The phrase "instead of poetry divinely terse" is revealing—it suggests that there is a divine poetry that *could* communicate the truth of the afterlife, but Shade's own poetry is too human to be like that. This dovetails with something that Shade hints at throughout "Pale Fire": that he believes the universe itself is like great poetry, beautiful because it is designed by a genius. To him, whatever nonhuman beings designed the universe are, in a way, poets, as the evidence that the universe is designed consists of its beauty and the inexplicable patterns and repetitions found throughout human life. These patterns and repetitions are similar to the ones found in metered and rhymed poetry, such as "Pale Fire" itself.

> *Life is a message scribbled in the dark.*
> Anonymous.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Hazel Shade died, John and Sybil were walking home when they saw this message written into the bark of a tree. This is obviously relevant to the tragedy that just occurred—in the wake of losing their only child, John and Sybil are trying to make sense of what meaning (if any) life and death have. By saying that life is a "message," this sentence literally implies that life has meaning, although by noting that the message is "scribbled in the dark," it implies that life's meaning may never be decipherable. In this way, this sentence is telling the grieving Shades that just because life appears to be chaotic and meaningless doesn't mean that there isn't meaning and order—it's just not for human beings to know.

On another level, this sentence encapsulates the philosophy on life that Shade will eventually adopt. He comes to believe that the universe has been designed by nonhuman beings,

and that just because humans cannot grasp the meaning or design of the universe, that doesn't mean the design isn't there. In other words, life is a message scribbled in the dark; it's an orderly and meaningful experience that human beings, as they're kept "in the dark" by their limited perception, can never truly understand. That the saying is signed "anonymous" is also meaningful—Shade believes that nonhuman "players" have designed the universe, so there is someone leaving this message, but that entity will always remain anonymous to human beings.

To receive this kind of message on such a momentous day (Hazel's death) and in such an unlikely place (carved into a tree trunk) is a wild coincidence. On the one hand, this could be Shade taking poetic license to explain to readers how he came to make sense of his daughter's death and move through his own grief, but Shade does seem to be pretty literal about describing what really happened throughout his poem. It's possible, then, to interpret this message appearing on the day of Hazel's death as just the kind of inexplicable coincidence that provides proof that life has been designed.

Pale Fire: Canto Three Quotes

❝ It missed the gist of the whole thing; it missed
What mostly interests the preterist;
For we die every day; oblivion thrives
Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,
And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files.
I'm ready to become a floweret
Or a fat fly, but never, to forget.
And I'll turn down eternity unless
The melancholy and the tenderness
Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;
The claret taillight of that dwindling plane
[...] Are found in Heaven by the newlydead.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the silly new-age approach that IPH takes to understanding the afterlife, Shade explains his own personal feelings about the nature of life and death. To him, IPH—despite being an institute devoted to studying death and the afterlife—misses the whole point of death, since they treat death as something totally separate from human life. Shade is only interested in death because it is inextricably bound to life—every moment of life is also a moment of death in which existence is transformed into memory and a person is propelled closer and closer to their ultimate fate. Life and death are also intertwined because the finality of death gives life meaning and urgency; a lot of the beauty that Shade perceives in his life comes from his awareness that it is precious and fleeting. When Shade says that death feeds on "blood-ripe lives" not "dry thighbones," he's saying that death is a part of life and it's only relevant to discuss death in the context of life.

The next part of this passage describes Shade's desires for his death. Throughout his whole life, Shade has been obsessed not simply with death, but with the question of whether his consciousness might survive death. In other words, he's happy to lose his body as long as he can keep his mind in some form (as he writes, he'd be fine with being reincarnated as a flower or a fly as long as he can maintain consciousness of the world around him). Shade still wants to be able to perceive beauty, feel melancholy, and appreciate the everyday things around him (like the taillight of a descending airplane), and what scares him about death is losing this beauty and meaning. This is a poet's sensibility—what brings him the most joy is his perception, and death only scares him insofar as he thinks he might lose that.

❝ Nor can one help the exile, the old man
Dying in a motel, with the loud fan
Revolving in the torrid prairie night
And, from the outside, bits of colored light
Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past
Offering gems and death is coming fast
He suffocates and conjures in two tongues
The nebulae dilating in his lungs.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker), Narrator/ Charles Kinbote

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the oddest passages in "Pale Fire." Here, Shade appears to be describing Charles Kinbote; Kinbote is an "exile" (he believes that he's exiled from Zembla, although the book implies that he's V. Botkin, a Russian exile) and he's

bilingual (he "conjures in two tongues"). Furthermore, there are explicit clues throughout the novel that Kinbote is suicidal, so it fits the description that "death is coming fast." Of course, Shade would have known all of this about his neighbor, so none of that is surprising—what *is* surprising is the specificity with which he predicts what happens to Kinbote after Shade's own death.

Shade writes these lines in mid-July, then he dies on July 21st, but it's not until August that Kinbote goes to a motel out west to write the Commentary to "Pale Fire." There, he frequently describes the colored lights outside his windows and the suffocating heat, which matches Shade's description to an uncanny degree. While Kinbote says that he never told Shade about his vacation plans in Utana (he wanted to surprise Shade), it's implied that Shade vacationed near this motel (which is why Kinbote made a reservation there in the first place), so it's possible that Shade was familiar with the lights outside the motel from his previous trips, which is why he could describe it with such accuracy.

But it's still quite inexplicable that he places Kinbote there, as he couldn't have known that Kinbote would go to that specific motel to write his Commentary or—as the novel implies—that he would die by suicide there once he finished. Scholars interpret this strange predictive passage in multiple ways. For some, Shade knowing something he couldn't know about Kinbote's future demonstrates that Shade is an invention of Kinbote's (that Kinbote wrote both "Pale Fire" and the scholarly material surrounding it), or that Kinbote is an invention of Shade's. Of course, if both the poem and Commentary have a single author, then it would neatly explain the resonances between this passage and the Commentary. Other Nabokov scholars, though, believe something much weirder. As Brian Boyd suggests in *Nabokov's Pale Fire: the Magic of Artistic Discovery*, this passage might point to Shade's poem having been influenced by an entity that could see the future—perhaps his dead daughter's consciousness survived her death and now sees the fates of her father and his creepy neighbor, and she unconsciously helps Shade to write his final poem. This theory helps to explain many uncanny resemblances between "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's Zembla delusions, as well as the instances like this one in which Shade seemed to predict Kinbote's fate.

> Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
> I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
> And stop investigating my abyss?
> But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
> Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
> Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
> Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
> Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
> Of correlated pattern in the game,
> Plexed artistry, and something of the same
> Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

This crucial passage of "Pale Fire" comes after Shade has told the story of reading an article about woman who saw a white fountain during a near-death experience. As Shade himself saw a white fountain during a heart attack, he believed that both of them having the same vision was objective evidence of an afterlife—but it turned out that the woman saw a white *mountain*, and the newspaper article he read had misprinted the word. Shade had been so excited by this coincidence and he felt that it meant he was beginning to solve the mystery of the afterlife. Someone less playful and openminded than he is might have interpreted the truth of the matter—that the woman never saw a white fountain at all—as cause for despair, a hint that the afterlife is indecipherable and that no matter how hard a person tries, they will never be able to know the truth. But Shade has a different attitude; while he initially believed that the white fountain was the key to understanding the afterlife, he realizes that the unbelievable coincidence of the misprint is the true key.

What he means by this is incredibly complex, but essentially it boils down to the misprint being a coincidence that affirms Shade's belief that the universe is made of so many uncanny patterns that it must be designed. The point of life, for him, is to notice these patterns and to see in them evidence of order, or "sense," rather than chaos and nonsense. The point of human life, for Shade, is to revel in the beauty and wonder of these patterns, which are often revealed through surprising and inexplicable coincidence. After all, he believes that the beings who designed these patterns in the universe must also delight in the wondrous order that they have created, so by devoting his life to

noticing and appreciating these patterns, he is—in essence—communing with a higher power. This, for Shade, is his spirituality; it's how he finds meaning, purpose, and comfort in life.

There are a couple of specific phrases here that illuminate Shade's beliefs. When he writes that the "real point" is "not text, but texture," he's suggesting that it's worthwhile to notice coincidence and pattern itself, rather than trying to find meaning behind those coincidences or patterns. In the fountain/mountain mix-up, Shade made the mistake of chasing the *meaning* of the coincidence of the white fountain, which led him to erroneous beliefs about the afterlife. In that situation, he was paying attention to the "text" (or the meaning) rather than the "texture" (or the mere fact of there being a pattern), which is what led him astray. Furthermore, when he writes that his life would be well-spent if he devoted it to finding "some link-and-bobolink some kind of correlated pattern in the game," he's giving readers a clue as to the nature of the patterns that he's seeing as evidence of the universe's design. A bobolink is a kind of bird, so in the very phrase "link-and-bobolink," Shade is using a linguistic pattern (the repetition of "link") to show how the coincidence and patterning between two seemingly unrelated things (a bird and a link) points to conscious design (as his poetry is consciously designed to play with language patterns).

Pale Fire: Canto Four Quotes

❝ *Dim Gulf* was my first book (free verse); *Night Rote*
Came next; then *Hebe's Cup*, my final float
In that damp carnival, for now I term
Everything "Poems," and no longer squirm.
(But *this* transparent thingum does require
Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*.)

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, John Shade explains how he has titled his books throughout his life and he hints at the source of the title "Pale Fire." His previous books (here he mentions *Dim Gulf*, *Night Rote*, and *Hebe's Cup*, while elsewhere Kinbote mentions *Supremely Blest* and *The Untamed Seahorse*) appear to take their titles from illustrious authors who came before Shade. The phrase "dim gulf" appears in the Edgar Allen Poe poem "To One in Paradise," which is addressed to a dead lover (in keeping with many of Shade's literary allusions to works dealing with the dead and the afterlife). "Night rote" is less clear, but "Hebe's cup" is from Richard Crashaw's "Music's Duel" (Hebe is the Greek goddess of youth, and her cup of ambrosia could supposedly restore youth, connecting to Shade's obsession with surviving death). "Supremely blest" comes from the Pope poem "An Essay on Man" (the same poem from which Shade takes his Zembla reference), and "the untamed seahorse" is an indirect reference to Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," in which a Duke has had his previous wife killed and then he reduces her further by keeping a portrait of her that only he is allowed to see. In the poem's last lines, the Duke points out a sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse, which is what Shade is referencing with his title "The Untamed Seahorse." Shade admits here that he took the titles of his early works from other authors—presumably to borrow some of their glory and therefore make his own work seem more serious—and then, when he reached a certain amount of professional stability, he no longer needed to borrow titles; he could simply call his work "poems" and "no longer squirm" (feel confident in standing in his own reputation alone).

However, in his final work, Shade returns to borrowing titles. The "Help me, Will!" is a clue that "pale fire" comes from William Shakespeare ("Will"); in fact, it's from his play *Timon of Athens*, and the passage reads, "The moon's an arrant thief and her pale fire she snatches from the sun." In other words, Shakespeare is saying that since the moon doesn't give off its own light (but rather reflects the sun's light), the moon is a thief that is stealing light from the sun. This title references exactly what Shade has been doing by giving his works titles that allude to famous writers—he's stealing a little bit of their luster to make his own work look brighter. However, unlike his previous titles, which he borrowed with a straight face, here he is winking at readers—Shade is being deliberately self-deprecating, borrowing a title that is itself about the act of borrowing light from another source, which implies that Shade is conscious that his own poetry doesn't measure up to Shakespeare's and that his work is indebted to the Bard. He's also explicitly self-deprecating when he says that his poem is a "transparent thingum" that needs a "moondrop" title—he's downplaying his own sophistication, showing that he has come full circle from feeling insecure and hiding behind the titles of greater writers, to feeling secure enough not to reference anyone else in his titles, to accepting that his work will never be as good as some of his heroes and building that into the poem itself.

Of course, this title isn't *just* a reference to borrowing phrases from famous authors; it's also a description of what happens in the novel *Pale Fire*. Charles Kinbote, the editor of Shade's poem "Pale Fire," uses Shade's great work as an excuse to tell his own delusional stories of Zembla. The implication is that Charles is stealing Shade's pale fire, using the poet's reputation to make people pay attention to his own bizarre stories. Shade, of course, couldn't have known that this would happen (Kinbote didn't become the poem's editor until after Shade's death), so this seems to be just another uncanny moment in which Shade, via his title, predicts a future that he couldn't have known.

> Maybe my sensual love for the *consonne D'appui*, Echo's fey child, is based upon
> A feeling of fantastically planned,
> Richly rhymed life.
> I feel I understand
> Existence, or at least a minute part
> Of my existence, only through my art,
> In terms of combinational delight;
> And if my private universe scans right,
> So does the verse of galaxies divine
> Which I suspect is an iambic line.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

This complex passage explains the deep connection that Shade sees between poetry and the structure of the universe. *Consonne d'appui* is a French term for an identical rhyme—something like "wear" and "ware." To an English-speaking reader, a *consonne d'appui* as an end rhyme in poetry sounds lazy and wrong, but Shade is saying that (despite the conventions of his native tongue and of the generations of English poets he worships) he appreciates a good *consonne d'appui*. When he calls a *consonne d'appui* "Echo's fey child," he is referencing the Greek mythological figure Echo who could only repeat what was just said to her (meaning that her speech was all, essentially, identical rhyme with what immediately preceded it). By calling *consonne d'appui* Echo's "fey child," he is both acknowledging that *consonnes d'appui* are considered unsophisticated ("fey") in English and referencing Echo's literal child, Iynx, who was turned into a bird. Of course, the mention of a person being turned into a bird evokes the first line of "Pale Fire" in which Shade sees himself as a dead waxwing.

By invoking the *consonne d'appui*, Shade is making a bigger point about the structure of the universe: he sees identical rhymes as a metaphor for the echoes and coincidences that he's always encountering. When he says that he sees life as "richly rhymed," he's referencing a concept associated with the *consonne d'appui*: the French notion that there is *rime pauvre* (poor rhyme), *rime suffisante* (sufficient rhyme), and *rime riche* (rich rhyme). Rhymes that don't have many shared sounds are *rimes pauvres*, whereas rhymes with many shared sounds are *rimes riches*. So Shade is remarking here on the sheer number of rhymes he sees in the world (the universe, to him, is a *rime riche*), and he believes that these rhymes cannot be coincidental—it must be evidence that the universe, like a poem, is consciously designed.

Shade then extrapolates on this comparison between poetry and the universe. When he says that he understands existence through his art (poetry), he's saying that poetry has become his metaphor for the structure of the universe. In his poetry, Shade loves "combinational delight"—he likes there to be unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated things (like the waxwing imagery subtly referencing his father, since his father had a waxwing named after him) and he likes to combine layers of meaning (like "Echo's fey child" referencing both the *consonne d'appui* and Iynx, subtly developing the bird imagery throughout the poem). Shade delights in designing these layers of meaning, unexpected connections, and even the literal patterns of his work (the meter and rhyme). He believes that the nonhuman entity that designed the universe must work in a similar way, delighting in creating mind-boggling patterns and connections that are generally too subtle for human perception but that sometimes appear in the form of an inexplicable coincidence or a beautiful and unexpected echo between two seemingly unrelated things. When he writes that the "verse of galaxies divine" is written in an "iambic line," he's suggesting that the universe itself is like a poem; it's designed to be patterned, beautiful, and full of endless meaning.

Commentary: Lines 1-48 Quotes

❝ We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words (see note to line 596), reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion, crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the pentameter, stepping off, boarding a new train of thought, entering the hall of a hotel, putting out the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade, Jakob Gradus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Just prior to this passage, Kinbote has introduced readers to Jakob Gradus, the Zemblan assassin who (at least in Kinbote's mind) tried to assassinate him but killed Shade instead. Here, Kinbote describes Gradus's journey from Zembla to New Wye as occurring within Shade's poem itself—he writes that Gradus follows the "road of [the poem's] rhythm," that he swings between its pages and lines, and marches in "iambic motion." Kinbote even suggests that when Shade "blots out a word," Gradus simultaneously shuts off the lights in his hotel, and that when Shade puts down his pen after a day of writing, Gradus simultaneously goes to sleep. This description clearly suggests that Gradus has been created by the poem "Pale Fire," as his movements and actions seem wholly determined by Shade's writing.

Nonetheless, Kinbote oddly insists throughout the novel that Gradus is a real person who made a real journey from Zembla to New Wye to assassinate the exiled King. This claim would seem to be at odds with the passage above (and with all of Kinbote's other assertions that Shade's progress on "Pale Fire" was synchronized with Gradus's travels). Describing Gradus as a creation of Shade's writing process is a hint that Gradus is invented—he's a delusion of Kinbote's, not a real person (the person who killed Shade is Jack Grey, an escaped lunatic who mistook Shade for Kinbote's landlord, Judge Goldsworth).

There are several other noteworthy aspects of this passage. First, the notion that poetry itself could create and animate Gradus resembles Shade's own philosophy of the universe: Shade believes that the universe itself is like a poem, designed by nonhuman beings to be beautiful and richly patterned. In this way, human existence is a byproduct of these nonhuman entities creating the poetry of the universe. Just as Shade creates and propels Gradus through meter and rhyme, the designers of the universe create and determine the course of human life through their "poem," the universe.

Second, this passage may provide evidence of the popular theory among Nabokov scholars that, after Shade's death, his consciousness remained on earth and helped Kinbote to create the story of Gradus. Here, Kinbote may be unconsciously telling the truth: that Shade *did* create Gradus, although not in a way that anybody would expect.

Commentary: Lines 49-98 Quotes

❝ At times I thought that only by self-destruction could I hope to cheat the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull, [...].

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), Jakob Gradus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, Kinbote has been describing the misery of his first months in New Wye, as he spent every night gripped by terror, certain that every noise in his house was a Zemblan revolutionary who had come to kill him. (Kinbote, of course, believes himself to be the deposed Zemblan king, which makes him a target). Here, though, he changes course from treating these "assassins" as an external threat (real people who are coming to get him) and instead turns them into an *internal* threat (the assassins are "in me," he writes, implying that they're not real people in the world). Of course, this is a significant hint at the extent of Kinbote's psychological deterioration—he's having classic persecution fantasies, and he seems to finally admit that the assassins aren't real, but are rather only in his mind (in his "eardrums" and "skull"). This backhandedly confirms what an astute reader might already suspect: that Jakob Gradus, the Zemblan assassin that Kinbote believes killed Shade while aiming for him, is not a real person at all.

This passage also contains one of the novel's clearest hints that Kinbote is suicidal. He's having such distressing delusions and hallucinations that he can't sleep at night and

he spends all his waking hours in terror. On some level, as this passage demonstrates, he knows that he's ill and that these issues all stem from within himself, and he explicitly says that he sometimes believes that "self-destruction" (or suicide) is the only way to end the psychological problems that torment him. As his Commentary unfolds, it becomes clear that Kinbote's mental state is steadily deteriorating; his notes become less and less on topic, his thoughts are scattered, and he admits more than once to his own agitation and despair while he writes. Because of this (and other clues, including his strong identification with Hazel Shade), it's clear that at the end of the novel, once Kinbote finishes writing his Commentary, he takes his own life.

Commentary: Lines 149-214 Quotes

In its limpid tintarron he saw his scarlet reflection but, oddly enough, owing to what seemed to be at first blush an optical illusion, this reflection was not at his feet but much further; moreover, it was accompanied by the ripple-warped reflection of a ledge that jutted high above his present position. And finally, the strain on the magic of the image caused it to snap as his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile. He now advanced to the very lip of the water and was met there by a genuine reflection, much larger and clearer than the one that had deceived him. He skirted the pool. High up in the deep-blue sky jutted the empty ledge whereon a counterfeit king had just stood. A shiver of *alfear* (uncontrollable fear caused by elves) ran between his shoulderblades. He murmured a familiar prayer, crossed himself, and resolutely proceeded toward the pass. At a high point upon an adjacent ridge a *steinmann* (a heap of stones erected as a memento of an ascent) had donned a cap of red wool in his honor.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), King Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

After fleeing the Zemblan palace, hiking up a mountainside in the dark, and then being guided to the mountain pass by a friendly farm family, King Charles stops to rest by a lake. This passage describes his eerie experience there—one of dissociated identity and fear.

There are a couple ways to interpret this passage. If readers assume that King Charles is alone in this moment and the reflection—which is oddly distant from his body—is a genuine optical illusion, then it mirrors King Charles's mental state. Charles peers into the water and doesn't see himself reflected in the way he expects; he sees his own form perched on a ledge above his head, which is not where his actual body is. Looking into a mirror and seeing a frightening, inexplicable, and distant reflection seems like both a sign of psychosis and a way of describing King Charles's dissociated identities. In a way, King Charles *couldn't* look at his reflection and see himself normally, because he doesn't exist; he's a delusion of Kinbote's, and Kinbote is himself a delusion of Professor V. Botkin who has invented a story in which he is the deposed King of Zembla disguised as Professor Kinbote to thwart assassins. The fear that he feels in this moment might then be a fear of acknowledging the reality about himself; that he *isn't* the King of Zembla, but rather a lonely professor who is quickly losing his grip on reality.

However, there's another—perhaps more plausible—explanation. Readers already know that King Charles's ally Odon has arranged for Zemblan royalists (supporters of the King) to dress like King Charles and spread out all over the country to confuse the revolutionary police who are trying to hunt the King down. It could be that, as King Charles looks into the reflection on the lake, he is actually seeing one of his supporters standing on the ledge above his head. Since the man is impersonating him (they're dressed exactly alike), it seems like an uncannily distant reflection of King Charles himself. More evidence for this reading comes when King Charles walks from the lake to a nearby ridge (perhaps the same one?) and finds a pile of stones with a red wool cap on them. It seems that perhaps this impersonator has left his cap, suggesting that King Charles was seeing a real person. Furthermore, Kinbote describes the pile of stones with the cap on it as a "steinmann," which is the German word for a cairn, or a pile of stones left as a trail marker. However, the novel's index also includes an entry for a Julius Steinmann, described as a "Zemblan patriot" (which, to Kinbote, means a loyal supporter of King Charles). Steinmann is also referenced briefly in the Commentary as an "especially brilliant impersonator of the King," so it seems most likely that King Charles was, in this moment, seeing Julius Steinmann on the ledge above him, and Steinmann resembled him so thoroughly that even he was fooled.

One other noteworthy aspect here is that King Charles refers to his fear as *alfear*, which he defines as "uncontrollable fear caused by elves." This, of course, references Goethe's poem "Erlkönig," or "The Elf King," which King Charles was reciting as he climbed the mountain during his escape (Kinbote tells readers this in an earlier passage). So it makes sense that King Charles's first reaction

to seeing the odd reflection would be to interpret this vision as the Elf King himself, a supernatural being who, in Goethe's poem, snatches a young boy away from his father and kills him.

Commentary: Lines 230-348 Quotes

❝❝ pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told

Related Characters: Aunt Maud, Hazel Shade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

When Hazel investigates the haunted barn for her psychology paper, she encounters an otherworldly presence there that supposedly communicates these garbled words to her. While Kinbote spends a lot of time trying to interpret the message, he ultimately gives up and concludes that the words are nonsense—but Kinbote is a fool and a poor scholar who, throughout the novel, fails to follow up on important literary references that Shade is making, assuming that they are unimportant even though readers who *do* follow up realize quickly that these references are all thematically significant to "Pale Fire." In this way, readers realize that whenever Kinbote dismisses something as nonsense or fails to find the source or meaning of a reference, it's a clue that whatever Kinbote is missing is important. By that logic, these words must be a key to interpreting the book.

While these words *are* undeniably significant, scholars interpret them in different ways. One pattern that is apparent in these letters is that, by rearranging the letters, one can spell "atalanta" three different times. "Atalanta" refers to the Vanessa Atalanta butterfly, which Shade references in "Pale Fire." Not coincidentally, this is also the type of butterfly that lands on him in the moment before his death; the Vanessa butterfly (also known as the Red Admiral) was known in Russia as the "butterfly of doom," since it was so prevalent in Russia in the months before the assassination of Tsar Alexander II that many Russians thought it was an omen. This message, then, is also an omen of Shade's death.

Another common way to make sense of these words is through sound—while on the page, the letters appear to be nonsense, when read aloud, it's possible to find in them some (garbled) sense. Nabokov himself, in a letter to a scholar, offered a translation of the message, which isn't totally phonetic (the sounds gesture towards words and a sentence, but significant parts are left out). This is how he explained it, as quoted from Brian Boyd's biography of Nabokov: "Padre should not go to the lane to be mistaken for old Goldswart (worth) after finishing his tale (pale) feur (fire), [which in Shakespeare's play is accompanied by] the word 'arrant' (farant) [and this] with 'lant' makes up the Atalanta butterfly in Shade's last scene. It is told by the spirit in the barn."

In clearer terms, Brian Boyd explains the message as the spirit in the barn telling Hazel to warn her father ("pada") that he is "not to go across the lane to old Goldsworth's, as an *atalanta* butterfly dances by, after he finishes 'Pale Fire' (*tale feur*), at the invitation of someone from a foreign land who has told and even ranted his tall tale to him." Obviously, this is a prescient warning, since Shade dies immediately after finishing "Pale Fire" while crossing the lane to Kinbote's house (which he has rented from Judge Goldsworth), and Kinbote is a man from a foreign land who rants constantly about Zembla.

One final thing to note is that the spirit in the barn may be Aunt Maud. Recall from a passage of "Pale Fire" that Aunt Maud had severe speech difficulties at the end of her life, and Shade specifically mused about whether, in the afterlife, a person's consciousness might exist as it was at the prime of their life or in the diminished form of old age. If this barn presence *is* Aunt Maud, then her message shows evidence of her speech difficulties, which seems to suggest that she is, in death, as she was when she was old.

> The dead, the gentle dead—who knows?—
> In tungsten filaments abide,
> And on my bedside table flows
> Another man's departed bride.
>
> And maybe Shakespeare floods a whole
> Town with innumerable lights,
> And Shelley's incandescent soul
> Lures the pale moths of starless nights.
>
> Streetlamps are numbered, and maybe
> Number nine-hundred-ninety-nine
> (So brightly beaming through a tree
> So green) is an old friend of mine.
>
> And when above the livid plain
> Forked lightning plays, therein may dwell
> The torments of a Tamerlane,
> The roar of tyrants torn in hell.

Related Characters: John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192-193

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Kinbote's description of the haunted barn episode, he quotes a poem that John Shade wrote around that time, but which was only published after his death. Since the presence in the barn had resembled an electric light, Kinbote finds it relevant that Shade's poem—"The Nature of Electricity"—is about the possibility that the dead might live on in electric lights. This shows that, despite Shade's apparent dismissal of Hazel's barn investigations, he incorporated her observations into a poem, which suggests that he took seriously her claim that the light was a spirit communicating with her. Of course, this open-mindedness seems smart to readers who accept the interpretation that the spirit's message to Hazel (via the light) was a warning to her father not to go to the Goldsworth house where he would eventually die.

There are a few noteworthy aspects of this poem. The first is the conspicuous reference to moths, which resemble butterflies. Throughout the novel, butterflies signify the presence of Shade's dead family, and to say that the soul of Shelley (a poet) dwelling in an electric light might lure nearby moths suggests a mechanism whereby the dead might retain their earthly presence in the form of butterflies. If a person's soul after death is like a light, then that soul might be able to influence the material world by subtly drawing people into its orbit. Just as a light in darkness draws moths, a soul on earth might find ways to subtly influence human beings in ways that seem natural to them. This lends credence to the possibility that Hazel Shade, after her death, subtly influenced Shade's writing of "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's creation of the Gradus story.

There's also some additional evidence throughout the novel that the dead might literally reside in electricity. For instance, when King Charles turns on his flashlight inside the secret passage between his grandfather's dressing room and the Zemblan theater, he perceives that the presence of Oleg—his dead friend—is *literally* inside the light: Kinbote writes, "The dim light he discharged at last was now his dearest companion, Oleg's ghost, the phantom of freedom." It's also significant that Shade's poem mentions the dead dwelling in lightning, as Hazel's first night in the barn was marked by a spectacular lightning storm. While Hazel believed that the lightning and thunder made it impossible to perceive any presence in the barn, it's possible that the lightning *was* the otherworldly presence. Kinbote subtly affirms this when he remarks in his Commentary that "the scientific and the supernatural, the miracle of the muscle and the miracle of the mind, are *both* inexplicable." In other words, he's suggesting that natural phenomena are just as strange and inexplicable as supernatural phenomena; we're just used to seeing natural things like lightning, so we don't find them miraculous or revelatory.

It's also conspicuous that Shade brings up the number 999; his poem, of course, has 999 lines (since the final line was never written). The final lines of Shade's poem describe a Vanessa butterfly flitting around "some neighbor's gardener" (Kinbote's gardener). By writing that the 999th streetlamp might be "an old friend of mine," Shade is uncannily (since he wrote this poem before "Pale Fire") drawing attention to the Vanessa at the end of the poem, suggesting that the butterfly is someone he knows who has died. If so, that supports the theory that this Vanessa is Hazel Shade's presence trying to warn her father of his impending death.

Commentary: Lines 367-434 Quotes

I am thinking of lines 261-267 in which Shade describes his wife. At the moment of his painting that poetical portrait, the sitter was twice the age of Queen Disa. I do not wish to be vulgar in dealing with these delicate matters but the fact remains that sixty-year-old Shade is lending here a well-conserved coeval the ethereal and eternal aspect she retains, or should retain, in his kind noble heart. Now the curious thing about it is that Disa at thirty, when last seen in September 1958, bore a singular resemblance not, of course, to Mrs. Shade as she was when I met her, but to the idealized and stylized picture painted by the poet in those lines of *Pale Fire*. Actually it was idealized and stylized only in regard to the older woman; in regard to Queen Disa, as she was that afternoon on that blue terrace, it represented a plain unretouched likeness. I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), Queen Disa, Sybil Shade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206-207

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kinbote comments on a passage of "Pale Fire" in which John Shade describes his wife, Sybil. To Kinbote, this passage doesn't describe Sybil very accurately (it's "stylized," he writes), but it's a perfect description of Queen Disa, King Charles of Zembla's estranged wife. This is particularly odd because Sybil is 60, while the description matches Disa at age 30.

Kinbote points this resemblance out in part because of its "strangeness," which he implies is the whole point of writing and art. In other words, the purpose of "Pale Fire" is to create these strange and inexplicable resonances between Shade's words and the reader's life. This could be seen as an appreciation of the way in which art makes one's own life more vivid, even if that work is about something else (i.e., the poem vividly evokes Disa in Kinbote's mind, even though Shade is describing Sybil). Since Kinbote earnestly believes that this poem is subtly about him, though, he probably means something else.

In keeping with Shade's belief that the patterning in poetry mirrors the patterns in the universe, Kinbote seems to be saying that the point of art is the coincidences and strange connections that it invariably produces. In other words, art is valuable because it strangely resonates with life, drawing attention to the coincidences and patterns that are everywhere. Shade is quite explicit in his belief that art mirrors the patterning in life, and here Kinbote seems to ascribe to that view, too.

Commentary: Lines 469-629 Quotes

With this divine mist of utter dependence permeating one's being, no wonder one is tempted, no wonder one weighs on one's palm with a dreamy smile the compact firearm in its case of suede leather hardly bigger than a castlegate key or a boy's seamed purse, no wonder one peers over the parapet into an inviting abyss.

I am choosing these images rather casually. There are purists who maintain that a gentleman should use a brace of pistols, one for each temple, or a bare botkin (note the correct spelling), and that ladies should either swallow a lethal dose or drown with clumsy Ophelia.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), Professor V. Botkin, Hazel Shade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during Kinbote's commentary on a passage of "Pale Fire" that describes Hazel Shade's suicide. While Kinbote insists at first that he's not defending suicide, here he tenderly explains why someone might choose suicide and does seem to defend the logic of the choice. For Christians like him who believe that the afterlife is better than life on earth, it's "no wonder one is tempted" to kill themselves, which implies that this choice is reasonable and obvious to Kinbote. He then speaks lovingly of the weight of a gun, which he compares to a "boy's seamed purse" (something that he, as a pedophile, finds particularly sensuous), and he describes death as "inviting." All of this makes quite clear that Kinbote finds death alluring and that he believes that suicide would be a rational and even positive choice for himself. This is one of the clearest indications in the book that Kinbote is suicidal and will end his life shortly after finishing the Commentary to "Pale Fire."

Furthermore, when Kinbote says that he's choosing all these descriptions "rather casually," it's a clue to readers to pay close attention to what he says. He seems to be debating various methods of suicide—gentlemen perhaps should use a pistol while women, like Hazel Shade, should drown—but he's actually subtly confessing to his true

identity. When he says that one method of suicide that is appropriate for a gentleman is using a "bare botkin," he seems to be suggesting that a man could kill himself with a high-heeled shoe, which is obviously nonsense. He's not bringing this up because it's relevant to suicide; what's important here is the phrase "note the correct spelling." In the Index, under "botkin," Kinbote lists the alternate spellings "bottekin" and "bodkin," but this passage insists that "botkin" is correct. It's more likely, however, that he's not correcting those spellings of "botkin"—he's correcting "Kinbote." After all, Kinbote's true identity is the deranged professor V. Botkin, and Kinbote is a kind of anagram of that name. This passage, then, is a confession that "Kinbote" is not the "correct" spelling of his own name; that would be "Botkin."

> KINBOTE: But who instilled it in us, John? Who is the Judge of life, and the Designer of death?

SHADE: Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.

KINBOTE: Now I have caught you, John: once we deny a Higher Intelligence that plans and administrates our individual hereafters we are bound to accept the unspeakably dreadful notion of Chance reaching into eternity. Consider the situation, Throughout eternity our poor ghosts are exposed to nameless vicissitudes. There is no appeal, no advice, no support, no protection, nothing. Poor Kinbote's ghost, poor Shade's shade, may have blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somewhere—oh, from sheer absent-mindedness, or simply through ignorance of a trivial rule in the preposterous game of nature—if there be any rules.

Related Characters: John Shade, Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225-226

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Kinbote and Shade about sin, faith, and eternity. While Kinbote argues for traditional Christian notions of original sin and a God that stands in judgment, Shade continuously dismisses all of this as nonsense, subtly asserting his own views, which Kinbote seems mostly to ignore. Here, Kinbote shows that he fundamentally doesn't understand Shade's view of life and death, even as Shade says something crucially important.

While Shade *does* believe that death and the afterlife are a mystery and must remain so to human beings (who do not have the ability to perceive divine truths), he does *not* believe that eternity is defined by chaos and random chance (which Kinbote wrongly suggests that Shade believes). To Kinbote, the only possible order in the afterlife would be one of rules, judgment, and protection by a higher power—in other words, it's a sort of legalistic system, without which he sees the afterlife as lawless and frightening. To Shade, this is absurd. Since life is so strange and amazing, Shade assumes that death will be the same way—it's not going to be a courtroom in which God judges people, which sounds ordinary and dreadful to him. But it's also not chaos. To Shade, the universe has a profound order, and he's positive that the afterlife—like life itself—has been designed by a divine being, but he doesn't believe that he can predict with any specificity what that would look like.

This transcription, then, is revealing of Kinbote and Shade's beliefs and friendship. Kinbote yammers on and doesn't listen to Shade, while Shade lets Kinbote rave. Shade dispenses his own wisdom without worrying too much about whether Kinbote is really listening, and Kinbote *isn't* listening; he would rather talk at length about his Christian beliefs and project beliefs onto Shade that he doesn't actually hold. Shade is secure enough in his ideas about the universe that he doesn't need to say more than his central belief that life and death must both be surprising.

> "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."

I patted my friend on the head and bowed slightly to Eberthella H. The poet looked at me with glazed eyes. She said:

"You must help us, Mr. Kinbote: I maintain that what's his name, old—the old man, you know, at the Exton railway station, who thought he was God and began redirecting the trains, was technically a loony, but John calls him a fellow poet."

"We all are, in a sense, poets, Madam," I replied, and offered a lighted match to my friend who had his pipe in his teeth and was beating himself with both hands on various parts of his torso.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote, John Shade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

At a faculty party, Kinbote sees Shade talking with the wife of Kinbote's rival, Professor Hurley. As he approaches them, Kinbote overhears what they're saying; Shade is apparently telling Mrs. Hurley not to call someone crazy, because it's actually creative to replace a "drab and unhappy past" with a "brilliant invention." While Mrs. Hurley tries to suggest that they were talking about a railroad worker who thought he was God, it's more likely that she and Shade were actually talking about Kinbote himself and they disguised their conversation when they noticed him nearby.

This shows how widely aware everyone at Wordsmith is of Kinbote's insanity. They all know that he is an unhappy man with a somewhat ordinary story who has lost his mind and invented the story of Zembla to make himself seem more interesting and important. It's a topic of gossip and scorn among the faculty, and Shade is being kind here when he defends Kinbote's delusions as poetic and as a reasonable reaction to his profound unhappiness. When Shade says that Kinbote is a "fellow poet," he's signaling to Mrs. Hurley that she shouldn't see him as an outcast or a laughingstock, but rather as someone as smart and respectable as Shade himself. This shows what a good and kind friend Shade is, even though Kinbote has never done much to earn this loyalty (when they're together, Kinbote is obnoxious and uncurious about Shade, so their "friendship" is somewhat one-sided).

This passage also suggests a link between art and madness. When Shade says that "fellow poet" is a better term than "loony," he seems to suggest that some ideas might seem crazy to some people but inventive or genius to others, and that the nature of art is to straddle the line between madness and invention. This is clearly true of "Pale Fire," which advances quite eccentric and inventive notions about life, death, and the afterlife—Shade's own ideas could certainly be considered crazy if he weren't such a lauded poet.

Commentary: Lines 662-872 Quotes

Lines 734-735: probably…wobble…limp blimp…unstable

A third burst of contrapuntal pyrotechnics. The poet's plan is to display in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the "game" in which he sees the key to life and death (see lines 808-829).

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kinbote is commenting on the words that Shade uses in "Pale Fire" to describe his heart attack. One noteworthy aspect is that these lines demonstrate the difference between "text" and "texture." The text of the words—in other words, their explicit meaning—gestures towards the failure of Shade's heart, as all the words signify a heart that is unsteady, deflating, and precarious (*limp*, *wobble*, *unstable*). Separately, the *texture* of the lines communicates the same thing; the repeating "b" and "p" sounds in those lines mimic the unsteady rhythm of a failing heart. This sensory effect is pure texture; it transcends the meaning of the words. Elsewhere in "Pale Fire," Shade has a grand revelation about life, that the "point" of life is "not text, but texture"—that seeing patterns and coincidences in life is itself evidence of the universe being designed, and one doesn't need to look at the *meaning* of those patterns to get at this truth. In other words, life is a "game" designed by faraway "players" to have various textured patterns, and while human beings cannot understand the "text" (the meaning), we can perceive the "texture," which is enough.

Throughout the novel, Nabokov plays with the concept of counterpoint, a musical term for two melodies that appear independent but enhance each other as they play simultaneously. The name "Gradus," for example, is taken from the seminal 18th century textbook on musical counterpoint, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, and Nabokov sets up a narrative counterpoint between Gradus's journey to New Wye and John Shade's writing of "Pale Fire." Kinbote explicitly invokes counterpoint in this passage when he calls these lines "contrapuntal pyrotechnics." On a literal level, the lines display a counterpoint between sound and meaning where the meaning and sound of the words act independently of one another to produce the same effect (the imagery of a failing heart). Beyond that, though, the lines evoke the central counterpoint of the novel: the interplay between life and death. To Shade, life and death are a quintessential counterpoint because they seem independent of one another, but actually they are melodies that play simultaneously and give one another meaning. This is what he's saying when he writes that death doesn't "thrive" on "dry thighbones" but rather on "blood-ripe lives"—death, in other words, is most relevant during life, because every moment of life is also a moment of death (as that moment fades into memory) and each instant of life

also propels a person towards death and is made meaningful through the inevitability of death. So, without death, life would have no meaning, and without life, death has no relevance. Since the lines about Shade's heart attack are describing a failing heart, they're literally about the interplay between life and death—this makes it quite appropriate that Kinbote describes them as "contrapuntal pyrotechnics."

Commentary: Lines 873-1000 Quotes

Lines 939-940: Man's life, etc.

If I correctly understand the sense of this succinct observation, our poet suggests here that human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the strangest and funniest passages of the whole novel, as Kinbote is commenting on the lines in "Pale Fire" that read "*Man's life as commentary to abstruse/ Unfinished poem*. Note for further use." It's clear to readers that Shade is describing exactly what Kinbote has done; Kinbote has taken Shade's unfinished poem and, through his Commentary, told what he believes to be the story of his own life (King Charles's upbringing, escape from the Zemblan palace, and relocation to New Wye). It's hilarious, though, that Kinbote—who normally sees himself at the center of everything in Shade's poem, even if the poem has nothing to do with him—seems to miss entirely how this is relevant to him and instead take it as Shade's broader philosophical statement about the nature of human life.

In fact, Kinbote *is* correctly interpreting that statement, as Shade certainly does believe that the universe is akin to a vast, unfinished poem that is impossible to understand, and that human life is merely a footnote in the scope of this. Shade writes repeatedly that the universe is like a poem in that it's beautiful, intricately patterned, and therefore clearly designed by an authorlike being who gets pleasure from orchestrating everything harmoniously—much like Shade himself in the writing of "Pale Fire," even if he believes that his own composition is clumsy and unimpressive compared to the vast and complex patterns of the universe.

On the one hand, it makes sense that Kinbote wouldn't see himself in this line, since to do so would require a self-awareness that Kinbote lacks. He earnestly believes that his Commentary is revealing the subtle meanings of Shade's poem by telling the Zemblan stories, so he doesn't see himself as telling his *own* story via the footnotes of an unfinished masterpiece. He's not able to understand how he has hijacked Shade's project, even when he encounters a line that literally spells it out for him. Because of this, Kinbote doesn't notice how uncanny it is that Shade—while he was alive—so accurately predicted what Kinbote would do after Shade's death. These are the kinds of coincidences that Shade relishes, although it's not clear that it *is* a coincidence—some scholars think that Hazel Shade, with knowledge of John Shade and Kinbote's fates, influenced Shade's writing of "Pale Fire" from beyond the grave, which accounts for these strange predictive moments.

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable (so I used to tell my students). Although I am capable, through long dabbling in blue magic, of imitating any prose in the world (but singularly enough not verse—I am a miserable rhymester), I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do—pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web. Solemnly I weighed in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, and for a moment, I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture in the bruised and branded sky.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), John Shade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which comes near the end of the book, Kinbote is describing the first time that he held the manuscript of "Pale Fire" in his hands. This passage is quite significant, as it ties together a number of threads that appear throughout the poem "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's Commentary.

First, this passage emphasizes an idea that appears throughout the book: that life is surprising and miraculous, even if human beings are too used to it to notice. The fact that people are able to communicate by linking arbitrary signs (letters and words) to abstract meanings is miraculous and improbable—the very existence of poetry that is intelligible to many different people across the ages is a phenomenon so bizarre that it would defy belief if we weren't so used to it. Shade consistently points out these kinds of everyday miracles, and the book suggests that it's strange to differentiate so rigidly between natural and supernatural, because things that people see as "natural"—such as lightning or written language—are just as strange as the supernatural phenomena that human beings imagine, like a firefly communicating messages from the dead.

There are two specific things to notice about this: first, Kinbote seems to be reiterating the difference between text and texture here (as Shade does in "Pale Fire"). He suggests that the miracle of writing doesn't consist so much of what the writing means (the text), but in the fact that it exists at all (the texture). In other words, the very fact that writing exists—no matter what it says—should demonstrate that the universe is a place of inexplicable wonder, just as Shade believes that the texture of patterns and coincidences in everyday life (regardless of what any of it *means*) is proof enough that the universe is designed. Second, it's conspicuous that Kinbote invokes the possibility of a firefly communicating messages from the dead. Throughout the book, there are hints that the dead might register their presence through lights, and the light that appeared to Hazel Shade in the haunted barn *did* seem to convey a message from the dead. Invoking a firefly communicating through its light is simultaneously an example of an unbelievable supernatural phenomenon and a phenomenon that would be perfectly at home in the world of this book, which drives home the point about the difficulty of separating the natural from the supernatural when *everything* is miraculous.

It's also worth investigating Kinbote's comments on the nature of art. When he suggests that he's not really a true artist, only a good imitator (except of prose), he evokes the Shakespeare passage from which the phrase "pale fire" comes: "the moon's an arrant thief and her pale fire she snatches from the sun." In this formulation, the true artist (Shade) is the sun, and Kinbote—an imitator who cannot produce his own fire and therefore must steal from others—is the moon. Furthermore, the way in which he *does* consider himself to be a true artist is significant: he claims that he's able to see the world as it really is. When Kinbote says that he can see "the web of the world, and the warp and weft of that web," he's metaphorically comparing the world to a woven tapestry, which evokes an earlier comment he made about "Pale Fire." In the Foreword, Kinbote noted that "it is the underside of the weave" that interests him; in that comment, he is comparing the poem "Pale Fire" to a tapestry and suggesting that the backside of the tapestry—where the Zemblan themes are found—is more appealing than the frontside (metaphorically, the autobiographical content of "Pale Fire"). Not only does this create another parallel between poetry and the universe, but it also evokes the notion of counterpoint that is seeded throughout the novel. If the world is a tapestry, the warp and weft are the contrapuntal melodies—separate threads that weave together to make a whole. In other words, the world is a tapestry woven with the threads of life and death.

It may seem strange that deranged Kinbote, who can't even acknowledge the autobiographical nature of "Pale Fire," is claiming to be able to see the world with unique clarity, but it's worth considering that he might, in a sense, be right. After all, Shade himself said that Kinbote wasn't a "loony" so much as a "fellow poet," and Kinbote's Commentary—as nearsighted and bizarre as it may be—has a lot in common with Shade's own wise view of the world, especially passages like this one.

Index Quotes

Botkin, V., American scholar of Russian descent, *894*; kingbot, maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought to have hastened their phylogenetic end, *247*; bottekin-maker, *71*; *bot*, plop, and *boteliy*, big-bellied (Russ.); botkin or bodkin, a, Danish stiletto.

Related Characters: Narrator/Charles Kinbote (speaker), Professor V. Botkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

In his index, Kinbote is *supposed* to be cataloging the contents of Shade's poem (readers would expect to find entries listing Shade's references to people, places, and things that appear in his poem, including Wordsmith College, his colleagues, and the lake where Hazel drowned). However, the index is mostly about Zembla—it barely has anything to do with "Pale Fire" at all. In fact, the only New Wye people who have entries are Kinbote himself, the Shade family (John, Sybil, and Hazel), and Professor V. Botkin, who was barely mentioned in the body of the novel and *never* mentioned in Shade's poem. This, of course, points to Kinbote's failure as a scholar, but also to his true identity. After all, it's quite strange that people who are much more present in both Shade's poem and in Kinbote's narrative of New Wye don't get entries (Dr. Sutton, Professor Hurley, Gerald Emerald, etc.) while V. Botkin appears.

The logical conclusion is that this is Kinbote inadvertently giving himself away. He's so narcissistic that he cannot fathom that any of his identities (even the one he doesn't embrace) wouldn't make it into the index, so he writes entries for Kinbote, King Charles, *and* V. Botkin. Furthermore, the entry sheds light on Kinbote's history and personality. While Kinbote believes himself to be from the imagined land of Zembla, V. Botkin is from Russia—it seems, then, that Botkin exaggerated his feeling of foreignness and exile into his Zemblan delusions, making himself into the king of an exotic land rather than admitting that he is a humdrum Russian émigré. In addition, "kingbot" seems to be a quasi-anagram of "botkin" or "kinbote," and it connects to a comment that Sybil made earlier, calling Kinbote a "king-sized botfly," and a letter that Kinbote wrote to Disa correcting her for addressing him as "Charles X. Kingbot." A botfly is a parasite, so the implication is that Botkin/Kinbote's nature is parasitical—of course, he is something of a parasite, as he hijacks Shade's poem for his own ends.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWORD

"Pale Fire" is a 999-line poem in four cantos, written in heroic couplets. The poet John Shade (1898-1959) wrote "Pale Fire" during the last three weeks of his life at his home in New Wye, Appalachia, in the United States. The manuscript was written on 80 index cards, each dated and neatly penned. Canto One takes up 13 cards, while Canto Two ("your favorite," the unnamed narrator writes) and Canto Three take up 27 cards each, and Canto Four (like Canto One) is 13 cards. Unlike the rest of the cards, however, the poem's last four cards—written on the day of Shade's death—are not a final copy, but rather a corrected draft.

Pale Fire *is a novel written in the form of a scholarly work about a poem. In keeping with academic conventions, the novel consists of four sections: a foreword (in which the scholar introduces the poem being examined), the text of the poem itself, a scholarly commentary on the poem (meant to help readers understand the poem's meaning), and an index that catalogs the poem's references. The very first line of this foreword is something of a literary joke: a poem written in couplets (rhyming pairs of lines) cannot have an odd number (999) of lines. This gestures to the fact that the poem is unfinished—something that the narrator does not immediately acknowledge, even though it would seem to be a key fact when introducing this poem to readers. The fact that the final four index cards (written on the day of Shade's death) are not a final draft further indicates that Shade never finished his poem because he died in the process of composing it, and it's odd that the narrator—the scholar introducing Shade's work—seems to gloss over this crucial fact. Another oddity is the narrator's use of the phrase "your favorite" in reference to Canto Two. He seems to be addressing someone directly, likely John Shade himself, which would be out of place in a scholarly work. This is even stranger since the reader already knows that John Shade is dead—the narrator seems to be trying to speak to Shade even after his death.*

John Shade, a man of strict routines, would write a particular number of lines each day and then copy the day's lines onto his index cards at midnight. Although he may have revised these cards later, he always dated the cards with the date of their creation, not the revision. The narrator notes that the amusement park outside his window is very loud. Because of Shade's dating system, his index cards are a "complete calendar of his work" on "Pale Fire." He began the poem in the early morning of July 2 and finished the first canto on the 4th. On his birthday, July 5th, he began the second canto, which he finished on the 11th. During the following week, he wrote Canto Three, and then he began Canto Four on July 19th.

Throughout the book, Shade is portrayed as a routine-bound suburbanite—a man married to his high-school sweetheart, devoted to his hometown, and interested in quiet domesticity. The strict writing routine he keeps is part of this characterization—he's not an erratic genius experiencing ecstatic highs and devastating lows, or capitalizing on brief flights of inspiration, but rather a methodical and practical artist who schedules his writing time and finds inspiration and creativity within routine. The narrator, on the other hand, already seems sort of erratic and eccentric—he interrupts a straightforward discussion of Shade's creative process to bizarrely remark on the loud amusement park outside his window, which has no bearing on the topic at hand. It shows his mind to be somewhat disordered, and it also casts doubt on his rigor and discipline as a scholar, since no credible scholar would include something so personal and irrelevant in a foreword. It's worth noting the attention paid to dates here. Throughout the book, Nabokov will synchronize events, giving readers who cross-reference dates a deeper understanding of the novel's plot and themes.

The last third of the final canto is full of "erasures" and "insertions," but the text itself is remarkably clear. Nonetheless, a "professed Shadean" gave a newspaper interview following Shade's death suggesting that the poem is merely a draft, rather than a definitive text. The narrator believes this to be a personal insult to his own competence and honesty. Right after Shade's death, another professor—Professor Hurley—gave an interview suggesting that Shade intended "Pale Fire" to be far longer than four cantos. This is nonsense—aside from the "internal evidence" in the poem, the narrator has heard both John Shade (while he and the narrator were on a walk) and his widow, Sybil, affirm that the poem was only going to have four parts.

At this point, the narrator's motivations and scholarly credibility are thrown into question. The last part of the fourth canto isn't yet a final draft (and it has an uneven number of lines, even though the poem is written in couplets, which implies that at least one line is missing)—nonetheless, the narrator insists that the poem is basically complete. Furthermore, he is personally *defensive about the suggestion that the draft isn't finished, taking this not as the dispassionate opinion of other scholars, but instead as a* personal *insult to the narrator himself. This is bizarrely self-centered, since these scholars seem only to be talking about the poem draft, not about the person editing it. Nonetheless, the narrator uses his personal knowledge of Sybil and John Shade's opinions to discredit dissenting scholarly opinions, something he'll do throughout the book (with decreasing credibility as the plot unfolds).*

The narrator believes that only one line of the poem is missing—the thousandth line—which is meant to be identical to the first line. This is part of the poem's structural symmetry, in which the first and last cantos are the same length, and the second and third cantos are the same length. And, on July 21st, the narrator himself heard Shade say that he was almost at the end of the poem.

The narrator doesn't give any direct evidence that the final line (if there is, in fact, only one line missing) is supposed to be the same as the first, although—as readers will see in the next section of the book, which contains the full text of "Pale Fire"—the poem's rhyme scheme suggests that the first line (which ends with "slain") could pair with the final line in the draft (which ends with "lane"). Instead of doing a close reading of the poem and exploring the evidence for and against the final line being the same as the first, however, the narrator expects readers to take his word for it. This is more evidence that the narrator is a poor scholar. The mirror structure of the poem (in which the lengths of the first and fourth sections match, and the lengths of the second and third sections match) will resonate with both the content of the poem (which includes a lot of imagery that involves reflections) and with the world of Zembla that the narrator will describe (Zembla, which sounds like "semblance" or "resemblance," turns out to be a sort of mirror world of the narrator's life).

The narrator also has a dozen index cards containing drafts of couplets that don't appear in the poem's final copy. Shade always destroyed his drafts when he was finished with them—the narrator often watched from his porch as Shade burned stacks of cards in a "pale fire," stooped like he was in mourning as "black **butterflies**" filled the air.

This passage contains the first reference to the book's title, in the "pale fire" of Shade's burning drafts. The phrase "pale fire" comes from a passage in Shakespeare's Timon of Athens: *"the moon's an arrant thief, And her pale fire she snatches from the sun." (In other words, the moon itself doesn't produce light; it merely reflects—or steals—the light of the sun.) Here, the burning drafts produce a "pale fire" that is (per the Shakespeare reference) stolen from somewhere else. Perhaps the implication here is that the poem "Pale Fire" is so brilliant that even the literal fire of the burning drafts is pale compared to the poem. If this is so, then it seems that art burns brighter than life itself, an idea that Nabokov will continue to develop. It's also worth noting the imagery comparing the floating ashes of the drafts to black butterflies. Throughout the poem, mentions of birds and butterflies will be intimately tied to Shade's love for his family. As the poem "Pale Fire" is, in large part, about Shade's wife and daughter, he might literally be burning drafts of lines about his family, which produces ashes that look like butterflies.*

The 12 cards that remain might have been spared because Shade intended to insert some of the unused materials into his final draft, or because he was attached to those variants but couldn't include them for structural reasons or because they annoyed his wife. Perhaps, "in all modesty," Shade saved the variants because he meant to ask the narrator's advice. In the Commentary, the narrator will indicate where these unused variants—which are sometimes better than the final poem itself—might have gone.

When the narrator suggests that, "in all modesty," Shade might have saved draft couplets to ask the narrator's advice, he is not being modest—as will become clear, he is wildly exaggerating both his closeness with Shade and his expertise in poetry, making himself seem more important and knowledgeable than he is. Furthermore, as the novel unfolds, the narrator's claims about the draft materials will seem increasingly suspicious; in both the Commentary and Index, the narrator will admit that at least some of these drafts were not Shade's—they were written by the narrator himself. This casts the narrator's claim that some of the drafts are better than the final copy in a different light; he's basically complimenting himself here, which is another sign of his egomania.

The narrator became the editor of "Pale Fire" because, after Shade's death, fearing the petty academic dramas that would have otherwise swirled around the manuscript, the narrator asked Shade's wife, Sybil, to sign a contract giving him permission to publish it with his commentary and send her the profits. Despite how fair the contract is, Shade's lawyer called it "evil," and his literary agent wondered if it was written in a "peculiar kind of red ink." But these people simply can't understand the narrator's connection to Shade's masterpiece, especially because the past of the poem's "beholder and only begetter" is personally connected to Shade's fate.

The narrator seems to describe a fair—and even generous—agreement that he made with Shade's widow about publishing the poem, but the extreme reactions of Shade's lawyer and agent (calling the contract "evil" and implying that the it was signed in blood, evoking a deal with the devil) should give the reader pause. This casts doubt not only on the narrator's honesty in relaying the terms of the contract, but also on his moral character; either the agent and lawyer must be irrationally overreacting, or they're so perturbed by the narrator's behavior that they think he's literally evil. In explaining his own connection to the poem, the narrator makes a peculiar claim: that he is the poem's "begetter" (or that he helped create it) and that his past is intimately connected to Shade's death. As the novel unfolds, it will become clearer what the narrator means by these strange claims, but this is another example of the narrator's self-aggrandizement and his desire to make Shade's life and work about him *rather than taking Shade's own intentions seriously.*

The aftermath of Shade's death revealed some secrets that forced the narrator to leave New Wye just after interviewing Shade's killer in jail. He wrote the Commentary to the poem disguised in "quieter surroundings" and then flew to New York where the publisher informed him that another professor would advise the editing. Furious, the narrator found a new publisher. This new publisher asked that the narrator mention in the foreword that he (the narrator) is solely responsible for mistakes in the commentary. While he had hoped that Sybil Shade would give him biographical information, they have not been in touch—it seems that "the Shadeans" negatively influenced her into asking that "Prof H." and "Prof C." become co-editors of the poem, a request that "precluded collaboration" with Sybil.

Readers should already have the sense that the narrator is perhaps not telling the whole truth, and reading between the lines here is alarming; he's describing a situation in which certain "secrets" made him flee his home, and in which he is so obsessed with being the only editor of "Pale Fire" that any suggestion of collaboration (by both the publisher and Shade's own wife) make the narrator cut off contact with those people altogether (even though Sybil is Shade's wife and could provide helpful information about the poem and its author). This behavior is bizarre and even cruel, although the narrator seems to find it justified. Furthermore, it's alarming that the new publisher makes the narrator take sole responsibility for mistakes; it seems that the publisher is worried that this edition is riddled with errors, a concern that will prove true as the book unfolds.

The narrator was a dear friend of Shade's, even though they'd known each other only a few months. In February of 1959, when the narrator moved to New Wye, he rented a house from Judge Goldsworth, who was temporarily abroad. This house was across the street from Shade, and the narrator was ecstatic—years before, he had tried to translate Shade into Zemblan. The two met at Wordsmith College, where they were both professors, first at a faculty lunch, and then when the narrator gave him a ride home. While Sybil invited him to stay and have a drink, the narrator couldn't because he had a table tennis game scheduled with "two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy." After this, the narrator began "seeing more and more" of Shade—from his window, he could see directly into Shade's house.

This passage begins to reveal the actual relationship between the narrator and Shade. While the narrator claims to be a close friend, they'd only known each other briefly and there's no evidence here that they had anything but a neighborly acquaintance. Furthermore, the narrator says that he began "seeing more and more" of Shade, but the next line makes it comically clear that he meant "see" in the sense of literally looking into his house, rather than seeing him socially. So the terms of their relationship seem clearly voyeuristic and one-sided. Furthermore, this passage gives the first hint that the narrator is gay and has pedophilic tendencies; he's inviting young boys to his house to play games.

Soon, though, fellow academics became envious that Shade preferred the narrator to anyone else. The narrator once overheard a young professor in a green velvet jacket, whom the narrator will call Gerald Emerald, saying that Shade had left with "the Great Beaver," mocking the narrator's beard. As he was leaving the room, the narrator pulled Emerald's bowtie loose. One day, the narrator's department head, Dr. Nattochdag, called him in and asked him to be "more careful" because a boy complained. The narrator was relieved when Nattochdag said that the complaint was about the narrator's mocking a literature course that the boy attended. The narrator wonders if Nattochdag's kindness to him was perhaps because the professor suspected the secret about him that only a couple people at the college knew. In another incident, a professor told him at the grocery store that he was "remarkably disagreeable" and "insane."

The narrator has so far given no evidence that he was actually friends with Shade, so it doesn't ring true that other academics were jealous of their friendship. Reading between the lines, it seems like the narrator might simply not be well-liked, and Gerald Emerald's cruelty wasn't a result of jealousy, but rather an effect of the narrator's own off-putting behavior (such as pulling Emerald's tie loose). The anecdote about Dr. Nattochdag implies, again, the narrator's sexual impropriety with young boys. It seems that the narrator was worried that a male student might have complained about the narrator's sexual advances, so he's relieved when the complaint had only to do with his mean comments. It should be alarming to the reader that the narrator casually describes so many incidents in which other people find him evil, unpleasant, or insane—the narrator himself has proved fairly untrustworthy, so it's worth wondering whether these observers are right.

The narrator's friendship with Shade, though, was worth all this jealousy, and the friendship was even more precious because Shade deliberately hid their closeness in front of others. Shade was quite unattractive; greying, pudgy, wrinkled—quite at odds with the "harmonies hiving" within him. His looks seemed to be the "waste products" of the perfection in his verse. The narrator's friendship with Shade was so close that they didn't discuss personal matters—only intellectual topics.

This passage makes even clearer that the narrator and Shade weren't *close. The narrator interprets Shade's social chilliness as a way of hiding their closeness from others, but the much simpler and more plausible explanation is that Shade didn't like the narrator very much. It's also significant that they didn't discuss personal matters, especially since (as the book will reveal) Shade's family life was so important to him and he certainly would have discussed that with a close friend. The narrator is being unpleasantly shallow here in drawing attention to Shade's looks and implying that it's strange that such a talented poet would be ugly. Of course, those things are unrelated, and commenting unfavorably on Shade's appearance seems petty and irrelevant to introducing his poem.*

Shade inspired a kind of awe in the narrator, as he could watch Shade taking the world in and transforming its elements into poetry. This is the same feeling the narrator had when, as a boy, he saw a magician eating a vanilla ice after a remarkable magic show at the narrator's uncle's castle. "Pale Fire," too, is like magic.

To the narrator, Shade's poetry is a way of imparting sense and beauty on the world. He sees this is a literal act of transfiguration—a magical process by which Shade observes his surroundings and alchemizes them into gorgeous verse. The narrator is both awed by the enormity of such a thing and seemingly fascinated by its banality. He finds it hard to believe that something so amazing could also be ordinary, a disconnect that Shade himself (a man who revels in the ordinary) would never feel.

While the Commentary comes after the text of the poem (as is customary), the narrator hopes that the reader will look at the Commentary first and then decipher the poem while re-reading the Commentary. Without the narrator's notes, Shade's poem has no "human reality," since "Pale Fire" is too "skittish and reticent" to be properly autobiographical and the poem omits many great lines. The poem depends on the author's reality, and only the narrator's notes can provide that reality—a statement that Shade wouldn't have accepted, but the commentator has the last word. This foreword is signed with the narrator's name: Charles Kinbote.

After all of the narrator's praise of the "magic" of "Pale Fire," here he asks readers to spend much more time with his Commentary than with the poem itself. This is a sign of his relentless megalomania. It's also strange that the narrator (named Kinbote, as this passage reveals) would think that "Pale Fire" has no "human reality" and is not autobiographical—the poem that follows is actually intensely personal and human and rooted explicitly in Shade's own life. Reading this passage after reading the poem that follows is bizarre, and Kinbote likely knows it, which is why he concedes that Shade wouldn't have accepted Kinbote's interpretation that the poem isn't personal. Nonetheless, Kinbote does *have the last word, which speaks to the odd relationship between poet and critic and the way in which a critic can, in the right circumstances, eclipse the poem itself.*

PALE FIRE: CANTO ONE

The poem's speaker (presumably John Shade) looks out his living room window. On the glass is the "ashen fluff" of a dead **waxwing** that, seeing the blue sky reflected in the glass, crashed into the window and died. Shade sees himself as the waxwing, still living and flying in the reflection of the sky. The reflection also makes everything in his living room—his furniture, an apple on a plate—appear to be outside, hovering above the ground. Throughout many seasons, he watches nature through the window as it mingles with the reflection of his room.

In poetry, a heroic couplet is a pair of rhyming lines of iambic pentameter, a type of verse favored by Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. By 1959, when the novel is set, it would have been considered somewhat old-fashioned to write in heroic couplets. In addition, for Shade to write in heroic couplets (which were traditionally reserved for tales of war and glory) of merely sitting in his living room looking at nature is a deliberate valorization of domestic beauty. This opening image of the dead waxwing is pivotal to many of the book's central themes. First, this opening image gestures towards the book's (and Shade's) preoccupation with death and immortality. While the waxwing itself has died, Shade sees his own reflection, which appears to be in the blue sky, and he imagines himself to be a sort of ghost of the waxwing that is still living and flying in the reflection. Throughout the poem, Shade will raise questions about whether death is final and how one might live on after death, and this opening image sets the tone, showing his longing for life to triumph over death. It's also crucial to notice how the glass produces illusions that are both deceiving (in that the illusion of open sky kills the waxwing) and revealing of a truth: that nature and human domestic life are intertwined. Shade is amazed both by the natural world and by his family and domestic life—the two are inextricable sources of beauty and meaning for Shade, and he loves seeing his home and nature pushed together in the window reflection.

Shade describes **bird** tracks in the snow outside his window, wondering who walked "from left to right the blank page of the road." He reads the tracks, decoding from the dots and arrows that it is a gorgeous pheasant that has found its China in his yard. Perhaps this is the "fellow" who put his shoes on backwards in *Sherlock Holmes* to make his tracks reversed.

Shade is seeing the road outside as a blank page and the bird leaving its marks as it walks as being analogous to writing, while his looking at the tracks is analogous to reading. This immediately sets up the sense that nature is leaving messages that observant people can decode, much as they would read a book. The description of the bird's tracks as "dots and arrows" seems to refer to the way in which a bird's foot can look like an arrow and its beak pecking at the snow can leave a dot. The implication is that nature and human symbols (writing) are not separate, but rather intertwined and mutually dependent. When Shade muses that the bird is like a character in Sherlock Holmes, he's making the same point—that art and nature coexist in the same plane. The reference to the pheasant finding China in Shade's American yard refers to pheasants being originally of Asian origin. This reference to a bird finding its far-flung homeland in Shade's yard obliquely evokes how Charles Kinbote, in his Commentary, will find his (imaginary) homeland of Zembla in Shade's poem.

Shade loves every color, even gray, and he often makes himself take mental pictures of what he's seeing in the world—nature, his home, icicles—and then replay those images later with his eyes closed. He muses that, while as a boy he could see his front porch from the lake, now he cannot even make out the roof of his house from the same spot—maybe it's a "quirk in space." When he was a boy, the shagbark tree in his yard was young, while now it is bigger and thriving. White **butterflies** pass under the tree where the "phantom" of his daughter's swing hangs.

Throughout the book, the assassin Gradus—the man who eventually kills Shade—is associated with the color gray. Notably, "shade" (in its literal sense, as in "shadow") is also gray. So here, when Shade calls attention to his love of the color gray, he is both implying an acceptance of his own death (personified in Gradus) and a love of his life (since he himself is "Shade," which is literally a gray shadow). This twinning of life and death—the sense that one cannot love life without accepting death—is a motif throughout the whole book. Nabokov also consistently associates butterflies with both death and his family (fitting, since a major concern of Shade's is whether he and his deceased family members will survive, in some form, after death). The presence of butterflies alongside the "phantom" of his daughter's swing is important—the "phantom" language suggests that his daughter is dead, while the butterflies suggest that—even though his daughter, Hazel Shade, is gone—there is still life surrounding the tree with which Shade associates her. Nabokov isn't necessarily implying that Hazel has literally been reincarnated as a butterfly, but he's suggesting that life—in different forms—prevails and balances death.

Since his boyhood, Shade has mostly kept the house the same, besides renovating a wing and replacing a weathervane with a TV antenna. The **mockingbird** used to perch on the weathervane, but now she sits on the antenna, crying out to relay the TV programs she's heard. Shade's parents, both ornithologists, died when he was a baby—his dad of a bad heart and his mom of pancreatic cancer. He's tried so many times to "evoke" them that today he has "a thousand parents" that all, sadly, "dissolve."

The fact that Shade's deceased parents were both ornithologists is important; throughout the book, he associates birds and butterflies with dead family members, and this is a clear link between death and birds (pretty much all he remembers about his parents is that they're dead and they loved birds). Since Shade lives in the same house he grew up in, it's noteworthy that the mockingbird that once landed on his parents' weathervane now lands on his TV antenna. This bird continuing to visit the house despite the change from weathervane to TV antenna suggests a continuity of life, despite Shade's parents' death and the changing times. Shade's repeated failure to remember his parents as they were, and his sense of them dying again ("dissolv[ing]") every time he tries, sets the stage for his major quest: to figure out what happens after death and whether it's possible that his family still exists in some form.

After his parents' death, Shade would pray for the rest of his family to stay healthy. His strange Aunt Maud raised him—she made paintings that combined realism with the fantastically grotesque. Maud lived until after Shade's daughter was born, and now Maud's room is preserved. Her belongings are now a "still life in her style."

In a way, Shade's poetic style owes a debt to Aunt Maud. On the surface, "Pale Fire" is a realist autobiographical poem, but—digging deeper—it is a poem profoundly concerned with odd and fantastical things, such as ghosts and the afterlife. In this way, like Aunt Maud's paintings, Shade blends realism with subject matter that others might consider fantastical. By preserving Maud's room, Shade has, in some way, preserved Maud, particularly since her belongings give a sense of who she was. This is one way of thinking of life after death, although later Shade will raise the possibility that Maud has survived death in a weirder, more literal way.

As a young man, Shade lost his faith in God, as he found the concept "degrading" and illogical to a free man, although he couldn't quite see himself as free (he felt that nature was "glued" to him). In nature, Shade found "the painted parchment papering our cage." He noticed rings around the moon, the bright sun, "twinned iris," and rainbows reflected in a cloud from a thunderstorm "staged" far away. People are "most artistically caged."

This significant passage begins to explain Shade's spirituality and metaphysics. While he rejects God as a concept that doesn't give enough credit to the freedom of mankind, he's not actually convinced that, as a human being, he is free—although the constraint to his freedom isn't found in God, but in "nature." By this, Shade presumably means that his awareness of mankind's place in the natural world makes him skeptical of the notion that human beings are any more or less free than any other aspect of nature, which is interdependent and weighted with eons of genetic programming. But while Shade finds the idea of God oppressive, he seems to admire the way that nature might constrain his freedom—people, after all, are "artistically caged," he writes, which seems to suggest that nature both controls people and provides them with transcendent beauty. It's possible to see the events of Pale Fire *as an endorsement of this notion, as Shade is both a prisoner of fate (he is doomed to die) and a person who derives profound meaning and pleasure from the natural beauty around him.*

Shade is enamored of the chirping of crickets, the light on his neighbor's porch, and the "Great Bear." Ages ago, five minutes equaled 40 ounces of sand. When "infinite foretime" and "infinite aftertime" "close like **giant wings**," a person dies.

The imagery of this passage collapses time scales by referring to both things of a short duration (a porch light turning on, an hourglass marking five minutes) and of a long duration (the "Great Bear" references the constellation Ursa Major, which has been a feature of human mythology for centuries). Here, Shade refers to a human lifespan as a blip between "infinite foretime" (the endless time before a person was born) and "infinite aftertime" (the endless time that follows a person's death). The imagery of "giant wings" flapping further connects death to birds and butterflies, painting a human lifespan as a single wing-flap of an ethereal creature. This simultaneously emphasizes the supremacy of nature and the insignificance of an individual human life in the grand scale of time.

Shade was never athletic—he was always fat and asthmatic. He was "the shadow of the waxwing slain/by feigned remoteness in the windowpane." He didn't envy other boys, except when thinking about the "miracle" of the "lemniscate" of bicycle tracks. At eleven, Shade was playing with a wheelbarrow toy when there was a "sudden sunburst in [his] head." The black that followed was incredible; he felt "distributed through space and time." This happened every afternoon for a while and then stopped, but the experience changed him; he remains both shameful and filled with wonder.

In this passage, Shade describes his childhood loneliness, reprising the poem's first line in a context that implies, perhaps, that he was hurt emotionally ("slain") as a child by being made to feel that he was different from other boys ("feigned remoteness"). This perhaps explains Shade's sympathy for Kinbote, an annoying but isolated man who really wants a friend. "Lemniscate" is a mathematical term for a figure eight, which resembles an infinity sign. Here, Shade is simultaneously describing his desire for playmates and his sense that infinite time—or life transcending death—is a miracle. It's no coincidence that this image of the lemniscate occurs right before Shade's initial seizure, which was the moment when he first got a sense of the possibility of infinite being and the constant danger of death, an experience that reoriented his life.

PALE FIRE: CANTO TWO

For a time when Shade was young, he thought that everyone but him knew the "truth/About survival after death." Later, he would question human sanity, wondering how anyone could live without knowing what happened to consciousness when a person died. Eventually, one night, he decided that he would devote his life to understanding death. Now, at 61, Shade is clipping his nails and thinking of how each finger resembles people in life.

This passage marks the poem's explicit turn towards its main theme: death and the possibility of the afterlife. For Shade's whole life, what happens after death has been his central question. At first, he assumed that there was an easy answer that everyone else already knew—apparently that seemed more plausible to young Shade than having such a fundamental question be unanswerable, since realizing that there wasn't *an easy answer made him literally question people's sanity. He couldn't understand how anyone could be at ease in the world without knowing what would happen to them when they died—clearly, Shade couldn't simply go about his life without an answer. It seems like a bizarre shift to go from questions of life and death to a description of Shade clipping his nails and thinking of how, literally, his fingers resemble people he knows. But Shade will go on to reveal how, as he has investigated life and death, he has become attuned to coincidences, patterns, and resemblances that give him hope that there is some kind of grand design to the universe, one that will allow him to survive death in some form, even if he doesn't know what that form is. Discussing how his fingers look like people he knows is a sort of silly way to gesture towards that, but Shade always finds meaning and dignity in everyday things.*

At 80, Aunt Maud's health declined. She went to an institution where she lost her ability to speak. Shade wonders, if a person is resurrected, what stage of life they would return to. Space and time might simply be perceptual illusions, but if someone were told before they were born what life would be, it would probably seem like bizarre and "wonderful nonsense." Because of this, Shade wonders why he should laugh at human ideas of the afterlife—perhaps it's not that our ideas of the afterlife are too outlandish, but rather that they're not outlandish *enough*, since we basically only dream up a "domestic ghost." It's ridiculous to try to describe the fate of humanity in his personal words—it should be "poetry divinely terse."

Aunt Maud is one of Shade's dead family members whom he hopes has, in some form, survived her death. But this passage gets at some of the difficulties of imagining this—if Maud were resurrected in heaven, for example, would she be as she was in the institution before she died, or at the prime of her life, and who might decide this? To some extent, Shade explains these questions away in the next lines by asserting that the afterlife is unimaginable. His logic is pretty sound; if a being with no knowledge of human life were asked to imagine human life, they would certainly come up with "nonsense." Likewise, human beings trying to describe an entirely unknown and alien world—the afterlife—are incapable of imagining anything so different from their own reality. To Shade, this lack of imagination leads human conceptions of the afterlife to somewhat resemble life on earth—people think only of "domestic ghosts" rather than acknowledging that the reality is probably so outlandish that nobody could fathom it. In fact, human language cannot even describe it—only "poetry divinely terse," by which Shade seems to mean the nonhuman language of the divine.

As Shade and his wife walked home on the day that their daughter died, they saw "Life is a message scribbled in the dark. -Anonymous" written on the bark of a tree. Also on the trunk was the husk of a cicada and an ant preserved in sap. This reminds Shade of an Englishman in France who accidentally said, in French, that he was feeding the cicadas (*cigales*) when he meant to say seagulls. "Lafontaine was wrong," Shade reflects; "Dead is the mandible/alive the song." As he clips his nails, he thinks that he hears "your" steps upstairs and everything is okay.

This passage makes a couple of tricky associations and relies on some outside knowledge of language and literature to understand. When Shade saw a cicada molt and a preserved ant on the tree, it reminded him of Lafontaine's retelling of the Aesop fable about the cicada and the ant. In this story, an ant has spent the summer industriously stockpiling food for the winter, while the cicada merely sang all summer. As winter approaches, the panicked cicada asks the ant to borrow food, but the ant refuses, since it's the cicada's own fault that she didn't do anything productive. When Shade sees a cicada molt (implying that the cicada shed its exoskeleton but didn't die) alongside an ant preserved in sap (a dead ant), he corrects Lafontaine, whose story implied the opposite: that the cicada died while the ant survived. In this case, it's the "mandible" (which references a part of an ant) that is dead, while the cicada lived on. This is a defense of the immortality of poetry, which is akin to the cicada's song (Shade has devoted his life to poetry, which he believes will immortalize him in some way). But when Shade immediately brings up his sense that he can hear his dead daughter's footsteps upstairs, it makes this declaration broader. The mandible (the literal bones) of a person might be dead, but their song can somehow live on, as Shade seems to believe of Hazel. The writing scrawled on the tree trunk—that "life is a message scribbled in the dark," attributed to "anonymous"—is also important. This is, in a way, an encapsulation of Shade's beliefs about life and death. He comes to believe that the pattern of echoes and coincidences that he sees across his whole life are signals that there is some order and logic that he himself cannot understand but that some "anonymous" forces have designed. So, in a way, Shade believes that all of life is a message from an anonymous beyond, but human beings—limited by their perception—are in the dark about what that message is.

Shade and Sybil fell in love on a high school trip to a waterfall. As he learned about the science of the waterfall, he looked at Sybil's body. In all these years, she hasn't changed much, and they can still hear the waterfall on quiet nights. Addressing Sybil as "my dark **Vanessa**," he asks her to "come and be worshipped" and "caressed." They have been married for forty years, and he wonders how many more years they will have. He loves it when Sybil stares at creatures in the tree or tells him to look at the sunset, and he loves her most when she "greet[s] her ghost."

While Kinbote has depicted Sybil as a controlling monster of a woman, it's clear from this passage that John and Sybil are profoundly in love and that he sees her as a gentle, beautiful, and observant person. Here, Shade blends his love of nature with his love of his wife, intermingling his description of a waterfall with the moment he fell in love with her, and comparing her to a gorgeous Vanessa butterfly. Throughout the novel, butterflies are simultaneously associated with Shade's family and with death—here, he refers to Sybil as a butterfly, and then immediately turns to wondering how many years they will have together before one of them dies. Every time Shade invokes a butterfly, he seems to be thinking of a family member's death. It's also clear from the fact that Sybil will often "greet" their daughter's "ghost" that she, too, shares John's sense that Hazel is still in their life, despite her death.

Their daughter looked more like John Shade than Sybil, which broke their hearts. At first they tried to deny that she was ugly, but it was undeniable in adolescence. Despite being smart, she was left out socially and was once cast as an old crone in a play, which made Shade weep in the bathroom. He and Sybil mourned that she would never have boyfriends, even while they told themselves that this wasn't everything.

Shade's extensive attention to Hazel's lackluster looks and the suffering that she (and he) endured because of it sets up the circumstances of her death: she died by suicide after being abandoned on a date. The extent to which Shade focuses on Hazel's looks, though, also recalls two prior moments in the poem—one in which the cicada shed its exoskeleton but lived on, and one in which Shade wondered in what form Aunt Maud might be resurrected in the afterlife. A central (but subtle) concern of Shade's musings on death seems to be whether Hazel, after death, might escape the ugliness that tormented her while she was alive—perhaps, like the cicada molt that Shade saw the night of Hazel's death, death has merely meant shedding her skin while her song lives on.

Their daughter had odd fears and visions. Once, she spent three nights researching strange sounds and lights in a barn, and she was fascinated by words spelled backwards. She was quite critical and only smiled when she was hurt. Despite her sadness and troubles, Shade loved her and relishes the evenings when they would play games together or he would help her with her homework—even the ones when all three would be at work in their separate rooms. The "three chambers bound by" Shade, Sybil, and their daughter are now a "three-act play" that depicts "events" that will "forever stay."

This passage introduces Hazel's eccentricity and her association with paranormal activity—while she looks like John, her personality seems to take after Aunt Maud. Shade's declaration that the "chambers bound by" each member of his family are now a "play" that will preserve events forever seems literally to be drawing attention to the distance between Shade and his family—how they spent time in different rooms ("chambers"), and now that Hazel is dead, this distance between them will always remain. However, by referring to the three members of his family as a "three-act play" that preserves the events of their life, Shade is also gesturing towards the immortality of art. By writing about his family, Shade is making sure that their lives are preserved in verse.

One night, Shade's typist set Shade's daughter up with her cousin, Pete. They went to a bar, but when Pete met Shade's daughter, he left, claiming that he'd forgotten he had another obligation. She claimed not to mind, but she took the bus to the lake instead of going home. At that time, Shade and Sybil were watching TV and waiting for her. Shade thought of the vacation when his daughter was conceived, when they saw the man feeding the seagulls, while Sybil nervously wondered where their daughter could be. When they turned off the TV, a point of light lingered and then died in "black infinity." At that moment, a man walked—too late—along the bank of the lake.

The implication here is that, when Hazel's blind date realized that she wasn't beautiful, he bailed on her, which hurt her so deeply that she went to the lake to drown herself. While Hazel was experiencing this, her parents were at home watching TV, and Shade intersperses his narration of Hazel's journey to her death with narration of his and his wife's evening of watching television and idly chatting with one another. On the one hand, this is a literary device meant to enhance the drama and the stakes of the moment (Hazel's parents have no idea how heartbroken they're about to be), and Kinbote (in his Commentary on this section) will criticize Shade for leaning on a tired literary device to convey such an important moment. However, it's possible to take the odd coincidences between Hazel's evening and her parents' evening (that she dies in the moment when their TV fades to black, that John thinks about the time when she was about to be born just as she is about to die) not as literary sentimentality but as evidence of Shade's belief that everything in his life reflects patterns beyond his understanding or control—patterns that point to the universe being designed. The fact that Kinbote later criticizes the artistry of this synchronization technique indicates to readers that they should look further. After all, Kinbote is a fool who tends to miss the point of things, so Shade is likely drawing deliberate attention to how his life and Hazel's fate intersect.

While Shade was doing the dishes around midnight, a cop car arrived; some people think that their daughter died while trying to cross the lake, or that she got lost, but Shade and Sybil know that she died by suicide.

It's significant that John insists that he and his wife know *what happened to their daughter—he admits no possibility of doubt, even though other people remain unsure. This isn't to suggest that Hazel literally told him from the afterlife that she died by suicide, but it does seem that John and Sybil believe that they retain a connection to her that is strong enough that they are certain of what happened.*

PALE FIRE: CANTO THREE

"L'if, lifeless tree!" Shade writes. "Your great Maybe: Rabelais: The grand potato."

These opening lines are a little hard to decipher without context. L'if *in French means "the yew tree," but obviously* l'if *looks like the English word "life." In that way, Shade is drawing a tension between the word "L'if," which evokes both life and a tree, and the phrase "lifeless tree"—as if* l'if *is both alive and dead simultaneously.* L'if *also looks somewhat like "the if," which links both to the I.P.H. (pronounced "if") that he will later reference, and to the concept of the "great maybe." This latter phrase references the last words of Rabelais, who said he was going to search for the "great maybe," which—in French—is* "le grand peut-être." *In English,* "grand peut-être" *sounds like "grand potato," so here Shade is playing trans-lingual word games (much as he did with "seagull" and* "cigale"). *In general, this opening to the third canto is setting readers up for the canto's major theme: the mystery of what lies beyond death and the possibility that life can persist in death.*

When John and Sybil's daughter was young, the family spent a term at the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter (IPH, which they pronounced "if"). Shade had been invited to lecture there on death. But IPH missed the point of death—that "we die every day," and that death is not about "dry thighbones" but about "blood-ripe lives." Shade feels fine about returning to life as a fly or a flower, but he wants never to lose his consciousness of life's joy and pain. He would refuse heaven unless he could find there the gleam of a car taillight, the way Sybil smiles at dogs, or the ink in his pen.

That the name of this institute devoted to studying the afterlife is pronounced "if" draws attention to how hypothetical human understanding of the afterlife is. Throughout his poem, Shade always respects the mystery of what follows death, even as he seeks whatever information might be available to human perception. In this passage, Shade also comes close to telling readers how he personally feels about death and life—he's not attached to his body, but he cherishes consciousness. The afterlife would only be acceptable to him if he could continue to find pleasure in observing beauty—even very banal beauty, such as the color of a car taillight. This shows his poet's disposition, as what Shade values most about life is finding beauty all around him. He also makes the point that death is not separate from life—every moment of life involves impending death, and studying death is really about understanding the nature of life. For Shade, studying death isn't a morbid fascination with "dry thighbones," but rather an expression of love for his existence and a desire to understand more fully the life that he finds so beautiful.

The IPH, however, suggested that one should prepare for the afterlife to be disappointing. Maybe nobody is there to greet the newly dead; it might be a "boundless void" where a person is left alone without memories. While IPH rejected God, they did ascribe to some mysticism, telling people how to move through solid objects if they became a ghost, or what precautions to take against an unfortunate reincarnation (such as becoming a toad in the middle of a busy street), or how to behave if their first wife and their second wife are jealous of each other in heaven.

After Shade's complex meditation on life, death, beauty, and mystery, the concerns of IPH are supposed to seem outlandishly silly and myopic. They're telling people how ghosts move through solid objects and how to navigate the etiquette of encountering multiple deceased spouses in heaven—this is exactly what Shade was mocking when he previously wrote that human beings are so limited in their perception and imagination that they can only imagine a "domestic ghost" when thinking about the infinite possibilities of the afterlife.

Everyone knows from dreams that it's hard to speak with the dead, and it's also hard to tell anyone what thoughts to think as they're dying. Nobody can help an exiled old bilingual man dying of suffocation in a motel in the prairie as colored lights swirl outside. The only thing that can be known is that there will be a "rift"—it could be nothing on the other side. Sybil said of IPH that she couldn't tell the difference between the institute and hell.

The reference here to a bilingual man suffocating in a prairie motel while colored lights flash outside his window clearly evokes Kinbote, a bilingual man who said in the Foreword that he'd fled to a motel somewhere out west so that he could finish his Commentary on "Pale Fire" and who referenced the colored lights outside his window several times. There are a couple things to notice about this reference. First, it suggests that Kinbote dies in his motel—there will be many hints throughout the novel that Kinbote is suicidal and that he probably kills himself after finishing his work on "Pale Fire." Second, in the timeline of the novel, it is odd—prophetic, even—for Shade to make this reference. After all, Shade wrote this canto just before his death in July, while Kinbote would not decamp for the western motel until August (and he explicitly says in the Commentary that he never told Shade of his vacation plans). Furthermore, Kinbote doesn't finish his Foreword—the last part of his manuscript—until October, so that's the earliest that he could plausibly die. Shade, then, seems to be predicting in July—with remarkable specificity—Kinbote's fate a few months down the road. Scholars have explained this and other similar prophetic moments in the poem "Pale Fire" a few different ways. Some people believe that Shade is an invention of Kinbote's (and therefore Kinbote wrote the poem and *the Commentary, which would explain how the poem predicts Kinbote's fate). Others believe that Kinbote is an invention of Shade's. Still others think that this is Nabokov inserting his presence into the book to show that he is the master of his characters and the unifying thread between the poem and Commentary. A fourth theory—one that Nabokov scholars actually consider quite credible—is that moments like this reveal that Shade was writing "Pale Fire" under the unconscious influence of his dead family members who, from a mysterious afterlife, know both his and Kinbote's fates and are guiding him through his literary masterpiece before his death. (For more on this, see Brian Boyd's book* Nabokov's Pale Fire: the Magic of Artistic Discovery.)

The silliness of IPH actually helped Shade in the sense that it taught him what to ignore in his quest to learn the truth about death. When his daughter died, he understood that she would not come back as a ghost, and that the creaking in the house is only the wind and not her presence.

Notably, Shade is not saying that being around the mystical nonsense at IPH made him give up on the notion of an afterlife altogether—he's merely saying that the experience clarified for him what isn't *likely in the afterlife. As he searches for traces of his daughter after her death, he's not going to look in the howling of the wind or the creaking of the floorboards—he knows that she's not a "domestic ghost" and that her presence is likely to turn up in stranger, more unexpected ways.*

Eventually, after their daughter's death, Shade and Sybil's life resumed; they went to Italy, attended to the publication of Shade's essays, and returned to teaching. Then one night, Shade "died." It was during a lecture on poetry that Shade had "one of [his] old fits." His heart stopped for a few moments before it started again, and Shade knows—without knowing how—that he "crossed the border."

When Shade's childhood seizures first happened, it was his first experience of glimpsing what consciousness beyond death could be. During those experiences, he lost track of his body and of time, but some part of his mind remained—this is the origin of his preoccupation with consciousness persisting after the body dies. Here, as an adult, he has a heart attack instead of a seizure, but his experience is somewhat similar to what he experienced in childhood.

While dead, Shade found that everything he loved was gone, but he had no regret; there was a "system of cells interlinked within cells" and then, in the dark, there was a white fountain. He understands that the fountain wasn't really there, but its illusion pointed to something real that could only be glimpsed by someone in the world of the dead. When he woke up, a doctor denied that he could have hallucinated in his state and rejected Shade's perception that he died; "not quite: just half a shade," the doctor said.

When Shade describes a "system of cells interlinked with cells," he's perhaps being literal, but he's also perhaps describing a theory of the universe. Here, in death, he has intuited a pattern—a repeated structure, almost fractal in nature, in which linked cells replicate at smaller and smaller scales. The notion of a repeating pattern has resonance with poetry itself (Shade's poem, of course, has a metrical pattern, repetition of sounds through rhyme, and a repetition of various themes and motifs, including butterflies), and it also resonates with how Shade sees his own life, as a series of coincidences and patterns that seem to point to a world that has been designed, not evolved by chance. The doctor's comment is a pun. A "shade" is another word for ghost, so when the doctor denies that Shade died when his heart stopped, he's making a joke that Shade was only half-dead.

Afterwards, Shade thought often of the white fountain—how it "reeked with truth" and had "its own reality." Whenever his life troubled him, he would find comfort in thinking of the fountain. Then he came across a magazine article about a woman who, after a heart attack, told of a "land beyond the veil" with angels, stained glass, soft music, and a white fountain. Believing that their shared vision of the fountain was proof that the afterlife existed outside of themselves, Shade got the woman's address from the journalist and drove to see her. He found her silly and boring, though, and he never managed to ask her about the fountain. When Shade called the journalist, the man said that the article was accurate except for one unimportant misprint: *fountain* should have said *mountain*.

For his whole life, Shade had been searching for concrete information about what lies beyond death. When he first saw the fountain, he found it obscurely meaningful, but then when he thought that someone else had seen it too, it seemed that his puzzle was solved and that the fountain was objective proof that there was an afterlife, shared between different people, in which consciousness remained. Out of desire to have concrete proof of the afterlife, he overlooked the fact that the woman's other claims from "beyond the veil" included such silly things as soft music and stained glass (the very kinds of "domestic ghosts" that Shade dismisses), but if he'd seriously considered what this woman was saying before going to meet her, he likely would have realized that he was chasing after an answer that was too simple for the complexity of the problem at hand.

That Shade based his belief in eternal life on a misprint might have been a hint to stop his search for the truth of death. But then it occurred to him that, actually, this was "the real point": that what seems like nonsense is actually a "web of sense," and that in life he must find pleasure in the patterns all around him—the same pleasure that "they who played [the game] found," no matter who "they" are.

Some people might have found in this misprint a bitterly ironic lesson that everything is arbitrary and meaningless and that the experience of the afterlife cannot be proved or shared. But Shade—a poet always attuned to patterns and coincidences and experiences that rhyme with one another—finds in this mistake his real theory of life and death. While the mountain/fountain mix-up seemed like nonsense, it's actually a significant coincidence that points to a "web of sense" that orders the world. The patterns and coincidences of human life are evidence that the universe is designed by "players" whom humans cannot perceive or understand. But these patterns that are detectible everywhere in the world are evidence of their existence, and the meaning of human life is to delight in those patterns and in the beauty of the life that these players—whatever they are—have created.

The players are not audible or visible, but still they exist "playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns to ivory unicorns and ebon fauns," giving some a long life and killing others, hiding a person's glasses, and "coordinating these events and objects with remote events/And vanished objects. Making ornaments/ Of accidents and possibilities." After this realization, Shade tried to tell Sybil of his "faint hope," although while he was speaking, she was telling him to shut the door and asking about his trip.

Here, Nabokov—a chess enthusiast—is comparing the structure of the universe to a game of chess, suggesting that human life is a game played by far-off players whose moves and motivations cannot be understood but whose patterns are faintly visible to the pieces on the board—humans—if people are open to perceiving them. The signs of the game are found in "accidents and possibilities"—strange resonances between seemingly ordinary things, like the mountain/fountain misprint. To Shade, this realization unlocks the afterlife for him. Even if he doesn't know what the afterlife is specifically like, the evidence that life itself is designed suggests to him that there will at least be something *beyond death. When he tries to tell Sybil of his "faint hope," it's likely that he's referring to the hope he has gained from his revelation that perhaps Hazel's consciousness is alive somewhere, even if they cannot access it. That Sybil is asking about banal things like the door and his trip to meet the woman from the news article while he's trying to communicate this earth-shattering revelation shows how divine revelation and domestic reality intermingle. This is both funny and poignant, as Shade's whole point is that the domestic* is *evidence of the divine.*

PALE FIRE: CANTO FOUR

Shade declares that he will "spy on beauty" as nobody has done before, and cry out, and try what hasn't been tried. He spells out two methods of writing: A, which happens in a poet's mind while he occupies himself with another task, and B, which happens when he is actually writing with a pen. In B, the "hand supports the thought" by transforming images or ideas into words, while A is agonizing, because the writer cannot think of anything but the poem, even as he tries to do something else. In method A, everything has to be in the poet's head at once, but it's possible that this makes the poem better, since he cannot write down a false line and just leave it there—sometimes the right word comes only when he's away from his desk.

Shade's revelation about life and death has reinvigorated his commitment to using his poetry to evoke the world's beauty and invent new forms and patterns in his art. The fact that he turns from such a momentous spiritual revelation at the end of the last canto to a prosaic description of his writing process at the beginning of this one shows how Shade implicitly connects his writing to his spirituality. Creating his poetry is, for him, a type of creation that mirrors the way that the "players" in the last canto create patterns and accidents that form the beauty of human life. This passage suggests that Shade is always writing, even when he's not physically writing, and that some of his truest ideas come when he's out in the world, rather than at his desk.

Shade writes best on midsummer mornings. Once, he was half-asleep and imagined that he was on the dewy lawn wearing only one shoe—but when he woke up, one shoe was on the lawn, which was a "mystery," "mirage," and "miracle."

These are the kinds of inexplicable events that make Shade rejoice, because they point to mystery and coincidence, which he associates with proof that there is truth and order to the universe that human beings can never know.

Since his biographer might be too proper or uninformed to know that he shaved in the bath, Shade details how he shaves and describes his skin thinning and how that makes him nick himself more. The commercials where one-armed men shave perfectly seem impossible; Shade struggles to shave even with both hands. But sometimes, when he suddenly realizes the perfect image or phrase for a poem, his hairs stand on end in the way that the man's hairs do in the commercials when they're held up with shaving cream. The blade traveling across Shade's cheek is like cars driving on the highway or like plowing "Old Zembla's fields."

Shade's description of shaving being a struggle until, in a moment of inspiration, his hairs stand on end just like they do in the commercials echoes his previous description of how writing poetry in his head is a horrific struggle until, suddenly, it isn't. This passage also contains the poem's only reference to "Zembla," which is significant because Kinbote believed that the whole poem *was going to be about his imagined homeland of Zembla. Instead, he got only this throwaway line. What's worse is that this isn't a reference to Zembla in the way that Kinbote means it—Shade isn't referring to the faraway country that Kinbote believes himself to be from, but is instead making a literary allusion to an Alexander Pope poem that invokes Zembla in reference not to Kinbote's homeland, but to the Russian island of Novaya Zemlya (also called Nova Zembla). Shade has previously written a book on Pope, so this allusion would be readily available to him.*

"*Man's life as commentary to abstruse/Unfinished poem*. Note for further use," Shade writes. As he dresses, he roams the house thinking about poetry; his "muse" is with him wherever he goes. But at every moment, Sybil is also there, too, "beneath the word, above/The syllable, to underscore and stress/The vital rhythm." She is youthful and she makes his old words—which he wrote for her—alive again when she speaks them.

It's possible that Shade means the line about man's life being a commentary on an unfinished poem as a metaphor for the human condition: that humanity is a footnote to a divine poem that is still unfolding. However, like the previous passage in which Shade seems to forecast Kinbote staying in a prairie motel with an amusement park outside the window, here Shade eerily predicts what Kinbote will do with the manuscript of "Pale Fire" after Shade's death: use the commentary on an unfinished poem to tell his own *story. In this passage, Shade also entwines art and domestic life once again by suggesting that Sybil is literally present in the rhythm of his poetry—it's not that his poetry* depicts *her, it's that his poetry* contains *her in some sense. This recalls Shade's vision of "cells interlinked within cells" (a vision he had when he "died" after his heart attack) in that it shows how the patterns of the divine players are mirrored in the rhythm of poetry which reflects his love for his wife. All of these things—the divine, poetry, and marriage—exist at different scales, with different levels of abstraction, but they're all interlinked rhythms.*

Shade's first book was called *Dim Gulf*, and next came *Night Rote*, then *Hebe's Cup*, but then he decided to simply call everything "Poems." However, this particular poem requires a "moondrop" title—"Help me, Will!" Shade exclaims, and then he writes "Pale Fire."

Here, Shade is mocking his younger self for always choosing titles that came from another person's work (all of these titles are references to other poems). Once he got over that phase, he decided to publish a book of poems simply called "Poems"—not a reference to anyone else. However, for "Pale Fire," he decides that he needs a title from Shakespeare ("Will"), from whom he selects "Pale Fire." But this is not a simple regression to Shade's youthful need to borrow legitimacy from great poets by referencing them in his titles,—using "Pale Fire" as a title is a self-aware joke about borrowing artistic inspiration from others, since the passage of the play Timon of Athens *in which the phrase "pale fire" appears is explicitly about getting inspiration from outside of oneself (the line is "the moon's an arrant thief, and her pale fire she snatches from the sun"). Shade has spent his whole life studying the poetry of others and writing his own poetry, and he feels intimately interconnected to the poets who have come before him. To feel confident enough to use "Pale Fire" as his semi-ironic title, Shade is acknowledging that all literature exists within a web of the language and literature that came before it and that he cannot separate his own poetry and inspiration from the work of others.*

As the day fades, Shade feels tired and he lets go of some of the poetry he meant to write. He muses that maybe he loves the *consonne d'appui* because he believes that life itself is "fantastically planned" and "richly rhymed." In this moment, he feels like he understands his existence only through his poetry. But the universe, like his poetry, "scans right," and he believes that the poetry of galaxies is written also in iambic meter. He's pretty sure that people survive death, and that his daughter is alive somewhere, just as he is "reasonably sure" that he'll wake the next morning, July 22nd. With this, it's time to put aside his poetry for the evening.

Consonne d'appui *is a French term for "perfect rhyme"—that is, words like "pain" and "pane" that sound the same. In French poetry, it's perfectly normal to have rhymed words that sound the same, but in English poetry this isn't generally done (consonnes d'appui tend to strike English speakers as odd). As an English speaking poet, Shade would be expected to grimace at a consonne d'appui, but he loves them—and here he has a metaphysical theory as to why. To him, two unrelated words happening to sound the same is akin to the kinds of coincidences that show that the universe itself is planned and beautiful ("richly rhymed"). It's actually through poetry itself that Shade can catch a glimpse of how he thinks the universe works—the way that he designs his poetry to be patterned and rhyming must resemble the way that the "players" design the universe. If people could decode the mysteries of the universe, they would find in it something similar to poetry—a sense that everything is orderly and beautiful, that the universe itself has been written in meter and rhyme. Shade takes great comfort in this insight—it suggests to him that his belief that his daughter still exists somewhere is no more absurd than his belief that he'll wake up tomorrow, the 22nd of July. Of course, Shade does* not *wake up the next morning, since he dies right after writing these lines. Just like the mountain/fountain incident, it's possible to interpret this as a grim and cynical indication that Shade's theories of the afterlife are false, but it's also possible to explain this line about waking up the next day as another uncanny and possibly prophetic aspect of Shade's poem that suggests that he is, in some small way, in tune with aspects of the universe beyond himself.*

The sun is setting, and Sybil is in the garden—Shade sees her shadow by the shagbark tree and hears a neighbor playing horseshoes. A Vanessa **butterfly** sweeps over the lawn, and "some neighbor's gardener" walks by with a wheelbarrow.

The poem "Pale Fire" has no 1000th line—the final line (the 999th) is just one half of a couplet, with its rhyming pair missing. As Kinbote suggests, the first line ("I was the shadow of the waxwing slain") is a rhyming fit for the final line. It also fits in terms of the literal narrative of the poem; after 999 lines of exploring the interplay of life and death and the possibility of existence beyond death, Shade is killed in the moments after he sees his neighbor's gardener—he is unexpectedly slain, like the waxwing. But the poem remains unfinished, and it's not possible to know exactly what Shade would have done. There are a few things to note about this ending. First, the banal domesticity of these lines might seem a bit anticlimactic coming after the enormity of Shade's revelations about life and death, but actually this ending fits with his beliefs—for Shade, the sublime patterns of the universe are everywhere, which means that the domestic is divine, and this ending is a quiet appreciation of what is, for Shade, the meaning of life: appreciating nature and his family. Second, the neighbor's gardener pushing the wheelbarrow recalls the toy that Shade was playing with as a child in the moment that he had his first seizure (it was a tin man with a wheelbarrow). As a man with a wheelbarrow precedes both Shade's first experience of death and his actual death just after writing this line, this is an example of the kind of patterning that Shade sees as evidence of a designed universe. Third, the Vanessa butterfly again appears in a moment that is weighted with associations of family and death—this time heralding Shade's own death.

COMMENTARY: LINES 1-48

Lines 1-4: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain. Kinbote writes that this opening image describes a **bird** that dies smacking into the reflection of the sky in Shade's window. He imagines John Shade as a young boy, seeing the dead bird and experiencing the shock of death. When Shade and Kinbote were neighbors, Kinbote often saw waxwings by Shade's house.

Kinbote opens his Commentary by describing what is literally happening in the poem—that a bird has died by flying into a window. But what he doesn't *do is the basic job of a scholarly commentary: suggesting to readers what this line* means *and giving context for how to interpret it. For example, he could have explained how this image evokes the possibility of an afterlife and Shade's obsession with immortality (since, while the waxwing is dead, Shade is seeing himself as its shadow, suggesting that its life continues on in some form). Or Kinbote could have noted here what he notes later on: that Shade's own father had a species of waxwing named after him (implying that the waxwing might also be a stand-in for Shade's dead parents, with Shade himself as their "shadow," carrying their existence forward after their death). All of this would be standard information for a scholarly Commentary, but Kinbote's inability to provide it immediately casts doubt on his ability as a scholar and interpreter of poetry.*

Kinbote had previously only known about northern European **birds**, but his gardener in New Wye—a young man "in whom [he] was interested"—taught him to identify local birds. Oddly, the waxwing resembles a bird that appears on the crest of Zembla's King Charles the Beloved, whose "misfortunes" Shade and Kinbote often discussed.

Kinbote's acknowledgement that he knows about the birds of northern Europe situates the fictional land of Zembla somewhere in northern Europe, likely close to Russia (since Kinbote frequently describes the significant Russian influence on Zembla). His "interest" in the young gardener is sexual, which perhaps explains why Kinbote has patience for the gardener teaching him about birds, but he hates whenever Shade discusses nature. The reference to the waxwing-like bird in the Zemblan crest immediately establishes a connection between Zembla and the world of New Wye—many such "coincidences" connect New Wye to Zembla, establishing Zembla as a sort of mirror world to Kinbote's life in New Wye (and also suggesting that Kinbote may be inventing Zembla based on the events in his life in America).

Shade began "Pale Fire" just after midnight on July 1st—the exact middle of the year—and Shade would certainly understand Kinbote's desire to synchronize the start of the poem with the departure of the "would-be regicide" Gradus, but actually Gradus left Zembla five days later.

In narrating Gradus's story, Kinbote is obsessed with the coincidences and synchronicity between Gradus's travels to America and Shade's composition of the poem. Kinbote seems to believe that Shade's fate—to die at the hands of Gradus—is inextricably connected to his progress on the poem. Calling Gradus a "would-be regicide" implies that Gradus intended to kill a king—King Charles the Beloved of Zembla.

Line 12: that crystal land. This may be a reference to Kinbote's homeland of Zembla. In a particularly disorganized draft that didn't make it into the final copy, there are lines here that describe how a friend told Shade about a "certain king," but Shade seems to have cut them due to censorship by a "domestic anti-Karlist" (Sybil).

An "anti-Karlist" is someone who opposes King Charles ("Karl" being a variant of "Charles"). Kinbote is leading readers to believe that Shade would have explicitly written about King Charles had his wife not stopped him for political reasons. Not only is this clearly delusional (Shade obviously had no intention of writing a poem about Zembla, despite Kinbote's fervent desire that he would), but the draft variant that Kinbote references is also an outright fabrication—later in the Commentary and then again in the Index, Kinbote admits that he wrote this line himself. So here, Kinbote is citing a line he wrote himself as proof that Shade's poem would have been about Zembla had his meddling wife not censored him, and he uses this reasoning as an excuse to talk at length about Zembla (ostensibly to illuminate the subtext of the poem, but really because it's his own obsession).

Discerning historians will remember Charles the Beloved's reign as a peaceful time in Zembla in which the arts and sciences thrived and the poor got richer as the rich got a bit poorer (which might someday be known as "Kinbote's Law"). Influenced by his uncle Conmal (a Shakespeare translator), Charles the Beloved developed a passion for literature. At age 40, just before the end of his reign, Charles began teaching literature in disguise—it would be unbecoming, after all, for a king to teach. Kinbote himself, after not shaving for a year, resembles King Charles in disguise.

This passage overtly hints that Kinbote is *Charles the Beloved, first by calling the lessening of wealth inequality under King Charles "Kinbote's Law" and then by conspicuously noting that Kinbote—himself a foreign-born professor with an interest in literature—physically resembles King Charles. If Zembla is a mirror-world that reflects the life that Kinbote wishes he had, then it's significant that he emphasizes that Charles is "beloved" by others and was a competent, benevolent ruler. Kinbote himself isn't well-liked and his peers do not consider him to be a credible scholar, so his delusion of being a beloved and successful ruler is an inversion of his actual life.*

Line 17: And then the gradual; Line 29: gray. Coincidentally, with the words "gradual" and "gray," Shade nearly names the man that he would meet for a "fatal moment" three weeks after writing these lines. Jakob Gradus also goes by Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, and various other aliases. Gradus, who loved Soviet Russia, worked in the liquor business and flirted with political radicalism in the leadup to the Zemblan revolution. He left for Europe with a gun and a malicious intent on the same day that Shade began Canto Two of "Pale Fire." Throughout the Commentary, Kinbote will analyze the poem and simultaneously follow Gradus's journey to New Wye as he walks in "iambic motion" or "ride[s] past in a rhyme."

Kinbote's description of Gradus is meant to be insulting. Kinbote is a Royalist (a supporter of monarchy) who will later describe his nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Russia, while Gradus loves Soviet *Russia (Russia after its monarchy was overthrown). Furthermore, Gradus works in a disreputable industry (liquor) and Kinbote dismisses Gradus's radical politics as unserious. Kinbote clearly wants readers to see Gradus as a ridiculous and undignified figure. It's also noteworthy that Kinbote so explicitly links Gradus's travels with the poem "Pale Fire," not only in his desire to synchronize Shade's writing with Gradus's travels (as though the two are intimately related), but also in the sense he gives that Gradus's travel is somehow occurring* within *the poem. To say that Gradus walks in "iambic motion," for instance, is to say that his footsteps have the same meter as Shade's poem (which is written in iambic pentameter), as though Shade's poem has created Gradus and determined his actions.*

Line 27: Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is a detective in Conan Doyle stories, although Kinbote does not know which story is referenced here—he suspects that Shade made the reversed footprints up.

In the Commentary, it's Kinbote's job to explain literary references, but here he doesn't bother to research the Holmes reference (instead, he explains it away by guessing that it's made up). Actually, this reference is quite thematically important to the poem. When Arthur Conan Doyle got tired of writing Holmes stories, he tried to kill the detective off in "The Final Problem" by having a set of footprints lead out to a waterfall with no set of prints returning. However, later on, Doyle resurrected Holmes for financial reasons and explained away the ending of "The Final Problem" as Holmes having cleverly reversed his shoes to mislead those who investigated his death. Since "Pale Fire" is obsessed with the possibility of life after death, and this references the device by which Conan Doyle resurrected the detective he'd killed off, Shade seems deliberately to be pointing to bird tracks (the footprints referenced in the poem) as a sign of resurrection. This gels with Shade's general attitude towards nature, which seems to be a sense that after a person's death, their consciousness lives on in nature.

Lines 34-35: Stilettos of a frozen stillicide. Shade often uses wintry imagery, even though he wrote the poem in summer. Kinbote is "too modest to suppose" that the winter imagery comes from the fact that he and Shade first met in winter. The word "stillicide" means, according to Kinbote's dictionary, water dripping from eaves ("eavesdrop"). He saw this word once in a poem by Thomas Hardy, and the word subtly evokes "regicide."

Here, Kinbote shows that he has some literary background because he correctly ties the word "stillicide" to a Thomas Hardy poem. However, once again, he doesn't bother to research which poem in particular or why Shade might have invoked it. As it turns out, "stillicide" appears in Hardy's poem "Friends Beyond," in a passage in which Hardy's friends who have died seem to whisper to him from beyond the grave. Many of Shade's literary allusions are meant to evoke the possibility of life after death, positioning literature as a way of speaking from beyond the grave. Kinbote's megalomania is in full force here, as he calls himself "modest" while boasting immodestly about how his friendship is the source of Shade's wintry imagery (it's not—for one, the images of ice and snow crystals are thematically tied to the imagery of reflection and glass that appears throughout the poem). Were Kinbote even slightly more self-aware, he might have connected himself more to the word "eavesdrop" (since, as the Commentary will go on to reveal, Kinbote often spied on Shade in his home) than "regicide," which Kinbote brings up as a reference to Gradus.

Lines 39-40: Was close my eyes, etc. Kinbote points to an abandoned draft of this passage, which seems similar to a passage from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. However, since Kinbote doesn't have a library in the remote cabin where he is writing, he can only re-translate the passage in question from a Zemblan translation of *Timon of Athens* that he happens to have with him. "The moon is a thief: he steals his silvery light from the sun," Kinbote translates.

This passage is a joke at Kinbote's expense and evidence of what an astoundingly poor scholar he is. The title "Pale Fire" comes from the very passage in Shakespeare's Timon of Athens *that Kinbote goes on to quote—although he is translating the passage back into English from his Zemblan version, so "pale fire" becomes "silvery light" in this translation, and Kinbote doesn't recognize its significance.*

Line 42: I could make out. In early summer, Kinbote began to see how Shade would describe Zembla in his poem. Kinbote had been relentlessly telling stories of his homeland, certain that Shade would write the poem about Zembla that he himself could not. While "Pale Fire" unfortunately did not turn out to be explicitly about Zembla, it's obvious that the "sunset glow" of Kinbote's stories inspired Shade's burst of creativity that produced the poem. Moreover, Kinbote himself—in rereading his own Commentary—realizes that he has "borrowed a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb," subconsciously imitating Shade's own style in the Commentary.

In this passage, Kinbote attempts to convince himself and his readers that, even though "Pale Fire" seems to have nothing to do with Zembla, Kinbote's stories about Zembla are actually the poem's inspiration. By referencing the "sunset glow" of the Zemblan stories, Kinbote is evoking the Shakespeare passage from which the title "Pale Fire" comes—a passage that describes the moon stealing its light from the sun (since the moon's brightness comes not from creating light itself, but from reflecting the sun's light). Kinbote is implying that he *is the sun and Shade's poem is the moon, reflecting the light of Kinbote's stories. Then, Kinbote turns it around, suggesting that his Commentary is like the moon reflecting the "fiery orb" of "Pale Fire," since Kinbote has apparently imitated Shade's style. While Kinbote is a profoundly unreliable narrator, it's reasonable to think that both of these statements have some truth. While he was composing "Pale Fire," Shade* was *listening to Kinbote's stories about Zembla, so it's not crazy to think that they might have had some influence (however small). And it's obvious that Kinbote is stealing Shade's artistry, both in mimicking his style and in hijacking the publication of "Pale Fire" to use it as a platform to discuss his delusions about Zembla.*

Aside from the three references to royalty and the "Popian 'Zembla' in line 937," it seems that Kinbote's stories were deliberately eliminated from "Pale Fire." Nonetheless, the poem's abandoned drafts are full of references to Charles the Beloved.

Kinbote is grasping at straws here—none of the poem's references to kings or royalty have anything to do with Charles the Beloved, and he even admits that the remarkable inclusion of the word "Zembla" is a reference to an Alexander Pope poem, which itself is referencing a Russian island (not Kinbote's homeland). When Kinbote says that the drafts are full of references to King Charles, he's lying (he wrote those draft fragments himself) and trying to frame Sybil Shade by suggesting that her unwarranted hostility to Kinbote led her to force Shade not to write about Zembla. Of course, this is all nonsense, and it shows how deeply delusional Kinbote is.

Lines 47-48: the frame house between Goldsworth and Wordsmith. "Goldsworth" refers to Kinbote's landlord, Judge Goldsworth (whom Kinbote never met, because he was abroad during Kinbote's time in New Wye). "Wordsmith" refers to Wordsmith University, where Kinbote and Shade worked. The Goldsworth house was uncomfortable, and Kinbote hated living among the family's possessions. In the judge's papers, he found pictures of people whom Goldsworth had sent to prison, including a homicidal maniac who resembles Jacques d'Argus. Goldsworth also left annoyingly detailed instructions on how to care for the house, which Shade found hilarious. Shade's stories of the judge always left out how Goldsworth's severe sentences meant that tons of men were in prison aching for revenge.

This passage is crucially important to understanding the real story of Shade's death (as opposed to the delusional story about Gradus that Kinbote concocts). Judge Goldsworth sentenced many local men to severe prison terms, which left them thirsting for revenge against the punitive judge. Furthermore, the passing comment that one homicidal maniac that Goldsworth sentenced resembles Jacques d'Argus is a critical piece of the puzzle—Jacques d'Argus is an alias of Gradus, the Zemblan assassin, and this is the first clue that the man who ultimately kills Shade is not *Gradus, but rather this man, a murderer whom Goldsworth sentenced to prison who came to New Wye seeking revenge against the judge.*

Kinbote struggles to describe the architecture of Shade's house, particularly because—as summer approached—the leaves of a nearby tree blocked him from seeing into Shade's windows. On July 3rd, Kinbote went to bring "some third class mail" from Shade's mailbox to his door when he ran into Sybil, who told him not to bother Shade because he was at work on a poem. Kinbote exclaimed that Shade hadn't shown anything to him yet, and Sybil replied that Shade never showed drafts to anyone. Sure enough, Shade was reluctant to give any information about his poem no matter how much Kinbote pried, which led him to an "orgy of spying" that he could not control. Shade went to extreme pains to find spots in his house from which he could see into Shade's house.

Here, Kinbote inadvertently reveals just how bizarre his behavior is. He's been looking into the windows of Shade's home and inventing excuses to go to Shade's house (including walking a stack of "third class mail," or junk mail, from Shade's mailbox to his door—an incredibly weird and invasive thing to do). Kinbote also reveals here that he felt entitled to access to Shade's drafts, even though Shade didn't like to reveal much about his work before finishing. This is a reasonable preference and something that a real friend—or anyone who is merely polite—would respect, but Kinbote relentlessly pried into Shade's work via questioning him and then, when that failed, an "orgy of spying." The word "orgy" implies an excessive pleasure, showing that Kinbote himself might have understood how over-the-top his behavior was, even though he couldn't stop his compulsions.

As a boy, Kinbote once saw a man communing with God. It was at court in Onhava, the Zemblan capital, and Kinbote was hiding during hymnal practice from a boy he was upset with. A minister walked by and then stopped, enraptured—a bliss that Kinbote remembered upon seeing Shade's face while he wrote "Pale Fire." Every day, Kinbote spied, but some nights the house was dark before the Shades' bedtime. On July 11th—the day on which Shade finished Canto Two—Kinbote decided to investigate.

Here, Kinbote suggests that Shade, while writing, is having a transcendent religious experience—his facial expression is the same as the minister's when he was communing with God. Shade would likely agree with that, since writing is how Shade appreciates the beauty he sees in his life (which, to him, is the source of life's meaning) and he sees his poetry as mirroring the divine order of the universe, so writing literally makes him more in tune with his spirituality. For Shade—who isn't affiliated with an organized religion but is deeply spiritual—writing is like prayer.

Kinbote snuck behind their house where he found one small window illuminated. Through the window, he could see John and Sybil sitting on a sofa, apparently weeping as they gathered up a deck of cards. As Kinbote tried to get a better view, he knocked over a trash can, which made Sybil close the window and draw the shade.

While Kinbote initially believes that they are playing cards, it becomes clear to him later (and might already be clear to readers) that John is actually reading to Sybil from "Pale Fire" (the "playing cards" are the index cards on which he writes his drafts). Since Shade has just finished Canto Two (the end of which describes Hazel's death), it's reasonable to assume that they read the canto together and are crying over the loss of their daughter.

A few days later, when Shade missed an appointment to take a walk with Kinbote, Kinbote walked behind Shade's house and saw John and Sybil sitting at the kitchen table. He opened the door without knocking and realized that John seemed to be reading to Sybil. Startled, John swore at Kinbote, but he later said that it was because he thought his friend was an "intruding salesman." This encounter made Kinbote realize that not only was Shade reading his poem to Sybil, but he was probably taking Sybil's directions to cut all the Zembla material from "Pale Fire."

This is another moment where it's helpful to take a step back and examine what Kinbote's behavior actually is (as opposed to how he describes his actions). He's not just a friend dropping by—he's a creepy neighbor going behind the house and entering without knocking while John and Sybil are having an intimate moment of working on John's poetry. John's initial reaction to this—where he swears at Kinbote—seems to be his true (and justifiable) reaction. When he later softens this by telling Kinbote that he mistook him for a salesman, he seems to be trying to spare Kinbote's feelings, since Shade knows how lonely Kinbote is. This is an example of Shade's kindness, since Kinbote's behavior was incredibly inappropriate.

COMMENTARY: LINES 49-98

Line 49: shagbark. "Shagbark" is another word for hickory. Years ago, Charles the Beloved's wife, Disa, copied into a letter a passage of a John Shade poem that compares a gingko leaf to a **butterfly**. Kinbote quotes the passage (from a letter he received in April). On the Wordsmith campus, there's a street lined with ginkgo trees, and the word for "tree" in Zemblan is *grados*.

That Kinbote has a letter from Disa suggests, again, that he is Charles the Beloved. That the Zemblan word for "tree" is grados *evokes Gradus, the Zemblan assassin that Kinbote believes is hunting Shade down. Kinbote appears to think that Shade, via his interest in nature, is actually referencing his future assassin.*

Line 57: The phantom of my little daughter's swing. After this line, Shade cut a draft variant about architects and psychoanalysts colluding to not put locks on bedroom doors so that children will go to the doctor after witnessing a "primal scene."

The "primal scene" is a Freudian term for a child witnessing their parents having sex. This variant is making a joke about analysts paying off architects to omit locks from bedroom doors so that children are more likely to walk in on their parents having sex and then need therapy. Shade did seem to hate Freud and psychoanalysis in general, so it's possible that this variant is authentically Shade's (and not Kinbote's fabrication), but it's impossible to know for sure. It's also telling that Kinbote wholly ignores the key line that he's supposedly analyzing, a line that alludes to the loss of Shade's daughter via the "phantom" of her swing and instead focuses on a petty joke that Shade cut. Kinbote isn't doing his job of explaining the poem to readers.

Line 61: TV's huge paperclip. In John Shade's vapid obituary, Sybil provides a short poem that John wrote in June. It's about the things that break his heart, and it includes a line about the sunset hitting "TV's giant paperclips." The poem is entitled "the swing" and its final stanza mentions an empty swing under a tree. **Kinbote** suspects that this poem was actually written much earlier than June, and that Shade mined it for several images that appear in "Pale Fire."

This passage makes it especially clear how negligent Kinbote's commentary to line 57 (about the "phantom" of Hazel's swing) was. If the swing is the primary image in a poem about things that break Shade's heart, then it must be incredibly important to him and readers deserve a commentary that dives into the swing imagery in "Pale Fire."

Line 62: often. Throughout 1959, Kinbote was desperately lonely and "often" feared for his life. Loneliness is hard for an expat, particularly since Zemblans are so prone to killing their kings. After dark, Kinbote would pace around the Goldsworth house, covered in sweat and believing that every sound was a murderer. On these nights, Kinbote began spying on Shade's house, hoping that the poet would have another heart attack so that Kinbote could rush over and "resurrect" him with Zemblan herbal remedies.

The connection between "often" in the poem and Kinbote "often" fearing for his life is nonexistent—Kinbote has essentially abandoned all pretense of explaining the actual poem and is now blatantly talking about only himself. Furthermore, this passage shows how paranoid and delusional Kinbote was. Not only did he sincerely believe that assassins were coming for him (a classic delusion), but he was also narcissistic enough to hope for Shade to have a heart attack so that Kinbote would have an excuse to go save him. Of course, it's pure delusion to think that he could fix a heart attack with herbs.

Sometimes, it seemed that suicide was the only way to thwart the "advancing assassins who were in [him], in [his] eardrums, in [his] pulse, in [his] skull." Once, when the cat appeared in the music room, Kinbote called the police. It's quite easy for mean people to make their victims believe that they have "persecution mania" or hallucinations.

This is one of the novel's major hints that Kinbote is suicidal. While Kinbote mostly insists that Gradus is a real assassin who exists outside Kinbote's imagination, this passage seems like a half-confession that Gradus might simply be an attempt to externalize the suicidal impulse that is always "advancing" within Kinbote. Furthermore, it shows how unhinged Kinbote is that he calls the police when the cat—who lives in the house—appears in the music room. The police were probably being rational when they told Kinbote that he had a persecution complex and was hallucinating, but Kinbote interprets this as evidence that the police are conspiring against him—classic paranoid delusions.

Among several young professors "whose advances [Kinbote] rejected," there was one who played jokes. Once, after an "enjoyable and successful" meeting in which Kinbote demonstrated Zemblan wrestling moves on "several willing pupils," he found a note in his pocket saying "you have hal…..s real bad, chum." While the author meant "hallucinations," he's clearly unqualified to teach English, since the number of omitted letters suggests that he can't spell. That spring, Kinbote's fears disappeared after he took in a young boarder, his gardener.

When Kinbote says that he rejected the advances of many young professors, the truth is certainly that those professors rejected his *advances. Rather than demonstrating wrestling moves at a work meeting, it seems that Kinbote was inappropriately grabbing his colleagues, and one of them left a note that (based on the number of letters left out) was letting him know that he had halitosis, or bad breath (presumably, their faces were close together when Kinbote was "wrestling" this man). To assume that the man meant "hallucinations" and—despite being an English professor—couldn't spell the word properly is an overly complex explanation for a pretty straightforward situation, and it shows how disconnected from reality Kinbote is. The fact that a lot of his anxiety ended when he got a roommate shows how connected loneliness is to his mental illness.*

Line 70: The new TV. In a draft of "Pale Fire," there are some lines following this one that Shade may have planned to use later in the poem. They describe a "northern king" who escaped from prison because his supporters impersonated him to assist his escape. Kinbote writes that Charles the Beloved only escaped because his supporters dressed like him and spread out across the land, confusing the "revolutionary police."

Instead of commenting on the actual poem, Kinbote comments on a draft that he claims Shade may have intended to use at some point—but, in the Index, Kinbote confesses that he wrote this fragment himself, so really it's just a way to make the story he is about to tell seem relevant to Shade's poem. As Zembla is a reflection of what Kinbote wants his life to be like, it's telling that Charles the Beloved had so many admirers who wanted to imitate him in order to help him—it's clear that Kinbote is very lonely and wishes he had friends and admirers.

Line 71: parents. Right after Shade's death, Professor Hurley wrote an obituary in a mediocre journal. While bashing an obituary isn't fit for the "placid scholarship" of a Commentary, Kinbote mentions it because he learned some information about Shade's parents from this document. His father, a doctor, had a passion for studying birds—he even had a bird named after him, the *Bombycilla shadei*. Shade's mother was also passionate about birds, and while discussing the history of her maiden name and other surnames, Kinbote notes that the name "Botkin" means "one who makes bottekins, fancy footwear."

*Here, Kinbote is backhandedly confessing that Professor Hurley's obituary provided him with new and accurate information about Shade, which ironically shores up Hurley's credibility when he criticizes Kinbote's ability as a scholar. Kinbote doesn't dig into this (even though that's his job), but "*bombycilla*" is the genus to which waxwings belong, the bird from the opening line of "Pale Fire." That Shade's father had a waxwing named after him makes the image of the slain waxwing in "Pale Fire" more complex—it's invoking both of Shade's dead parents. This is the kind of information that's important to include in an annotated edition of a poem, but Kinbote is incapable of such focus and rigor. It's also noteworthy that he brings up the name "Botkin"—throughout the novel, he makes several offhand yet conspicuous references to the name "Botkin" and to professor Botkin, which hints at his true identity.*


In Hurley's obituary, there's only one reference to "Pale Fire"—that Shade was working on an autobiographical poem before he died. Furthermore, Hurley gets wrong the facts of Shade's death, perhaps because he—like the media—changed the murderer's motives for political reasons. The most bizarre part of the obituary is that it never mentions Kinbote's close friendship with Shade.

Despite Kinbote's loathing of Hurley, Hurley does seem credible—after all, he's an English professor, a colleague of Shade's, and he seems to have information about Shade that Kinbote doesn't, which suggests that Hurley knew Shade better than Kinbote did. Since Hurley does seem credible (while Kinbote is hopelessly unreliable), it's worth taking seriously that Hurley doesn't agree with Kinbote about the facts of Shade's death. Hurley believes the accepted story about how Shade died (which is that Judge Goldsworth sentenced a man to an asylum and that man escaped, went to Goldsworth's house for revenge, and killed Shade whom he mistook for Goldsworth). Nobody else believes Kinbote's story about Gradus the Zemblan assassin, which Kinbote tries to paint as a deliberate distortion for political reasons, but it is most likely a rational acceptance of the facts.


Just as Shade couldn't remember his father, King Charles had no image of his father's face, since King Alfin died when Charles was two. King Alfin was an absent-minded and silly man, but one unfunny story is worth telling since Shade repeated it to his colleagues. Years ago, "my father" took a visiting foreign emperor and a translator on a trip through the Zemblan countryside. At one point, King Alfin stopped to repair his car, and it was only when he was back in Onhava that he realized he left the emperor in the countryside. When Kinbote tried to contribute to Shade's poem, he asked that Shade write these stories down but not talk about them with others.

Throughout the novel, Kinbote has spoken of King Charles in the third person (suggesting that Kinbote and King Charles are separate people), but here he trips up and refers to the King's father as "my father." Kinbote has dropped enough hints that he is (or at least believes himself to be) the exiled king that this shouldn't come as a surprise. Kinbote told Shade that he should use the Zemblan stories in his poetry but shouldn't share them with others, but Shade did *tell his colleagues Kinbote's stories. This suggests how bizarre and entertaining Shade must have found Kinbote's delusions, and this is one of the novel's only instances of Shade being somewhat unkind to Kinbote.*

King Alfin was an aviator with a tendency to have accidents. Alas, one day when he was trying some tricks in his plane, the plane (his "bird of doom") went into an uncontrolled dive and, when Alfin managed to pull the nose up, he smashed into the side of a hotel and died. In pictures of the plane right before it crashed, Charles the Beloved could see his father raising one arm in triumph.

This moment echoes the first line of "Pale Fire," about the waxwing that crashed into the window thinking it was open sky. In the moment before Alfin's death, he raised his arm in triumph, which suggests that he thought that he had righted his malfunctioning plane and saved his own life—it seems that he somehow didn't see the building in front of him, which suggests that maybe the windows of the building made it seem that Alfin—like the waxwing—was flying into open sky. This parallel is underscored by the description of Alfin's plane as a "bird." It's not clear whether Kinbote told Shade this story and it inspired the image of the waxwing, whether this is evidence that Kinbote and Shade are the same person, or whether there's a spookier connection between Charles's Zemblan stories and their echoes in "Pale Fire" (some scholars believe that both "Pale Fire" and Kinbote's Zemblan stories were influenced from beyond the grave by Shade's dead family, which would account for the resonances between the poem and Charles's stories). Scholars don't agree about how to interpret this, but nonetheless the parallel between the plane crash and the waxwing is striking.

After Alfin's death, Charles the Beloved was assigned a kind tutor who didn't care about young Charles's "morals" despite that Charles "preferred ladies to laddies." Charles grew up loving the study of English poetry and relishing masquerades in which boys dressed as girls and vice versa. His mother, Queen Blenda, died of a congenital blood disease on the night of July 21st, 1936. At the moment of her death, King Charles was strolling with his friends through some trees outside the palace gates—something strange struck them then, and just afterwards the Countess ran out of the palace and gave them the bad news.

From this passage, readers can intuit that Zembla may be a bit more tolerant than New Wye. The man who essentially became young Charles's guardian didn't care that Charles was gay or try to make it a moral issue. Zembla reflects what Kinbote wishes his life were like, so it seems that this is a wish that his sexuality would never be an issue. That King Charles and his friends all felt something at the moment of the Queen's death is another instance of the dead seeming to communicate with the living, suggesting that death is not irrevocable and that the dead remain in the lives of the living in mysterious ways.

It's hard to describe the geography of the Zemblan palace, so Kinbote drew a map of the grounds and the building, hoping this would help Shade understand the events he described. He hopes that Sybil can mail him the map to reprint in later editions of this book, since he is too exhausted and plagued by headaches to draw another.

That Kinbote knows the Zemblan palace well enough to draw a map suggests, of course, that he is King Charles—or that the palace exists only in his mind. His increasing headaches and exhaustion show how he is deteriorating as he writes the Commentary to "Pale Fire," pointing to the possibility that he kills himself when his work is complete.

Line 80: my bedroom. Charles the Beloved thought of Fleur—the daughter of his mother's favorite Countess—only as a sister, although other men found her intensely sexual. She didn't seem to mind that Charles preferred "manlier pleasures."

Again, the notion that Charles's attraction to men is "manlier" than being attracted to women suggests that Kinbote wishes that his sexuality were not only acceptable, but also admired, in his day to day life.

Between the Queen's death and Charles's coronation, he suffered—he didn't love his mother, and he felt terrified of her ghost. The Countess made him do séances in which the Queen's spirit would use a planchette to instruct Charles to fall in love with a "flower." A psychiatrist (bribed by the Countess) told Charles that his "vices" killed his mother and would harm her spirit if he didn't "renounce sodomy." In that time, Fleur began sleeping on a large swansdown pillow by Charles's bed and, under her mother's instruction, tried ineffectively to seduce him. Her attempts irritated Charles, but he appreciated that her presence kept his mother's ghost away. Eventually, she stopped pursuing him. Thirteen years later, Charles married Disa, Duchess of Payn.

*The Countess clearly wanted her daughter Fleur to marry the King, which would afford both the Countess and Fleur tremendous privilege and comfort. To achieve this, she manipulated Charles horrifically: she hired a medium to pretend that the Queen's only wish from beyond the grave was for Charles to marry a "flower" (*fleur *is French for "flower") and she hired a doctor to tell Charles that his sexuality killed the Queen and would continue to torture her spirit unless he married a woman. This is obviously an evil thing to do to a man grieving his mother. This passage evokes some of the silliest parts of IPH that Shade describes in "Pale Fire": the notion that a ghost might communicate via a planchette, or that a spirit is lurking around the house. If readers take Shade's insight about the afterlife at all seriously, then they must dismiss these silly descriptions of the Queen remaining present after death. While Shade believes that consciousness somehow persists when a person dies, he doesn't think that they hang around in such conventional or straightforward ways.*

Lines 86-90: Aunt Maud. While line 90 of "Pale Fire" implies that Hazel Shade (John's daughter) was a baby when Aunt Maud died, Hazel was actually a teenager. Kinbote finds Maud's paintings "unpleasant but interesting" and her eccentricities must have shocked New Wye.

This passage develops the kinship between Aunt Maud and Hazel. Kinbote clarifies that the two knew each other quite well, having lived together until Maud's death when Hazel was a teen. It's clear that Maud influenced Hazel significantly, since both women were eccentric and drawn to morbid things that others found distasteful.

Lines 90-93: Her room, etc. In the draft, there are lines about Maud's room containing the cocoon of a Luna **moth**. Kinbote's dictionary says that the Luna is a large pale moth whose caterpillar eats hickory. Shade may have cut these lines because the Luna moth "clashed with" the word "Moon" in the following line.

In this part of the poem, Shade is listing some of Maud's belongings to illuminate her personality. It's telling that she has a Luna moth cocoon, because the novel associates butterflies (and moths in this case) with dead family members. Furthermore, the fact that it's a cocoon (which represents a transitional state between caterpillar and butterfly) echoes Shade's fixation on whether human consciousness transforms but survives after death (like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon transformed). That Luna moths eat hickory when they're caterpillars calls back to Kinbote's note on line 49, where he explains that a shagbark tree is a type of hickory. The shagbark tree is where Hazel's swing used to hang, so the detail that Luna moths (associated with Maud) eat shagbark (associated with Hazel) deepens the connection between Hazel and Maud.

Line 91: trivia. The objects in Aunt Maud's room include a scrapbook where she pasted funny or gross news clippings. Once, Shade showed Kinbote the first and last clippings in the book, both from *Life* magazine, which is known for being prudish about "the mysteries of the male sex." Readers must have been so surprised to find an ad for a "Talon Trouser Faster" that shows a virile young man and another ad for a "Fig Leaf Brief."

Maud's eccentricities are on full display here, and so is Kinbote's sexuality. The ads he points out are certainly strange and suggestive, and he's delighted to see a popular magazine making the "mysteries" of male genitalia slightly less mysterious.

Line 98: On Chapman's Homer. This refers to a popular Keats sonnet. A printing mistake placed the title of the poem into a headline about a "sports event."

This is a joke about how little Kinbote knows about America, and it requires a little explaining. The passage of "Pale Fire" that Kinbote is commenting on describes a newspaper headline ("Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4 On Chapman's Homer") that Aunt Maud tacked to her door. Of course, the headline is describing a baseball player named Chapman scoring a home run (a "homer") to win a tied game, but Kinbote—a European expat—has no familiarity with baseball. Because of this, he thinks that the headline is referencing the title of the Keats poem "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" (which refers to George Chapman's translations of the Greek poet Homer), and he thinks that it's merely a typographical mistake that has transposed this title into a headline otherwise about sports.

COMMENTARY: LINES 101-143

Line 101: No free man needs a God. Since so many artists and thinkers have seen their "freedom of mind" helped by faith, it seems like this is false.

Kinbote himself is religious (as he explains throughout the book) and here he's imposing his own beliefs, without nuance, onto Shade. In the referenced passage of "Pale Fire," Shade is making a much more nuanced point than Kinbote gives him credit for—Shade is grappling with how to reconcile God with his belief in freewill and how to reconcile his belief in freewill with his sense that nature actually determines so much of his behavior and experiences. The irony here is that Shade is much more freethinking and openminded than Kinbote, who is implicitly claiming that his own "freedom of mind" is enhanced by his faith, but who actually seems unable to grapple with the kinds of complex questions that Shade is raising.

Line 109: iridule. A term that Shade invented to describe an iridescent cloud.

Nabokov spoke many languages and loved learning and inventing obscure words. Shade, in inventing a word for a phenomenon in nature, is showing how observant and passionate he is about nature.

Line 119: Dr. Sutton. The name "Sutton" is a combination of the names of two retired doctors in New Wye, both friends with the Shade family.

This is another instance of Kinbote's commentary being unreliable. In other parts of the book, Kinbote treats Dr. Sutton as being a real person, so it's not clear what to believe.

Lines 120-121: five minutes were equal to forty ounces, etc. In the margin of a draft, Shade wrote the measurements of an hour in sand and atoms. Kinbote isn't able to check this, but the division seems off. On the day Shade wrote this line, Gradus was about to leave Zembla.

This is another moment of Kinbote failing tremendously as a scholar. Instead of explaining the gist of this passage of the poem, which is describing life and death as being somewhat meaningless in the scale of infinite time, Kinbote makes a pointless note about whether Shade did the correct math when determining how many ounces of sand denote five minutes in an hourglass (he doesn't even come to a conclusion).

Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat. Kinbote was also bad at soccer and cricket, although he's good at skiing and riding horses. After this line, Shade wrote some abandoned lines about children playing in a castle and finding a secret corridor in the back of a closet. Kinbote is devastated that Shade "rejected" these lines because they're beautiful and also they come directly from one of Kinbote's stories about Charles the Beloved.

Like the "Chapman's Homer" line, this is a joke about Kinbote's ignorance of American life. When Shade writes that he "never bounced a ball or swung a bat," he's clearly talking about basketball and baseball—not soccer and cricket. The fact that Kinbote doesn't get this elementary reference points to his isolation in America and casts doubt on his ability to understand any reference in the poem. Kinbote also admits in the index that the draft variant that he references is not Shade's—it's "K's contribution," meaning that Kinbote wrote it himself. Essentially, he's making up an excuse to tell the story that he wants to tell rather than analyzing the poem.

At the beginning of the Zemblan revolution, while revolutionaries poured into Zembla from a nearby nation, King Charles refused to give up his crown. He was held captive by revolutionaries in a room in the heavily guarded palace. Among the soldiers was one "royalist" (an ally of the monarchy) in disguise: Odon, who has since escaped to Europe, and who was a star actor in the Zemblan Royal Theater. Odon kept Charles filled in on the news and connected to his supporters. Rumors swirled that Charles would be tried or executed, and none of the escape plans that he and his allies concocted seemed plausible.

As Kinbote tells his stories of Zembla, he always inserts extraneous details to make King Charles (who is, of course, Kinbote himself) look better. Here, he casually notes that the Zemblan revolution did not originate from unrest within Zembla itself (whose population was presumably quite satisfied with the prosperity their king brought), but rather from malcontents in a nearby country—this assures readers that the revolution wasn't Charles's fault.

After someone accused Charles of trying to flash signals to his followers with a mirror, his captors transferred him to a lumber room that was once his grandfather's dressing room, a sad and dusty place with only one window and a faded portrait of his grandfather's former mistress, Iris Acht. As the King got into bed, he saw a key in the lock on the closet door, which brought back a memory.

As Zembla is a mirror image of Kinbote's life, it's fitting that it's a mirror that gets King Charles in trouble here. "Acht" means "eight" in German, which is part of a pattern of Nabokov bring up figure eights (for example, Shade uses the word "lemniscate" in "Pale Fire"). Of course, all these figure eights look like infinity signs, and that's part of the novel's obsession with whether people can, in some form, persist after death (transcending time).

Thirty years before, when the King was thirteen, he was waiting for his friend Oleg to come visit him at the castle. On their last visit, they had been allowed for the first time to share a bed, and the "tingle of their misbehavior" blended with Charles's excitement to repeat it. Looking for a toy that they could play with, Charles went into the lumber room, opening the closet with the key in the lock. There, he found Conmal's Zemblan translation of *Timon of Athens* and a few other knickknacks. About to leave, he accidentally knocked the shelf—when removed, the shelf revealed another keyhole, which the closet key fit. It opened into a dark passage, and Charles went to grab a flashlight.

This passage clearly describes King Charles's sexual preference for young boys. While Charles and Oleg were the same age when they became sexually involved (so this story does not explicitly involve pedophilia), the specter of pedophilia is still present, since King Charles and Kinbote both describe young boys with longing throughout the book. In another coincidence that seems too bizarre not to be meaningful, the book in the closet is Timon of Athens, *the obscure Shakespeare play from which "Pale Fire" gets its title. Perhaps Kinbote's reference to the play caused Shade to think of it when he needed a title for his poem, or perhaps the coincidence is even stranger and points to the kind of design in the universe that Shade believes signals the possibility of eternal life.*

Oleg arrived as Charles was returning to the lumber room, and the two boys went down into the passage, which was a stone tunnel that ran under various streets and buildings in Onhava. Oleg walked in front, and Charles admired his "shapely buttocks" in his tight shorts—Oleg's "radiance" itself, not the torch he carried, seemed to light the way. At the end of the tunnel, they reached a door, which opened with the same key. As soon as the door opened, though, they heard odd sounds: a man and a woman yelling at one another, a threat and a shriek, silence, and then casual chatter—"more eerie" than what came before—about how that was "perfect."

The notion of Oleg's own "radiance" being brighter than his flashlight subtly evokes (and inverts) the "pale fire" passage of Timon of Athens*: instead of the (nonreflective) moon stealing light from the sun, (nonreflective) Oleg is actually burning brighter than the light itself. This speaks to just how much King Charles desired Oleg. While Oleg and Charles do not understand what they're hearing in this moment, Charles later realizes that he's hearing two people rehearsing a play, which is why he and Oleg couldn't make sense of the flow of emotions in the overheard conversation.*

Panicking, Charles and Oleg ran back through the tunnel to the palace. They went to wash up and, with the water on, they found themselves "in a manly state and moaning like doves."

This passage implies that Oleg and Charles, aroused by the terror of what just happened to them, had sex as soon as they got back from the palace. It's noteworthy that Kinbote describes this as being in a "manly state"—nobody in New Wye would describe a gay encounter as "manly," but Kinbote wants to live in a world where it's both acceptable and even praiseworthy to be gay, so calling this "manly" reflects Kinbote's fervent desire to be the kind of person that people like and admire.

Decades later, King Charles remembered all this when he saw the key in the keyhole. He hadn't thought of it in a long time—after Oleg's death a couple years later, he blocked it out. Charles opened the closet and found it mostly empty besides some old clothes and the copy of *Timon of Athens*. Then, Charles stepped into the hallway and told the guard that he wanted to play piano—in the music room, he explained quietly to Odon that there was a secret passage that could help him escape. Odon, who had to leave soon to perform in a play, told Charles to wait and he would inspect the tunnel the next day, but Charles protested that "they" were coming closer and closer.

Odon is a staunch royalist (a supporter of Charles and the monarchy) disguised as a revolutionary guarding the palace, and he is Charles's most trusted ally. Here, Charles is convinced that "they" are coming closer—ostensibly meaning revolutionaries who want to execute him, but the reference is vague and Odon clearly doesn't share Charles's urgency. This evokes Kinbote's experiences in New Wye in which he believed that an assassin might enter his house at any moment, but nobody believed him.

Believing that the crown jewels were hidden in the palace, the revolutionaries hired two Russians to find them. Lately, they'd been searching the part of the palace with the Eystein paintings. Eystein was terrible at painting likenesses of people, but he excelled at trompe l'oeil paintings of objects in the background, which always made the people look even deader. Sometimes, Eystein would do a "weird form of trickery" where, amidst his depictions of wood or velvet or gold, he would paste into the frame an object of the same material he was depicting. This missed the "basic fact" that "reality" is not the "subject or object of true art"—art is supposed to "create its own special reality" that has nothing to do with the shared experiences of those outside of it. Anyway, the Russians hunting for the crown jewels thought—mistakenly—that perhaps those jewels were inside or behind one of the paintings.

In this passage, Nabokov uses Kinbote's commentary on the fictional painter Eystein to make a real point about the nature of art. Eystein wasn't a very good painter of people, but he could paint objects so lifelike that a viewer couldn't tell if those objects were really in front of them or not. To exploit this skill, Eystein would sometimes insert a real object alongside a trompe l'oeil painting of that object so that it really *wasn't clear what was real and what wasn't. To Kinbote, this isn't art—it's "trickery." To be real art, a work has to strive to "create its own special reality"—in other words, art should exist on its own terms, without trying to depict or incorporate outside reality. On the one hand, this is a credible dismissal of a painter more interested in a cheap gimmick than making an original statement. On the other hand, it's possible to read this as something of a joke—*Pale Fire *itself blends art, artifice, and reality so often that it can make a reader's head spin (for instance, the United States is real, New Wye is a real place in the world of the novel but it doesn't actually exist, and Zembla is neither a real place in the world nor in the novel). Of course, Nabokov mixes these layers of reality to make complicated points about art, delusion, and order in the universe, whereas the payoff of Eystein's work is cheaper.*

The King returned to his room, said good night to the guards, and then—as he was lying awake—a guard came in to say that he was going to the courtyard for a little while and would lock the King into his room. When the guard was gone, Charles opened the closet and, in the darkness, put on some old clothes over his pajamas and opened the secret door, taking *Timon of Athens* with him as a "talisman." Once in the passage, he lit his flashlight—the ghost of Oleg, the "phantom of freedom"—and in that light, realized that he was dressed in bright red.

Charles took Conmal's translation of Timon of Athens *with him as a "talisman" of his escape from Zembla, which is notable, since the only book that Kinbote brings to the cabin where he writes his Commentary is Conmal's translation of* Timon of Athens*—Charles is implying that he has kept that copy since the night of his escape and brought it everywhere with him. There are some plot parallels between* Timon of Athens *and Charles's life—for example, Timon begins the play as a rich and well-liked person, but he ends up alone in exile. It makes sense that Charles would associate the light of his flashlight with Oleg (since he has such a sensual memory of his flashlight on Oleg's body years before), but it's notable that he literally describes this light as a "phantom of freedom." For Charles, Oleg clearly represents a moment in his life when he felt quite free—he had an age-appropriate, consensual sexual encounter with Oleg, and his tutor at the time (his guardian, essentially) didn't seem to care one way or another about Charles's sexual orientation. So this was perhaps the moment when Charles was most free to be himself, something that Kinbote wishes he could have.*

The passage was more run down than it was years before. While walking, Charles found a footprint of Oleg's in the sand and a statue of Mercury (who brought souls to the underworld). At the end of the passage, the door opened into heavy black curtains that reminded him of a theater curtain—instantly, he understood where the passage had led him: to Iris Acht's old dressing room at the Royal Theater. Now, the room was filled with old sets and contained a portrait of Charles's grandfather, a memento of the time when the passage allowed him and Iris to have secret trysts.

This is another example of what seems like a presence from beyond the grave: Charles feels Oleg in his flashlight beam and also finds his preserved footprint in the tunnel. Conspicuously, Charles also notes finding a statue of Mercury, which suggests that the tunnel is some kind of passage to the underworld itself. In a way, it's akin to a passage to the underworld, or a butterfly's cocoon, because it marks the transition between one life and a completely different one.

Charles wandered into the hall where he found a costumed Odon. Startled, Odon pushed the king under a costume cloak and towards an exit to the street. One performer (a revolutionary) recognized the King but couldn't alert others because of his stammer. Charles and Odon slipped onto the street and headed for Odon's racecar.

It's been previously said several times that Odon, on his off hours from guarding the palace, was an actor at the Zemblan theater, so that is why Odon happened to be on the other side of this passage when Charles popped out. That Charles's closest ally would be the one to find him on the other side of the passage is a freak coincidence of the kind that Nabokov conspicuously places throughout the novel.

Lines 131-132: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain by feigned remoteness in the windowpane. These lines repeat the music of the opening, leaning into assonance. They also evoke "doom," as Gradus was—in the moment of their composition—coming closer and closer, closing the "feigned remoteness" between him and Shade. While Gradus took all forms of transit, he seems most suited to airplanes. What propels him across the sky is the "magic action of Shade's poem itself, the very mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor."

Kinbote starts out here by analyzing the poem in a normal, scholarly way—talking about assonance and repetition—but then he quickly digresses into interpreting these lines as being about Gradus based on the vague impression that they contain a sense of doom. Kinbote's use of "feigned remoteness" to describe the distance between Gradus and Shade suggests that the two are not truly distant—perhaps Shade always carried his fate within him, so he was never distant from the circumstances of his death. Adding weight to this notion is the sense that Kinbote gives here that Gradus is not an independent entity; in fact, he's someone that Shade is creating and propelling through the act of writing itself.

Line 137: lemniscate. Kinbote's dictionary says this is a "unicursal bicircular quartic," which seems to have nothing to do with bicycling and might just be meaningless and meant to sound nice.

Part of the joke here is that Kinbote's dictionary is so bad. Its definition of a lemniscate (a mathematical term for curves that resemble a figure eight or infinity sign) is so technical and obscure that Kinbote can't figure out what a lemniscate actually is. Kinbote's own style often relies on needlessly obscure words, so this is a bit of a joke about the silliness of his writing and also his cluelessness as a scholar explaining "Pale Fire."

Line 143: a clockwork toy. Kinbote has actually seen this toy. Once, he dropped by Shade's house asking after some pamphlets in the basement. While they were looking, Kinbote saw the toy on a shelf: a Black boy with a wheelbarrow. It was Shade's toy, and he said he kept it as a "memento mori" since he once had a fainting fit while playing with it.

In the passage of "Pale Fire" that Kinbote is analyzing, Shade describes playing with this toy at the moment that he had his first seizure. A "memento mori" (Latin for "remember that you will die") is a reminder of death. Since this first seizure made Shade feel, for the first time, like he lost his body, he associates the seizure with his first real awareness that he will someday die and with his lifelong curiosity about what will happen after. The fact that the toy is a Black boy pushing a wheelbarrow is important, since this image will recur in the moment before Shade actually dies—one of the last things he sees is Charles's Black gardener pushing a wheelbarrow in the yard.

COMMENTARY: LINES 149-214

Line 149: one foot upon a mountain. The Bera Range divides Zembla in half, and after Charles and Odon escaped, they planned to drive to a mountain castle to hide. However, the stuttering man had finally told someone he saw the King, which meant that there were already checkpoints on the roads when they got out of town. To avoid the checkpoints, Odon drove into the woods and dropped Charles off, instructing him to hike over the mountains while Odon returned to town as a "decoy"—leading Charles's pursuers astray by means of disguises. Odon's mother was American, from New Wye, and she liked hunting wolves from an airplane.

"Mountain" is a charged word in Pale Fire, *since Shade describes at length the mix-up between the words "fountain" and "mountain" that led him (erroneously) to think he had solved the mystery of death. Here, Charles is trying to escape death by climbing the mountains while Odon dresses like him to throw his assailants off his trail. Since Zembla represents what Kinbote wishes his life were like, it's telling that Odon is so eager to help and imitate Charles—Kinbote wants to be liked and admired, and he has trouble feeling rooted in his identity (Kinbote, after all, is really* Botkin), *which mirrors the ease with which Odon slips into King Charles's identity.*

Alone, Charles struggled through the brush, lost his cloak, and was about to give up when he saw a light from a farmhouse. There, the farmer's family seemed to mistake Charles for a lost camper and they offered him food and a place to sleep. At daybreak, the farmer said he would send "Garh" with him. While *Garh* is a name given to both sexes, Charles was anticipating a young boy, a "tawny angel." Instead, Garh was a girl in disheveled boy's clothing—she would be guiding Charles to the pass.

In Charles's predilection for masquerades in which girls dress as boys and vice versa, he has already shown his love of feminine boys. Here, he's hoping that the ambiguous name "Garh" belongs to a young man, and the use of "tawny" (a brownish color) shows that he's already thinking about Garh's bare skin. Garh is actually the opposite of what Kinbote wants, though—she's an ugly girl wearing boy's clothing, not a feminine and alluring boy.

When they arrived at the pass, Charles sat down on the grass and Garh began to take off her clothes. Alarmed, Charles stopped her, sent her home, and went quickly on his way. Soon after, he sat by a small, still lake and glimpsed the reflection of his own body clothed in bright red. But a distortion in the water made the reflection appear not at his feet, but farther away—his reflection seemed to be perched on the reflection of a ledge above his head. In a moment, that reflection vanished and he was left with a normal, much bigger and clearer reflection at his feet. Above him was the ledge where the "counterfeit king" had been, and he felt a pang of fear.

When Charles sits by the lake and sees his own reflection, there's an odd distortion that makes his reflection seem distant from his body. This could be interpreted in several ways. It could be that the distant reflection evokes the way in which Botkin is so distant from his own identity—he sees himself as Kinbote/King Charles, which is a vision of himself that is quite distant from his true identity. Using the phrase "counterfeit king" to describe the reflection evokes other possibilities—it could be that Charles was literally seeing one of the King Charles impersonators who were, at that very moment, running wild across the countryside, or it could be that, in the moment in which the reflection vanished, Charles was accepting that he was no longer the King of Zembla. Regardless, his realization that his reflection wasn't quite right made him feel afraid, which could signal how wedded he is to his delusions about himself—he doesn't want to have to acknowledge that the way he sees himself is false.

Continuing on, Charles reached the pass and began descending the other side of the mountain. A few hours later, once he'd reached a road, a police car pulled up alongside him and told him that the "joke has gone too far." There were, he said, 100 Charles impersonators in jail already, and they can't fit any more—the next impostor will be shot on sight. Charles claimed to be a British tourist and he gave the cop his red hat and sweater.

This passage suggests that the King Charles impersonators succeeded. The police have now stopped the real *King Charles, but they're so fatigued from the impersonators that they don't realize it at all, allowing King Charles to shed his red clothing and become even less legible as the escaped king. The proliferation of Charleses is an almost comical reflection of Botkin's disordered and multiplying identities.*

In town, Charles found armed extremists everywhere, but as he passed a hedge, a "gloved hand" gave him a note instructing him to go to "R.C." Trying to seem casual as he walked towards Rippleson Caves, Charles scrutinized passers-by to see who might be an undercover cop. He saw a disfigured man reading the paper, and on the front page he saw Odon's picture with a reward for his capture. The disfigured man began to speak, and Charles realized that this *was* Odon wearing stage makeup to disguise his face. Odon ushered the King to a boat.

While King Charles hid in plain sight, Odon disguised his identity by essentially creating a mask. The way that all of these characters so effortlessly step in and out of identities again mirrors how slippery Botkin's own identity is. This is also a moment when the Zembla fantasy seems too convenient to be believable—a "gloved hand" emerges from the bushes, correctly identifying King Charles and giving him instructions on where to go, while Odon sat on a bench disguised and reading about himself. All of this further suggests that Zembla is merely a delusion.

Line 162: With his pure tongue, etc. Shade's fainting fits must have been some form of epilepsy, a "derailment of the nerves…on the same curve of the tracks, every day…until nature repaired the damage." Kinbote cannot forget the sweaty faces of railway workers watching the windows of trains passing by.

Kinbote seems to be unraveling a bit, as his Commentary is getting less coherent. Here, he describes Shade's epilepsy as a "derailment" of nerves, as though they're trains on a track, and then he changes the topic without segue to railway workers he once saw. In other words, he's not even pretending to say something relevant to Shade's poem, but instead he's taking his own metaphor—nerves being like derailed trains—and associating his way to his memory of railway workers. None of this is relevant.

Line 167: There was a time, etc. Shade began Canto Two on his 60th birthday, which was July 5th. Actually, that's a mistake—his 61st.

This passage makes clear that Kinbote didn't bother to revise his Commentary before publishing it. It's easy to cut the mistake from that sentence, but Kinbote didn't.

Line 169: survival after death. Kinbote directs the reader to his note to line 549.

Survival after death is, of course, the major theme of "Pale Fire," and Kinbote has so far devoted no sustained attention to what the poem has to say on the matter—in fact, he seems to have almost entirely missed Shade's fixation on death and the afterlife, focusing instead on Gradus as the manifestation of Shade's fate. Here, Kinbote's lack of attention is funny—he highlights a key phrase of the poem that explicitly spells out the animating question of Shade's life, and yet he doesn't explore it at all. Instead, he directs readers to his note to another line, in which he transcribes a theological debate between himself and Shade and—instead of focusing in on Shade's key comment that "Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one"—Kinbote simply talks over Shade to explain his own thoughts.

Line 171: A great conspiracy. After the King escaped, the extremists believed for almost a year that he and Odon were still in Zembla. As the extremists were obsessed with planes, the government shut down airports and then instituted strict checks of passengers and cargo, never considering that Charles may have fled by other means. They searched the countryside and interrogated Charles impersonators, but then—when they got word that Odon was directing a movie in Paris—they realized that somehow he and the King had escaped.

Here, Kinbote paints the extremists (the revolutionaries who deposed King Charles) as profoundly inept. They were so obsessed with slick, modern planes that they never thought to secure other means of crossing the border—an unlikely mistake, even for an inept government, which suggests that the Zembla fantasy springs in part from Kinbote's need to feel important, superior, and beloved.

Out of vindictiveness rather than strategy, the extremist government—and a political group called the Shadows—began plotting Charles's death. During Gradus's time with various leftist organizations, he had come close to killing people but had never done it. Nonetheless, the Shadows selected him as Charles's assassin just after midnight on July 2nd, 1959—the very moment at which Shade began his poem. For his whole life, Gradus had been somewhat blundering and his hatred of injustice and deception would be laudable if it didn't spring from his stupidity, his dogmatic refusal of nuance and his insistence on calling anything he didn't understand deceptive.

That Gradus was given his assignment to kill King Charles at the exact moment that Shade began Pale Fire is another indication that Kinbote somehow believes that the force propelling Gradus to New Wye is the writing of "Pale Fire." In other words, by beginning "Pale Fire," Shade inadvertently sealed his fate to die at Gradus's hands. The notion that the Shadows and Shade were fated to meet is also implied in their matching names—"shade" is a variant of "shadow." Nabokov is poking a little fun at leftist groups here (which were responsible for a lot of the political upheaval in Nabokov's early life) by suggesting that Gradus's desire to fix injustice isn't admirable since it comes from an inability to grapple with complexity.

Line 172: books and people. In a notebook, Kinbote has transcribed a few conversations between himself and Shade. In one, Shade says that he feels detached from both good reviews of his work and bad ones. Shade said of the authoritarian head of the Russian department that it's strange how Russian intellectuals are humorless, while Russian writers could be so funny (luckily, Kinbote notes, Professor Botkin taught in a different department and wasn't subjected to that professor's whims). Shade also said that he is hard on students for a few particular errors: not reading or reading poorly, trying to discern symbolism in a work, and claiming that an author is sincere—this last one always means that "either the critic or the author is a fool."

This passage contains a key clue about Kinbote's identity. When Shade disparages the head of the Russian department, Kinbote notes that it's lucky that Professor Botkin doesn't have to deal with that man. Kinbote is a narcissist who has proven himself to be utterly unable to see the world from anyone else's perspective and unwilling to entertain any ideas that don't directly pertain to himself or his stories of Zembla. Because of this, it's extremely strange for Kinbote to suddenly show an interest in the professional wellbeing of a man (Professor Botkin) whom he has barely ever mentioned before. The logical conclusion is that Kinbote is happy that Botkin isn't in the Russian department because he himself *is Botkin and he's happy that the head of his department is not this man. Shade's disparagement of trying to identify symbolism or sincerity in literature is a direct articulation of Nabokov's own beliefs—he was particularly averse to writers who used straightforward stock symbols to communicate pat ideas (a skull is a symbol of death, etc.).*

Line 181: Today. On July 5th, Shade began work on Canto Two. That night, he had a get-together at his house and then returned to work after his guests left. Kinbote watched him from the window. On that same day, Gradus departed Zembla for Copenhagen, and Kinbote was having a bad time. He'd taken an interest in a "young friend" who'd lost his driver's license, and the night before, he'd driven the man to his parents' house for a party. At the party, he lost track of the "silly boy" and was instead trapped in a full night of insipid socialization with boring strangers. The next morning, he located his car (where it seems a man and a woman had been having sex) and drove back home alone, the car breaking down along the way. When he got home around 6 p.m., he realized that he had almost forgotten Shade's birthday.

On July 4th, Kinbote drove a younger man (whom he describes as a "silly boy") to a party at that man's parents' house. It's not clear whether this man is a teenager or a very young adult, but either way this alludes to Kinbote's consistent sexual interest in men much younger than him. The horrible experience of getting ditched at the party, not connecting socially with any of the guests, and then having his car break down had already put Kinbote in an agitated state, but it got much worse when he remembered that it was Shade's birthday and he watched from the window as Shade's party guests came and went. This whole passage describes someone wildly lonely and isolated, and his experiences here would be painful for anyone.

A while back, after noticing Shade's birthdate on a book jacket and seeing his shabby pajamas, Kinbote bought him a silk dressing gown, which he'd wrapped and placed in the hall. He quickly showered and got a massage from his gardener, who told him that the Shades were having a party. Sure that he'd simply missed his invitation, Kinbote called, but Sybil told him that John was unavailable and would call tomorrow. Instead of marching over with his gift anyway, Kinbote waited for Shade to call and correct the mistake. He waited by the window all night, watching the guests and drinking champagne alone.

That Shade didn't tell Kinbote his birthdate nor invite Kinbote to his birthday party shows, again, that they weren't very close. It's quite bizarre behavior to buy an acquaintance silk pajamas, which is a fairly intimate present. Instead of accepting that he wasn't invited to the party, Kinbote assumes that it was a mistake—it's a tragic scene when Kinbote waits for Shade to call while drinking alone and watching the party unfold from his window. This both accentuates his loneliness and suggests his immaturity—most adults have already learned to cope with not being invited to a party.

The next morning, after seeing Sybil leave, Kinbote walked over with his gift, but when he arrived at the door, Sybil returned. He handed her the gift and she said that they didn't invite him because they knew he found parties tedious. Reminding her of a conversation they'd had about how overrated Proust is, Kinbote said they were wrong. He handed her a copy of a Proust book and told her to give it to John and pay attention to the bookmark in it. He'd brought this book just in case, having marked a passage in which one woman rudely didn't invite another woman to a party and claimed it was because the uninvited woman wouldn't like it.

Since Kinbote can't admit that John doesn't like him very much, he blames John's distance from him on Sybil and tries to go to the Shade house when Sybil isn't there to shield her husband from Kinbote's annoying presence. Here, that plan fails, but Kinbote has concocted a stunningly passive-aggressive revenge: giving John a Proust book with a passage marked in which a woman behaves similarly to Sybil, explaining that she didn't extend an invitation for that person's own good. That Kinbote anticipated Sybil's excuse so well shows unusual awareness of himself and others (usually he's too much of a megalomaniac to interpret or predict the behavior of others), but his insight is not in service of empathy—it's about revenge.

Lines 181-182: waxwings…cicadas. Kinbote directs readers to other lines in which waxwings appear, including the poem's last line. He also points out the lines in which cicadas will later "sing triumphantly."

The last line (the poem's 1000th line) never appears—it's unfinished after line 999, so Kinbote's assertion that waxwings reappear in the final line is merely an assumption. When he references the cicada that will later sing, he's referring to a part of "Pale Fire" that describes a cicada's exoskeleton on a tree, left behind after it molted. In the poem, Shade insists that the cicada's song is alive, which is a way of talking about life after death, although Kinbote doesn't appear to understand the subtleties of the passage.

Line 189: Starover Blue. This Commentary is like the Royal Game of the Goose, albeit played in this instance with "little airplanes of painted tin": a "wild-goose game, rather." He directs readers to "square" 209.

Here, Kinbote references an old board game in which players roll dice to move through a series of squares, trying to reach the end. Notably, there are some traps: if a player lands on a square with a skull on it, for instance, they lose. The implication here is that the story of Gradus and Shade (explored further in the note to line 209, which is presumably what's meant by "square 209") is essentially a board game whose stakes are death. The reference to toy tin airplanes seems to evoke Gradus, whom Kinbote insistently associates with air travel, and calling his Commentary a "wild-goose game" seems to be a play on the phrase "wild goose chase," which means an impossible quest. This is fairly apt, since Kinbote's Commentary is unrelated to Shade's poem (so trying to understand the poem by reading his Commentary would be a goose chase) and, furthermore, his Commentary relays his delusions, so it's not always possible to pin down the truth of what he's saying.

Line 209: gradual decay. Gradus is moving westward from Copenhagen to Paris. After having "sped through this verse," he is gone but will soon return.

In the word "gradual," Kinbote finds an echo of "Gradus." This passage again suggests that Gradus's travels from Zembla to New Wye are not happening in physical space, but rather within the poem "Pale Fire" itself (Gradus is speeding not on a road but "through this verse").

Lines 213-214: A syllogism. While a youth might believe this, people learn later in life that everyone is these "others."

This passage refers to a syllogism that Shade quotes in "Pale Fire" saying that, while other people die, "I am not another," so "I'll not die." Kinbote seems to be trying to correct the obviously false logic of the syllogism, rather than engaging with Shade's implicit point about how tempting it is to believe in one's own immortality.

COMMENTARY: LINES 230-348

Line 230: a domestic ghost. Jane Provost, who was John Shade's secretary, told Kinbote more about Hazel than John did, as he didn't want to talk about his dead child and Kinbote didn't urge him to. Nonetheless, Canto Two gives a fairly complete depiction of Hazel—perhaps "too complete," since it probably came at the expense of "richer and rarer matters." But, however boring this note, it's Kinbote's responsibility as a commentator to give the reader some information.

Reading between the lines, it seems that Kinbote never really asked John about the biggest tragedy of his life: the loss of his daughter. It's not surprising, since Kinbote is too preoccupied with himself to take a real interest in anyone else. Sure enough, he's not even interested in the section of the second canto of "Pale Fire" that describes Hazel Shade—he thinks that it's excessive, since it took up so much room that Shade had to omit "richer and rarer matters" (a reference, of course, to Zembla). It's unbelievable for the editor of a poem to suggest that the event at the heart of the poem—Hazel's death—should have been omitted in favor of something of personal interest to the editor. Because of this, it's ironic and funny when Kinbote invokes his responsibility as a commentator immediately after.


In 1950, when Hazel was sixteen, she appeared to begin moving objects with her mind. Aunt Maud had just died, and a "poltergeist" seemed to associate its odd phenomena with her. For instance, the dog basket belonging to Maud's dead terrier shot across the room one morning, and one of Maud's paintings was found turned towards the wall. After all the items associated with Maud had knocked around, the poltergeist moved on to other objects: saucepans, plates, lamps lighting randomly, and so on.

While Shade was obsessed with life after death, it seems that he never considered the possibility that Maud's spirit was haunting his house (after all, he dismissed such notions as unimaginative, believing that a person's consciousness must survive death in a much stranger form, one that would be difficult for a human being to imagine). Instead, the odd occurrences in his house seemed too cliched and banal to be Maud's presence, so Shade pinned them on Hazel. That's not a crazy assumption, since Hazel and Maud were close and Hazel was a strange person. The so-called poltergeist could have just been Hazel's idiosyncratic way of grieving Aunt Maud.


Kinbote suspects that Shade associated these occurrences with his own boyhood fits, wondering whether he'd passed down some variation on his own disorder. John and Sybil always believed that Hazel was somehow the source of these events, even though she never said so—they thought it was some kind of external manifestation of insanity. The Shades didn't like "modern voodoo-psychiatry," but they consulted with old-fashioned Dr. Sutton and began saying loudly that they were considering moving to another house. The disturbances immediately stopped. It's odd, though, that people are more comfortable with explaining these phenomena as an act of Hazel's rather than as the ghost of Aunt Maud, since science and the supernatural are both miraculous and inexplicable.

It's not clear whether Shade believed that Hazel was causing these disturbances via natural means (like throwing objects or setting up strange scenes) or supernatural ones (literally moving objects with her mind). Shade may have been more open to the latter possibility, since he himself experienced so much strangeness with his mind and body when he was a child having seizures. Regardless, the threat of moving to a new house (which, presumably, would have severed Hazel's ties to Aunt Maud even further) caused the phenomena to stop. In this passage, Kinbote describes Dr. Sutton as a real person in New Wye (whereas previously in his Commentary he has suggested that the Dr. Sutton who appears in "Pale Fire" is a composite character rather than a real person). Kinbote is also suspicious of dividing the natural and supernatural too starkly, since the phenomena that people regard as natural are no less miraculous than ghosts. This is a sentiment that Shade would likely share, as he found nature so wondrous that it became his proof of the divine.

Line 231: How ludicrous, etc. Kinbote points to an unused draft passage following this line. It's about an "Other World" where the dead live, including "Poor old man Swift, poor —, poor Baudelaire." Musing about what name the dash might have replaced, Kinbote supposes that, based on the poem's meter (and the assumption that the middle "e" in "Baudelaire" would be silent, as Shade does with "Rabelais" in line 501), the name is a trochee. There are many famous people who have gone insane, so it could be that Shade was overwhelmed by the possibilities—but it could also be that he didn't want to spell out his close friend's name, especially in this "tragic context."

It's funny that Kinbote can do a close reading of poetry's meter only when he suspects that he's at the center of it—otherwise, he seems completely indifferent to discussing Shade's metrical choices. Here, he tries to discern the missing name in a series of authors who went mad. Since Shade's poem is written in iambic pentameter, each line must have ten syllables, and the number of syllables in the omitted name depends on the number of syllables with which Shade intended his reader to pronounce "Baudelaire," which could either be two (Bowd-lair) or three (Bowd-uh-lair). In a different line of "Pale Fire," Shade uses "Rabelais" with two syllables ("Rab-lay" rather than "Rab-uh-lay"), so Kinbote sees this as proof that the first "e" in Baudelaire should be silent. If this is the case, then the metrical pattern dictates that the missing name is a "trochee" (which is a two-syllable word whose first syllable is stressed)—conveniently, "Kinbote" is a trochee and therefore might fit into this line. Of course, it's improbable that Shade would put the name of his non-famous neighbor who isn't even a writer into this passage, but Kinbote's assumption that he might be a fit tells readers two things: that Kinbote believes himself to be insane (like the other two men referenced) and that Kinbote is incapable of thinking about anything but himself.

Line 238: empty emerald case. This refers to the shell of a cicada, left behind when it molts. Whenever Shade and Kinbote would walk together at sunset, Shade would relentlessly talk about the natural world, not realizing that Kinbote would much rather discuss literature or life. On one particularly frustrating night, Shade parried all of Kinbote's questions about how he was depicting Zembla in his poem by instead lecturing him on nature.

The passage of "Pale Fire" that Kinbote is supposedly analyzing is full of complex references and gets at Shade's central theme of life surviving death, but Kinbote doesn't help illuminate this for his readers (which is supposed to be his job). Instead, he complains about Shade's interest in nature (one of the poet's defining characteristics) and inadvertently reveals his relentless and annoying pressure on Shade to write about Zembla.

Line 246: ...my dear. Here, Shade is addressing his wife, Sybil. The passage about her (lines 246-292) is, structurally speaking, intended as a transition to writing about his daughter. But Kinbote can attest that whenever Sybil's footsteps were heard upstairs "above our heads," things were not necessarily alright.

The passage that Kinbote references is not a transition to talking about Hazel—it's a huge, detailed passage about Sybil herself. Kinbote's inability to acknowledge that Shade wrote at length about Sybil shows Kinbote's hatred of her. Throughout the book, Kinbote is casually vicious about women, and his misogyny is especially evident in his insistence on blaming Sybil for everything that goes wrong in his "friendship" with John. It's comical how little Kinbote is able to take the poem on its own terms—he can't even acknowledge that while he *might dread hearing Sybil's footsteps, Shade finds comfort in hearing his wife walking around his house.*

Line 247: Sybil. Sybil is John Shade's wife, whose maiden name, Irondell, does not refer to a valley full of iron ore, but rather comes from the French word for "**Swallow**." While Kinbote tried so hard to be nice to Sybil, she never liked him. He heard she would call him a "king-sized botfly" and a "monstrous parasite of a genius," but he forgives her.

Elsewhere in the novel, it's casually mentioned that Kinbote is an expert on surnames and even wrote a book on the subject. This explains his fixation on Sybil's maiden name. That this passage starts with a discussion of names should inform a reader's interpretation of Sybil calling Kinbote a "king-sized botfly." A botfly is a parasite, and calling Kinbote a "king-sized botfly" linguistically evokes both the names "Kinbote" and "Botkin." Sybil seems to be simultaneously making fun of Kinbote's name and describing him pejoratively: Kinbote sometimes behaves like a parasite towards John, the "genius" that Sybil references.

Line 270: My dark Vanessa. This reference reminds Kinbote of a couple lines from a Swift poem (they contain the words "**Vanessa**" and "Atalanta"), and Kinbote recalls Shade saying that the Vanessa butterfly is sometimes called the Red Admiral. In Zembla, the Vanessa is part of the Payn family's coat of arms. John Shade pointed to a friendly Vanessa in the moments before he died.

When Shade calls Sybil his "dark Vanessa," he's referring to the Vanessa Atalanta butterfly, sometimes called the Red Admiral butterfly. Kinbote is correct that the words "Vanessa" and "Atalanta" appear in close proximity in a Swift poem, but—as usual—he doesn't follow up, so he misses the significance of the reference. The poem in question is "Cadenus and Vanessa," which is a poem that Swift wrote to his lover (he invented the name "Vanessa" for this poem as a combination of the woman's first and last name). The words that Kinbote quotes come right after a line about a goddess "pronounc[ing] her doom," and Nabokov seems to be drawing attention to the coincidence that the Vanessa Atalanta butterfly (named for Swift's poem) is also known as the "butterfly of doom," since so many of them appeared in Russia during the year that Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and many people thought that the butterflies foretold his death. In this way, it's quite fitting that Shade saw a Vanessa butterfly just before he died.

Line 275: We have been married forty years. John and Sybil Shade were married thirty years before King Charles married Disa, the Duchess of Payn. Morally speaking, Zemblans mostly turned a blind eye to King Charles's affairs with men, but public pressure increased on Charles to marry a woman so that he could produce an heir. Charles met Disa at a masked ball where she dressed as a boy. He put it off for a couple years but then married her.

Nabokov paid a lot of attention to character names—and so does Kinbote, as a specialist in surnames—so it seems quite deliberate that Disa is the Duchess of "Payn." The word Payn, *of course, sounds like both "pane" (evoking the reflective windowpanes of "Pale Fire" and echoing the mirror-world nature of Zembla) and "pain" (pain being something that Disa will go on to experience a great deal of after her marriage to Charles). Again, Kinbote constructs Zembla as a place that doesn't pass moral judgment on homosexuality, but instead encourages Charles to marry for pragmatic reasons, since he needs to produce an heir. Charles was clearly reluctant to marry a woman, and it seems that he married Disa not for her personal characteristics (even though it becomes clear that she's quite a kind person), but because she resembled a boy when they met.*

Line 286: A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire. On the day Shade wrote this line, Gradus flew to Paris, where he was to try to learn King Charles's location from the former Zemblan consul Oswin Bretwit. Gradus pretended to be an apolitical man who had come into the possession of some of Bretwit's old papers and was trying to return them. Believing that these papers might contain a precious stamp collection he'd been missing, Bretwit didn't consider that this might be a trap. Even when the papers turned out to be old letters that had already been published, Bretwit tried to pay Gradus for his troubles, but Gradus asked for a favor instead: he wanted to be put in touch with King Charles.

Here, Gradus brings a bunch of worthless papers to Bretwit to try to get him to reveal Charles's location in return. This moment is slightly evocative of Kinbote bringing Shade's junk mail to his door as an excuse to talk to him—both are manipulative and ill-conceived. This scene is supposed to be somewhat funny, since both parties are so incompetent: Gradus can't think on his feet, and Bretwit is too naïve to wonder if he's being trapped.

To confirm that Gradus was a fellow Royalist, Bretwit asked for the secret hand signal: the sign for "X." Gradus tried to imitate what Bretwit's hand was involuntarily doing, but he made a "V." From this, Bretwit assumed that Gradus was a reporter and threw him out.

Finally, Bretwit gets wise to Gradus and asks for the sign to confirm his political loyalty—the "X" is for "Charles Xavier," which is King Charles's real name. Even though Bretwit seems ripe for manipulation, Gradus can't figure out a workaround to the hand sign, so he gets thrown out.

Line 287: humming as you pack. This line was written on July 7th, the same day that Kinbote bumped into the Shades buying luggage. Upset to think that they might be going on a vacation, he ran over and asked where they were thinking of going. Sybil was deliberately vague and quickly pulled John away. However, Kinbote and Shade were patients of the same doctor who inadvertently revealed to Kinbote that the Shades were taking a cabin at "Cedarn in Utana on the Idoming border." Kinbote ran to a travel agency, found the likely cluster of cabins, and rented one immediately. He didn't tell the Shades of his plans, feeling privately furious at Sybil for her evasions and excited to see John's pleased expression when Kinbote appeared in Utana.

By this point, Sybil and John are so wary of Kinbote's bizarre and obsessive behavior that they won't even tell him where they're going on vacation because they (correctly) fear that he will show up there to stalk them. Nonetheless, Kinbote is too delusional to see the reality of the situation, and he instead does some detective work to figure out where they're going and then delusionally anticipates how excited John will be to see him. "Utana" and "Idoming" seem clearly to be words formed from real places in the American West ("Utana" might be Utah and Montana, while "Idoming" seems like Idaho and Wyoming). This fits with New Wye, which is in "Appalachia" (a broad region of the U.S., but not a state). It seems that Nabokov is using made up places, in part, to make it trickier to immediately decipher that Zembla is fictional in the world of the story. Since "Zembla" is the name of a real Russian island, it seems at first plausible that Zembla is meant to be a real place in the world of the story, just like Utana and Appalachia and New Wye—readers have to work to figure out what is real and what isn't.

Line 316: The Toothwort White haunted our woods in May. Kinbote isn't sure about this reference—his dictionary appears to suggest that it's some kind of white cabbage or **butterfly**.

Indeed, this line of "Pale Fire" references a white butterfly that lays its eggs on the toothwort plant.

Line 319: wood duck. The wood duck, whose coat has many colors, is much more beautiful than the swan. American animal names are "simple" and pragmatic and haven't developed the "patina" of European animal names.

The line of "Pale Fire" that Kinbote is analyzing here refers to Hazel as a "dingy cygnet" who "never turned into a wood duck." What he means is that, as Hazel matured, she never became more beautiful, but the usual way of phrasing that would be that the cygnet never turned into a swan. Replacing swan with "wood duck" is perhaps Shade's way of expressing his love of normal, everyday things—wood ducks, after all, would be more common where he lives than swans. Also, the fact that the wood duck is colorful and strikingly beautiful seems to underscore what sublime pleasure can be found in the everyday. Kinbote, of course, misses this entirely an instead makes a condescending comment on how unevolved American animal names are compared to European ones.

Line 334: Would never come for her. At twilight, Kinbote would often wonder whether Shade—or one of his "ping-pong friends"—would ever come for him.

Throughout the novel, Kinbote often identifies with Hazel, and here he is explicit about the fact that they shared painful experiences of loneliness. While Hazel waited for suitors that never came, Kinbote desperately wanted Shade to knock on his door. Kinbote's "ping-pong friends" refers to the string of young men (or adolescent boys) who came to his house in New Wye to play ping-pong, which was presumably an excuse to have sex. These young men were often fickle and they caused Kinbote considerable distress while he lived in New Wye.

Line 347: Old Barn. This refers to a shed near Shade's house where "certain phenomena" happened a few months before Hazel died. The barn belonged to Paul Hentzner, a German farmer who captivated Shade with his knowledge of the natural world. Shade would sometimes bore Kinbote by talking about this man—for some reason, his "earthy" simplicity appealed more to Shade than the intellectuals at the university. The two used to walk through Hentzner's fields around his barn, and Shade loved that Hentzner knew the names of local plants and animals—though no doubt he was inventing some of them or merely using folk names. After losing his land in a divorce, Hentzner continued to sometimes sleep in the barn where he eventually died.

As usual, Kinbote has great disdain for anyone who seems close to Shade. Here, he tries to denigrate Shade's close friend Paul Hentzner as being a boring and simple person who wasn't well-educated and would perhaps invent the names of plants and animals just to string Shade along. Kinbote is implying that Shade was led astray by this worthless man when Shade should have preferred intellectuals with no interest in nature like Kinbote himself. Of course, this completely ignores the most important parts of Shade's personality: he loves nature and valued that Paul both shared his passion and helped enhance it by teaching Shade the names and histories of the natural world. Shade wasn't impressed by intellectualism; he loved everyday things.

After Hentzner's death, a Wordsmith student and his friend were hanging out in the barn when they heard strange sounds and saw moving lights. Terrified, they fled without learning whether it was an "outraged ghost or a rejected swain." The incident became a local tabloid sensation, and Shade complained to local leaders until the barn was torn down.

This is another incident of seemingly paranormal activity following the death of someone Shade loves. Kinbote says that this could have been either an "outraged ghost" or a "rejected swain," although neither explanation seems likely. Shade has already explained in "Pale Fire" that ghosts don't haunt people or places the way they're often said to do (the presence of the dead is much more mysterious), which rules out an "outraged ghost." A "rejected swain" is a rebuffed male suitor, so it seems like Kinbote is implying that perhaps the two young men were in the barn for sexual reasons and the disturbance happened when one rebuffed the other's advances, but (since there is no evidence) this seems like more of a reflection of Kinbote's own experience than a credible explanation of what happened in the barn.

From Jane (Shade's former secretary), however, Kinbote learned that Hazel herself went to the barn to investigate the phenomena as the subject of a psychology paper. She and Jane spent the night there, but a lightning storm made it difficult to know whether the sound and light was natural or supernatural. A few nights later, Hazel went back alone and her notes reveal that she heard strange sounds and saw a small circle of light moving all around. It would move erratically in response to silly questions, and with slow deliberation in response to good questions (including "Are you dead?"). To encourage the light to communicate, Hazel recited the alphabet and saw which letters the light reacted to, although the result was nonsense; the ghost seemed to have "apoplexy."

It's unsurprising that Hazel would go to the barn to investigate whether there was paranormal activity—just like her Aunt Maud, she was always drawn to strange and morbid things, and the poltergeist incident at the Shade home has already associated her with ghosts. The lightning storm on the first night at the barn subtly makes a point that Kinbote previously made: the natural and supernatural aren't as easily distinguished as people think. If people weren't accustomed to seeing lightning, it would seem sublime or occult. Hazel's experience when she was alone might strike readers as questionable—a light seeming to answer questions is pretty close to a ghost talking to the living through a planchette, which is a notion that Shade dismisses as being too ordinary to be possible. It might be that Hazel is in a phase of development where she wants so desperately to believe that life survives death that she'll convince herself that anything is evidence (just as Shade himself did during the mountain/fountain mix-up). It might even be that Hazel wants so desperately to talk to her Aunt Maud that she interprets nonsense syllables as "apoplexy" (speech difficulty following a brain injury) because Maud herself suffered from apoplexy right before she died. However, it's also quite possible (even probable, based on what Nabokov himself has said) that Hazel is exactly right in her interpretation of this situation, even though she can't make sense of the message.

Kinbote would have abandoned the nonsense syllables altogether, except for the lines of Shade's poem "Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind/Of correlated pattern in the game." Because of this, Kinbote tried relentlessly to decipher the words, but he found nothing.

Kinbote is right to find in that line of "Pale Fire" an instruction to try to decipher order from chaos and patterns from coincidences. The fact that Kinbote can't find anything in these words is not an indication that there's nothing there—in fact, often when Kinbote says he can't find the source of a reference, it's a clue to readers that they should find the source themselves, since it adds important context to Shade's poem. Scholars don't agree on what meaning (if any) these syllables have, though. Some find the preponderance of anagrams for "atalanta" meaningful (a reference to the Vanessa butterfly that foretells death), while others (based on something Nabokov himself said) find in the sound of the syllables a message for Shade not to cross the lane to hear a tale of a foreign land (a message that, if received, might have prevented Shade's death, since he died after crossing the street to go to Kinbote's house where Kinbote would presumably talk about Zembla).

During the night, Hazel grew frightened when the light seemed to charge at her. Terrified, she left the barn and went home where she screamed at the ghostly figure on the porch. It turned out to be John Shade, waiting up to make sure his daughter was safe.

It's not clear whether Hazel is a smart and curious girl with eccentric fascinations, a disturbed and possibly insane girl who struggles with everyday life, or both. However, seeing her father looking like a ghost immediately after receiving that mysterious message does add evidence that the message might be about Shade's impending death.

Fairy tales always happen over the course of three nights, and in this instance, the third night brought Sybil, John, and Hazel to the barn together. Nobody took notes on this, but Kinbote has constructed the following scene, which he believes is essentially the truth.

While there's no reason to distrust Jane's assertion that John, Sybil, and Hazel all went to the barn together, Kinbote's belief that his invented scene is basically the truth should obviously not be taken seriously.

Kinbote writes "The Haunted Barn" in the form of a play. Sitting together in awkward silence, the mother and father joke occasionally (that sound was a stomach growling, not a ghost!) while the daughter reacts with irritation. Finally, the daughter explodes about how her parents ruin everything and then several minutes pass in silence. The stage directions say that "life is hopeless, afterlife heartless." When Hazel begins crying, John lights a lamp and leaves. The strange light never returned, although Shade later wrote a poem about the dead dwelling in electric lights and souls "lur[ing] the pale moths." Kinbote adds that, according to science, the earth would "vanish like a ghost" if electricity suddenly disappeared.

Normally, Kinbote simply makes things up and treats them as unquestionably true (Zembla, the draft variants that he only admits to fabricating in the Index, etc.), but here he clearly marks what he's making up (it's even in the form of a play, which draws attention to its artificiality). The dynamic of John and Sybil upsetting Hazel by not taking her paranormal encounters seriously seems plausible (that happened with the poltergeist incident, too), and it's possible that Kinbote is able to depict Hazel's reality plausibly because (as he has previously said) he identifies with her. He's a narcissist, but he can at least empathize with people in similar positions. However, the notion that life is "hopeless" and the afterlife is "heartless" seems purely Kinbote, as Shade would never say that about life, and Hazel would be unlikely to say that about the afterlife. The idea of the dead living in electric lights seems just strange enough for Shade to be interested in it—particularly alongside the image of light drawing moths. Shade sees the dead as an unidentifiable presence that affects the living, so the metaphor of moths to a flame seems apt. Kinbote's contribution about the world vanishing if electricity disappeared seems to underscore Shade's sense that life and death are inextricably intertwined (one would vanish without the other), and that the dead are an essential (if difficult to perceive) presence on earth.

Lines 347-348: She twisted words. Kinbote is pretty sure that *he* is the one who told Shade that, when reversed, "spider" is "redips" and "T.S. Eliot" is "toilest," but Hazel does resemble Kinbote in many ways.

This is another moment when Kinbote is explicitly identifying himself with Hazel, right down to his interest in mirror words. (Kinbote does use several names in his Zemblan stories that, when reversed, become other names. For example, Sudarg of Bokay, the masterful Zemblan craftsman of mirrors, becomes "Yakob of Gradus" or Jakob Gradus, and Charles's friend Odon has a brother named Nodo who is his opposite.)

COMMENTARY: LINES 367-434

Lines 367-370: then—pen, again—explain. John Shade had an American accent, which meant that he would rhyme "again" with "pen" rather than with "explain." Because of this, the rhymes in this section of "Pale Fire" are odd.

In this section of "Pale Fire," Shade follows a then/pen rhyme with an again/explain rhyme. Since Shade is American, his accent should mean that this second couplet doesn't work—"again" should rhyme with the "pen" that precedes it, not the "explain" that follows it. But there's a reason that Shade does this; Shade (and Nabokov) are subtly mocking T.S. Eliot, who was American born but used British rhymes in his poetry. The lines of "Pale Fire" in which these rhymes appear describe Hazel reading Eliot's "Four Quartets," but Kinbote is nonetheless unable to pick up on the joke.

Line 376: poem. Kinbote has a guess about what poem Shade is referencing here, but he doesn't have any books in his "mountain cave," so he doesn't want to name it without confirming. He does not approve of Shade's criticism of "distinguished poets."

The words that Hazel brought up prior to this line ("grimpen" and "chtonic," for instance) make it absolutely clear that Shade is referencing Eliot's "Four Quartets," which was popular at the time in which this novel was set. This casts further doubt on Kinbote's ability as a scholar. When Kinbote refers to the isolated cabin where he's writing his Commentary as his "mountain cave," he is casting himself as Timon in Timon of Athens, *the source of the novel's title.*

Lines 376-377: was said in English Lit to be. In the draft, this line was better: "the Head of our Department deemed." That department head might be the one in place when Hazel was a student, but it's also possible to take it as a reference to the *current* head, a professor Paul H., Jr. who is a terrible scholar. He and Kinbote sometimes interacted, but not often. Once, due to a migraine, Kinbote had to leave a concert where he was seated next to Professor H. That wasn't a stranger's business, but he held it against Kinbote, and, after Shade died, he wrote an open letter about the concern among the English faculty that "Pale Fire" had fallen into the hands of an "unqualified" and "deranged" person.

The head of the English department is Professor Hurley, and Kinbote has already expressed tremendous offense at Hurley's refusal to acknowledge in Shade's obituary how close Shade and Kinbote were. It's important to remember that Hurley is the credible one in this scenario, not Kinbote. It's not likely that Hurley was maliciously using a migraine as an excuse to denounce Kinbote—it's much more likely that Hurley found out that Kinbote was writing the Commentary on "Pale Fire" and became (rightfully) alarmed that Kinbote lacked the academic qualifications and sanity to do a good job.

Line 384: book on Pope. Shade wrote a book on Pope titled *Supremely Blest*, which is a phrase from Pope that Kinbote only sort of remembers and cannot quote exactly.

The phrase "supremely blest" comes from the same Pope poem in which the word "Zembla" appears: "An Essay on Man." As is always the case when Kinbote can't remember a reference, this reference is thematically important. "An Essay on Man" is a long philosophical poem that argues, among other things, that human beings cannot perceive or understand the universe, and that—despite human incomprehension—the universe is a "vast chain" that is orderly and intricately designed. This is obviously thematically resonant with Shade's conclusion in "Pale Fire" that the universe is designed, but human beings can never perceive or imagine its complex order.

Lines 385-386: Jane Dean, Pete Dean. These are obviously pseudonyms. Kinbote met Jane right after John Shade's death, and she explained that Pete was perhaps exaggerating but certainly not lying when he said that he had to keep a promise to one of his fraternity brothers. Jane wrote the Shades a letter after Hazel died, but they never wrote back. Kinbote replied to Jane with some recently learned slang: "You are telling me!"

Shade uses "Dean" as a pseudonym for "Provost" (dean and provost are both administrative positions at a university). Pete Provost (Jane's cousin) was the man that Hazel went on a date with the night that she died—in fact, it was his ditching her with the excuse that he'd forgotten another obligation that drove her to suicide. Jane tried to cast Pete's behavior in a better light to the Shade family after Hazel's death (a pretty insensitive thing to do), and the Shades never replied. Since this is an experience that Kinbote has constantly (the Shades not reciprocating his insensitive and relentless attempts to reach out), he is excited to tell Jane that he understands her experience—and he's also excited that he now knows some American slang. Both of these details gesture to his incredible loneliness.

Lines 403-404: it's eight fifteen (And here time forked). At this point in the poem, two events unfold simultaneously: the Shades watch TV at home while Hazel leaves her blind date, rides the bus to the lake, and drowns. This narrative seems "too labored and long," and the device of synchronization is a bit tired since Flaubert and Joyce used it so well.

For the rest of the canto, Shade interlinks his narration of what happened to Hazel just before her death and what the Shades were simultaneously doing at home. In many instances, the banal things they're doing at home—watching commercials on TV, for instance—will seem related to Hazel and her experiences, even though these events are unfolding separately. Kinbote criticizes this as an overused literary gimmick, which is ironic because he himself has been using this very technique of synchronization throughout the Commentary to suggest that the writing of "Pale Fire" was related to Gradus's travels to New Wye.

Line 408: A male hand. Perhaps at the very moment that Shade wrote this line, Gradus was driving to the villa of Joseph Lavender, an art enthusiast who was possibly harboring Odon. Gradus would pretend to be an art dealer and try to casually gain information about King Charles's location. But Gradus's gestures alone would have given away that he was a lower-class Zemblan and therefore likely to be a "spy or worse."

Immediately after criticizing John's use of synchronization, Kinbote does it himself—this is unsurprising, though, since Kinbote has never been self-aware. That Gradus's gestures alone give away his class is ironic because Kinbote previously suggested that the reign of King Charles resulted in the disappearance of wealth inequality in Zembla. Here, it seems that Zembla does still have distinct classes, and that the lower classes are less likely to support the King (which suggests that his reign was less benevolent and equalizing than Kinbote initially suggested).

When Gradus first arrived at the extravagant villa, he didn't find anyone. Then, a mysterious footman introduced him to Lavender's nephew's governess, who called the boy over to show Gradus the flowers. Gradus perceived Gordon—a gorgeous teenager wearing a leopard-print loincloth—as indecent. When they passed a grotto, Gordon mentioned that he once spent the night there with a friend. In an outdoor toilet, Gradus saw—written in a boy's handwriting—"the King was here." When he asked where the King is now, Gordon said he didn't know, although last year when he visited, the King was headed for the Côte d'Azur. It didn't matter that Gordon was lying (he actually did know where the King was)—his mentioning the Riviera helped Gradus make the connection to Queen Disa's villa. Told that he wouldn't see Lavender after all, Gradus left.

Gordon is a sensuous, barely clad young boy who knows the King, once spent the night in an outdoor grotto "with a friend," and scrawled on an outdoor toilet that the King had been there—all signs point to Gordon having been a lover of King Charles's. Like Kinbote, King Charles has a persistent sexual preference for alarmingly young boys. While Gordon thinks that he's protecting King Charles by not giving up his location (even though he knows it), he slips up by revealing too much in his misdirection. This is quite lucky, because Gradus is so inept that he likely would have done a poor job of impersonating an art collector to manipulate Joe Lavender.

Line 413: a nymph came pirouetting. In the draft, there's a more musical variant: "A nymphet pirouetted."

"Nymphet" is the iconic term that Nabokov coined in his novel Lolita, referring to a sexually attractive young girl. Of course Kinbote would like this version, because it subtly evokes pedophilia.

Lines 417-421: I went upstairs, etc. In this part of the draft, there is a variant that includes a quotation from Pope's "Essay on Man," referring to a "lunatic king." Kinbote criticizes Pope for his meter and Shade for not including this part of the Pope quote in the final poem. It's possible, though, that he cut it to avoid "offending an authentic king"—it seems that Shade may have known Kinbote's secret.

In his commentary to line 384, Kinbote claimed not to remember what poem the phrase "supremely blest" came from, but here he easily identifies other lines from that same poem. This is another example of Kinbote becoming more mentally acute when he suspects that a reference might be about himself. He's obviously alluding here to the fact that he believes himself to be King Charles, and he seems also to be conceding his own insanity.

Line 426: Just behind (one oozy footstep) Frost. This references Robert Frost, acknowledging obliquely that Shade's poetry was never so perfect as Frost's.

Shade and Frost share some conspicuous biographical similarities. They're both poets who love nature, write formal verse, and lost a child by suicide, for example. Their names also seem intertwined, since frost often appears in the shade.

Line 431: March night…headlights from afar approached. In this moment, the television imagery is "delicately" converging with Hazel's story.

While Kinbote was previously dismissive of Shade's use of synchronization, here he seems to reverse himself, becoming appreciative of the "delicate" linking of TV imagery with the story of Hazel's evening.

Lines 433-434: To the…sea Which we had visited in thirty-three. The Shades visited Nice that year, but Kinbote doesn't know the particulars of the trip (which is Sybil's fault), and so he can't say whether they ever saw Queen Disa's villa. Disa grew up there, and then returned in 1953 as a "banished queen," although the public was told that it was for health reasons. She's still there.

It's Kinbote's own fault that he doesn't know anything about John and Sybil's trip to Nice—Kinbote apparently never asked John (he was tremendously uncurious about John's life while he was alive), and Sybil was under no obligation to tell Kinbote anything before or after John's death. Even in this moment, however, Kinbote doesn't seem genuinely curious about the trip—he actually wants to know if they saw Queen Disa's villa while they were there, so Kinbote's curiosity (of course) is merely about himself and his Zemblan delusions. This passage also implies that Disa and King Charles's marriage failed and he sent her away to France so that he could continue to pursue men while telling the public that Disa was in poor health.

The Zemblan revolution began in May of 1958, and Disa wrote King Charles urging him to stay at her villa until the situation was resolved. When Charles replied that he was a captive in the palace, Disa tried to come to Zembla, but some Royalists explained to her that she would merely be held captive there, so she returned home. After Disa heard of the King's escape, Lavender told her that someone representing King Charles would soon come to discuss business matters. When the visitor came, she instantly recognized him—despite his disguise—as King Charles.

Even though Charles treated Disa cruelly and eventually banished her to the house where she grew up in the south of France, Disa clearly still cares about him. The revolution worried her tremendously, and she offered to shelter Charles and tried to rescue him, even at risk to herself. Furthermore, she cares about him enough to know his voice even when he's in disguise. It's clear that King Charles doesn't deserve any of this love or attention based on the way he treated her, but Zembla is a mirror world that reflects Kinbote's ideal life. Kinbote is a misogynist who believes that women owe him unconditional support and cooperation (he believes this of Sybil, for instance), so in some sense it's no surprise that this would appear in his fantasy.

As she aged, Disa became even more lovely, and Kinbote thinks it's strange that there's a passage of "Pale Fire"—lines 261-267—in which Shade's description of Sybil is also a perfect description of Disa in the moment that King Charles saw her at the villa. Kinbote hopes that his readers appreciate how strange this is, because otherwise there's no point to "writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all."

That Shade's description of Sybil reminds Kinbote so much of Disa is strange—Sybil is a woman past middle age, while Disa is quite young. In this coincidence, Kinbote sees something meaningful: the whole point of writing—poetry, commentary, or anything else—is to evoke these echoes between seemingly disparate things. Shade would agree with this, as he sees in the patterning of good art a reflection of the order and design in the universe.

When they were first married, Disa would lose her temper due to her "misfortune," and Charles would use these outbursts as an excuse to keep her away. He'd never successfully slept with her—he told her that he was a virgin (which was true in the way that she interpreted it), so she tried to seduce him. Try as he might, he couldn't participate. Disa didn't have family or friends to confide in, so she didn't know what to make of the rumors she heard. Her distress turned to sarcasm, and while he assured her that he'd given up men, he often fell to temptation. Finally, she was so humiliated that she returned to her villa in France.

Of course Disa is angry and embittered—at a young age, she married a king who turned out to be cruel to her (both unfaithful and inattentive to her emotional needs). On top of that, she's isolated and publicly humiliated by the rumors going around about the King's affairs. King Charles doesn't seem at all empathetic to her plight, as he uses her tantrums as an excuse to spend even less time with her, rather than seeing them as evidence of her suffering and a sign that he should be kinder to her.

Charles had never loved Disa (although he respected her), but in dreams his feelings were different. Even if he never thought of her while awake, he felt deep emotions for her dream-image. He always remembered her as she was on the day when he told her that he didn't love her. They were on vacation in Italy, and when he said it, she fell to the ground in despair. In his dreams, he would constantly deny that he didn't love her—his love for her in dreams was deep and passionate and unlike anything he'd experienced in life. These dreams showed her grief and humiliation and her efforts to keep up the appearance that their life was happy. Sometimes, just as he wanted to tell her he loved her, she would disappear.

This passage provides perhaps the most emotional depth that readers get from King Charles or Kinbote in the novel—it's a backhanded admission that megalomania and isolation take a profound toll. King Charles is repressing his guilt about how he treats Disa so deeply that it only appears in dreams. Through these dreams, Charles creates an alternate world in which he's capable of profound love and even empathy for his wife's suffering. Since his image of Disa is fixed on the moment when he told her that he didn't love her, it seems that he has—somewhere within him—incredible grief over his marriage, just as she does. Disa is able to show that grief, while Charles can only dream it. That kind of repression is difficult to bear.

When Charles appeared at Disa's villa in disguise after fleeing Zembla, he was not troubled by these thoughts. Instead, he told her how he escaped, which amused her. Disa invited him to stay long-term, but he announced that he was headed to America to teach literature. When she asked to visit him there, he wouldn't respond, and she wailed in despair. He decided to leave.

While Charles does have these persistent dreams about Disa, he's able to thoroughly cut off the feelings of the dreams in his waking life. This is bad for Charles (who is repressing his suffering) and bad for Disa, as Charles's lack of empathy and emotion when he is with her allows him to be cruel to her and indifferent to her grief. It's hard to reconcile the Charles who dreams about wanting to tell Disa that he loves her with the Charles who won't even agree to let her visit him in America, despite her kind offers to shelter him.

When Kinbote told all this to Shade, he wondered how Kinbote could know so much about this "appalling king" and also how anybody could think to publish it while the people in concern were, presumably, alive. Kinbote assured him that a good poem could not possibly be offensive or false, and also that once Zembla was immortalized in verse, he would disclose a great secret to Shade.

Kinbote is emotionally callous and persistently misogynistic, so it's possible that he doesn't totally understand why Shade would find King Charles "appalling." It's doubtful that Shade believes that Zembla or King Charles exist, so his question about whether it would be legally permissible to publish such things about live people might just be whimsy or even an attempt to bait Kinbote into either admitting that Zembla is fantasy or affirming his genuine belief in Zembla (he essentially does the latter by saying that he will soon disclose a secret).

COMMENTARY: LINES 469-629

Line 469: his gun. As he drove to Geneva, Gradus wondered when he would get to use his gun. Back at his hotel, he called Headquarters and talked to them in a mix of code and broken English so as not to be intercepted—but they misunderstood what he was saying and thought they could find the King's location by breaking into Disa's villa. They instructed Gradus to wait in Geneva for further instruction.

Kinbote can never resist describing Gradus's incompetence. It's pathetic to think of him wandering Europe, longing to use his gun, but unable to even communicate to his superiors the limited information he has about the King.

Line 470: Negro. After one of their colleagues made an anti-Semitic remark, Shade and Kinbote discussed prejudice, with Shade saying he hated "vulgarity and brutality," which are both at the heart of racism. From the standpoint of verbal precision, Shade preferred "Negro" to "colored," but Kinbote's Black gardener thought that "colored" was more respectful. Kinbote asked about Shade's "artistic" objection to the word "colored," and Shade explained that, in old scientific works about nature, watercolorists filled in outline drawings of plants and animals. Sometimes, they would miss one, and the phrase "colored" reminded Shade of his longing that these unfinished outlines be properly filled in. Furthermore, he said, white people aren't white, but rather "all kinds of repulsive colors."

Shade is generally a respectful and kind man, and it does seem that he's happy to call Kinbote's gardener "colored" if that's what is most respectful (obviously that is no longer the preferred term today). But here Shade shows that his aesthetic sense does, in some ways, compete with his moral and political convictions, as it's hard for him to accept the linguistic imprecision of calling a Black person "colored" when it implies that white people do not have color (untrue) and also reminds Shade of the unfinished drawings in old books. Obviously, that's a highly personal association that has nothing to do with whether a term is respectful, so this is a moment of Shade indulging his poetic side more than his kindness.

Line 490: Exe. Exe refers to Exton, which is a town on Omega lake. Its natural history museum displays many birds that Samuel Shade collected.

Omega lake is the nearby lake where Hazel Shade drowned (Omega, the final letter of the Greek alphabet, seems to allude to Hazel's fate). Samuel Shade was John Shade's father, and this underscores the association between him and birds.

Line 493: She took her poor young life. What follows isn't a defense of suicide, but rather a realistic description of a "spiritual situation." People who believe in God feel a greater temptation to be done with life, although they also fear the sin of suicide. Any "serious conception" of the afterlife involves a belief in God, and Christian faith relies on a belief in "spiritual survival." This afterlife doesn't need to be specific—Zemblan Christianity, in fact, insists that faith shouldn't paint a picture, but should instead provide "a warm haze of pleasurable anticipation."

While Kinbote insists that he's not defending suicide, that does seem to be what he's doing by sympathetically describing a "spiritual situation" (what a euphemism!) in which someone might prefer death to life. He's saying this in response to Hazel Shade's death, so one might interpret this as a surprising burst of empathy for the suffering of another person, but the fact that Kinbote immediately turns to the beliefs of Zemblan Christianity reveals that he's really talking about his own suicidal thoughts. While Kinbote uses the phrase "spiritual survival" (a phrase that Shade himself might use to describe his interests), this passage makes clear the difference between Shade's belief in a mysterious and almost transcendental afterlife in which human consciousness remains in the universe and Kinbote's notion that it's not worth inquiring into the details of the afterlife, but instead one should merely feel "pleasurable anticipation" for whatever it will be. To Shade, belief in the afterlife enhances the meaning that he finds in mortal life on earth, whereas Kinbote sees the afterlife as an escape hatch, a promise that makes him want to end his life on earth altogether in search of something better.

Feeling this, it makes sense that one might be tempted by the weight of a gun in its suede leather case. Kinbote has chosen these images "rather casually." Some people believe that a man should put one pistol to each temple or use a "bare botkin (note the correct spelling)," and that women should poison themselves or drown. However, of the known methods of suicide, falling is the best—although it's important to select the location carefully so as not to hurt others or fail in the attempt. Were Kinbote a poet, he would write an ode to the desire for death—the loveliness of the "universal unknown" taking over the "miniscule unknown" of a person's life. It does seem that people of faith, who believe that God will save them for eternity, should be forgiven the "one sin that ends all sins."

This passage makes it even more explicit that Kinbote wants to kill himself. When he says that he has chosen the images that he uses casually, it's a cue for readers to pay close attention to his language (since Kinbote never means what he says). Saying that a man should die by a "bare botkin" is an oblique reference to Hamlet. During his famous "to be or not to be" monologue, Hamlet contemplates suicide, suggesting that it might be better to die by a "bare bodkin" (meaning a dagger) than to live. Kinbote echoes this phrase, but instead of "bodkin," he uses the word "botkin"—and he calls attention to his spelling correction. However, "bodkin" (with a "d") is the word that appears in Hamlet, so it seems that Kinbote isn't correcting Shakespeare; Kinbote must be changing the spelling for another reason, then. It's likely that he's subtly inserting a clue that his own name, Kinbote, isn't the correct spelling—evidence that Kinbote's true identity is the professor V. Botkin.

Line 501: L'if. French for "yew." Oddly, the Zemblan word for weeping willow is also "if."

Here, Kinbote is supposed to be analyzing an incredibly complex passage that involves multi-lingual wordplay. He doesn't explain much—he doesn't even remark on the fact that L'if *resembles the word "life" or that* yew *sounds like "you."*

Line 502: The grand potato. This is a bad pun meant to express Shade's lack of respect for death. Kinbote remembers learning Rabelais's last words in French class: *Je m'en vais chercher le grand peut-être.*

*Kinbote does prove himself to be somewhat adept here, as he correctly identifies the origin of Shade's cryptic phrase "the grand potato" (in English, Rabelais' last words mean "I am going to search for the great maybe," and the French "*grand peut-être*" sounds like "grand potato" in English). But it doesn't seem right to interpret this pun as a sign of Shade's disrespect of death—Shade profoundly respects death, as he loves and respects life and he sees death as inseparable from life. It could be that Shade, by emphasizing the sound of Rabelais' words rather than their sense, is drawing his readers' attention to sound in the passages that follow (pronouncing IPH "if," for example). This could also be Nabokov's cryptic clue that the nonsense syllables that Hazel received from the ghost in the haunted barn should be read phonetically to decipher their sense.*

Line 502: IPH. While Kinbote cannot (for reasons of law and taste) reveal the real name of the institute that Shade is mocking, he also wants it to be known that he doesn't approve of the "flippancy" with which Shade addresses "aspects of spiritual hope which religion alone can fulfill."

This is something of a joke, as Kinbote has, throughout his Commentary, impugned the professional ability and personal character of many living people, so it's not clear why he suddenly chooses to protect IPH. It's also telling of Kinbote's foolishness that he gets moralistic about Shade mocking the silliest parts of IPH. If Kinbote sees his own religion in Shade's depiction of IPH, then it's another reason to mistrust Kinbote's notions of spirituality and the afterlife. Besides, he has just recently described the "spiritual hope" that religion provides him as an incentive to suicide, and it's quite clear that Shade finds real "spiritual hope" without any organized religion at all.

Line 549: While snubbing gods including the big G. This is the essence of what Shade missed. For Christians, the afterlife is impossible without God, which implies punishment for sin. Zemblan Protestantism is more high-church than low, while Sybil and John—initially Catholic and Episcopalian—wound up outside the Church with their own personal "religion." In a conversation in late June, Shade and Kinbote spoke of sin, and Kinbote talked about going to confession as a child and feeling that the priest's ear was too big to receive his "peccadilloes." Shade replied that *all* the seven deadly sins are "peccadilloes," but that a few of them (pride, lust, and sloth) are necessary for poetry.

Kinbote takes offense to anyone who finds spirituality without the Christian God, including Shade, and a big part of that seems to be Kinbote's horror at abandoning religious ideas of sin. This is somewhat ironic, of course, as Kinbote seems not to understand how much he himself is a sinner in the eyes of the Church—when he describes his youthful sins as mere "peccadilloes" (minor transgressions), he doesn't seem to acknowledge how grave a sin the Church would find his homosexuality at this time.

Turning to original sin, Kinbote stressed its importance while Shade insisted that he never understood it and believed that people are born good. To his mind, there are only two sins: murder and deliberately causing pain. They argued about this, and when Shade said that life is such a surprise that he does not "see why death should not be an even greater one," Kinbote accused Shade of accepting the horrible possibility that chance determines eternal life, rather than God planning it.

Shade reveals his personal ethics here, which is that conventional morality is mostly nonsense (he has previously noted that some "sins" are actually productive, particularly for poets), and his only moral rule is never causing others to suffer. This is pretty consistent with Shade's behavior—he's generally kind to others, but he doesn't mind some vices (like sneaking a drink, despite Sybil's opposition). Shade's comment that, since life is so surprising, it seems reasonable to expect death to be surprising too, is key to his understanding of the afterlife. To him, Kinbote's notion that the afterlife involves tallying and then punishing human sin is too ordinary to be possible—death must be unimaginable, since it transcends human life. Kinbote seems wrong to take from this that Shade believes only in chaos and chance—Shade believes that the universe is a "web of sense," it's just that human beings can't understand it.

Kinbote hates the notion of the soul "plunging into limitless and chaotic afterlife with no Providence to direct her." It's better, he insists, to accept that God is a "pale light" during a person's life and then a "dazzling radiance" afterwards. After all, he knows that the world couldn't have been created by chance and that the mind helps create the universe, so God is as good a name as any for that force of creation.

Kinbote wants the afterlife to have rules, order, and design, and while Shade does believe that the universe (and therefore the afterlife) is designed, the difference is that Shade doesn't feel any need to fully understand it—he's happy merely experiencing and observing the sublime beauty of the universe. Kinbote's characterization of Shade's spirituality (a soul falling into a chaotic afterlife, fighting through confusion alone) bears no resemblance to what Shade actually believes. Kinbote's language about life being a "pale light" and the afterlife being a "dazzling radiance" evokes the title "Pale Fire" and the quotation from which it comes. Here, Kinbote suggests that life steals its pale fire from the afterlife—in other words, life itself isn't radiant, but it seems *bright because it reflects the glow of the afterlife. Shade would wholly reject this logic (he finds tremendous radiance in life itself), and that Kinbote believes it emphasizes his suicidal nature: he thinks that life itself is lusterless and it gets all its meaning and allure from death.*

Line 550: debris. Kinbote needs to say something about his note to line 12. His conscience has led him to admit that the two lines quoted in that note are "distorted and tainted by wishful thinking." But it's the only instance in the Commentary in which Kinbote's distress led him to falsify "Pale Fire." He could edit them out before publishing this book, but that would mean doing a little rewriting, and he doesn't have time for "such stupidities."

Kinbote's note to line 12 introduces the draft variant, supposedly written by Shade, "That my friend told me of a certain king"—here, Kinbote admits that he himself wrote that line, which he had previously used as proof that Shade meant his poem to be about Zembla but was censored by his wife. Obviously, this admission shreds whatever credibility Kinbote has left at this point (if he has any at all). In fact, Kinbote is still not being completely honest here—in the index, under "Variants," he admits to fabricating several more throughout the Commentary. Nonetheless, he still insists here that the note to line 12 is the only fabrication.

Line 579: the other. Kinbote doesn't wish to insinuate that Shade was seeing another woman. Of course, some gossips said he was sleeping with a student, but Kinbote always shushed them. Once Kinbote invited the woman in question to a party with the Shades, intending to quash the rumor, which brings him to the subject of invitations in New Wye. During his five months of knowing the Shades, he was invited over to eat three times, and they only accepted three of his "dozen or so" invitations, one of those being the dinner with the young woman in question, whom Kinbote had to entertain alone after the Shades left early.

It's not clear from Kinbote's narration whether or not Shade was actually having an affair with a student, or whether it was merely a malicious rumor that made the Shades uncomfortable. Nonetheless, Kinbote's Commentary is revealing of his own unpleasant social behavior. It seems that he relentlessly badgered Sybil and John to accept invitations to his house (a "dozen or so" is likely an underestimation, knowing Kinbote), and when they did *accept an invitation here and there out of politeness, he would do things like bring over the very woman Shade was rumored to be sleeping with. This is an incredibly rude and cruel thing to do that clearly put both the Shades and the young woman in an impossible social position, so it's no wonder that John and Sybil didn't go over to Kinbote's house very much.*

Line 596: Points at the puddle in his basement room. Following this line, there are some draft lines about a dead murderer meeting his aggrieved victim, and about whether objects have souls. In these lines appears the phrase "Tanagra dust," which can be combined to make the word "gradus"—Shade's murderer. While an average reader might chalk this up to coincidence, Kinbote can hardly find many instances in which "Gradus" would appear across two words. These draft lines are so significant that only scholastic rigor and respect for truth kept Kinbote from inserting them into the final draft and deleting four other lines to compensate.

When Kinbote sees the word "Gradus" hidden in the phrase "Tanagra dust," he interprets this as a prophecy: Shade naming his murderer, even though he did not yet know of the man's existence. While it's totally plausible to interpret this as coincidence and to see Kinbote's commentary as paranoid and absurd, Kinbote is ironically picking up on the same kind of unexpected coincidence that Shade himself saw as evidence of design in the universe. Even though Kinbote did not put those lines into the final draft, it's telling that he reveals how badly he wanted to. That rigor and respect for truth were apparently the only things that kept him from inserting the lines isn't compelling to readers who know by now that Kinbote has a loose relationship to the truth and is a poor scholar.

On the day when Shade composed those lines, Gradus wasn't doing much—just waiting in his hotel in Geneva. Without a hearty mind to entertain him, Gradus got bored and told headquarters that he would be relocating to a hotel in Nice.

Kinbote is relentless in his disparagement of Gradus. Here, he suggests that Gradus is so boring and stupid that he's incapable of entertaining himself and needs to make impulsive travel decisions simply to keep himself occupied.

Lines 597-608: the thoughts we should roll-call, etc. King Charles would have been executed if he hadn't escaped, but Kinbote knows that, had Charles been caught, he would have gone to his death just as Shade describes in the referenced lines: spitting into the eyes of his idiot executioners.

It's unlikely that King Charles would have behaved as Kinbote suggests; the King isn't someone who has demonstrated a lot of moral courage or personal conviction (for instance, he chose to marry a woman to keep up appearances instead of publicly embracing his gay identity despite the cost).

Lines 609-614: Nor can one help, etc. In his draft, Shade wrote this slightly differently, capturing well the "chance inn" where Kinbote is writing this commentary. At first, he hated the music from what he thought was an amusement park, but which was actually camping tourists. Now, it's quieter except for the wind; Cedarn is a ghost town without tourists or spies.

In the passage of "Pale Fire" that Kinbote is analyzing, Shade accurately describes the motel where Kinbote is currently writing his Commentary, including such specific details as the flashing lights outside his window. Of course, it's implied that Shade himself may have vacationed at that inn before, so that would explain why he knows about the flashing lights, but it doesn't explain his seemingly prophetic description in "Pale Fire" of an "exile" holed up in the motel "dying" (this, of course, would be Kinbote, a suicidal expat). Shade wrote this in July, while Kinbote didn't decamp for the inn until August, after Shade's death, so it's not clear how Shade could have foretold the future so accurately. Nonetheless, Kinbote doesn't remark on this extraordinary coincidence, which is particularly unusual because he's normally so eager to place himself at the center of everything.

Line 615: two tongues. Kinbote lists pairs of languages, including: English and Zemblan, English and Russian, English and Lithuanian, English and Bulgarian, and American and European.

By this point in the novel, it's clear that Botkin/Kinbote is some kind of language professor. Readers know that he doesn't teach English because he's not in Shade's department, and Kinbote has said that he's not in the Russian department, so it's likely that he's a professor of a Slavic language, although he believes himself to be a Zemblan professor. This passage supposedly analyzes the line in "Pale Fire" that refers to the exile dying in a prairie motel while speaking in "two tongues" (a description that fits Kinbote), and here Kinbote is listing various pairs of tongues that might fit the bill. He's being a bit coy, though—he doesn't reveal what specific language he teaches at Wordsmith, but the geography of the languages that he includes at least narrows the possibilities to Eastern Europe (Kinbote has shown himself to also speak Western European languages, including French and German, but he leaves those out).

Line 627: The great Starover Blue. Even with Professor Blue's permission, it's somewhat "tasteless" to put a real person into an invented poem where the person has to behave "in accordance with the invention." This is especially odd since other people in the poem are given pseudonyms. This name must have been alluring because a "star over blue" is so fitting for an astronomer, although his name has no relation to the sky—his name comes from a Russian word for a religious sect to which his father belonged. Starover was beloved by students, and he was one of the men in Shade's orbit, including the "distinguished Zemblan scholar" Professor Nattochdag.

In his concern about whether appearing by name in "Pale Fire" is reductive to Starover Blue's humanity, Kinbote is displaying unusual empathy. Even in moments where he clearly should be worried about a situation's effects on people (inviting the woman rumored to be Shade's mistress to dinner with the Shades, for instance), he doesn't show any empathy at all, so it's out of character for him to be empathetic towards Professor Blue for such a small issue. Kinbote is probably expressing this concern out of jealousy—he himself wanted to be the star of Shade's poem, and he's upset that he doesn't even get mentioned in passing, so he tries to make it seem like an insult to Starover Blue that he appears rather than being openly jealous. Kinbote has already said that Nattochdag is his department head, so by calling Nattochdag a Zemblan scholar, Kinbote is suggesting that he himself belongs to the Zemblan department (of course, no such thing exists, so Kinbote/Botkin's real department remains a mystery).

Line 629: The fate of beasts. A draft variant of this phrase was "the madman's fate." Zemblan theologians have speculated on the souls of madmen, concluding that even the most deranged people contain a "sane basic particle" that survives after death and regenerates in an afterlife free of fools.

Here, Kinbote contradicts himself. He has previously said that Zemblan Christianity refuses to speculate on the specifics of the afterlife (preferring only to say that it's wonderful), but in this passage he says that Zemblan theologians have speculated with a lot of specificity about the afterlife, saying that it's free of fools and that the insane are resurrected without their insanity. Perhaps this is merely self-serving, since Kinbote knows that he's insane and he's excited for the afterlife, so he wants to believe that he will be mentally healthy after he dies.

Kinbote has never known a madman himself, but there were some good stories in New Wye. Once, at a party at the Hurley home, Kinbote spotted Shade talking to Hurley's wife. As he approached them from behind, he overheard Shade tell her that she was using the wrong word, and that "one should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention." When he tapped Shade on the shoulder, Mrs. Hurley said that while she thought that an old railroad worker who thought he was God was crazy, Shade believed him to be a poet. It's maybe not even worth commenting on this silly passage—the whole part of the poem about IPH could be shorter.

This is an incredibly revealing anecdote, as it backhandedly admits the truth of Kinbote's identity. Reading between the lines, it seems likely that Shade and Hurley's wife were talking about Kinbote, *not about some nonspecific railroad worker; indeed, Shade's description of replacing an unremarkable and unhappy past with a brilliant but invented story perfectly describes what Kinbote (or Botkin) has done. By defending Kinbote in this way, Shade shows that he understands the situation and remains incredibly empathetic towards Kinbote, even appreciating the poetry of his delusions, thereby placing Kinbote on the same plane as Shade himself.*

COMMENTARY: LINES 662-872

Line 662: Who rides so late in the night and the wind. This passage is an allusion to Goethe's poem about the erlking—a spirit in the woods that falls in love with a traveler's young son. "Another fabulous ruler," King Charles, repeated Goethe's lines to himself while climbing the mountains during his escape from Zembla.

Kinbote is extrapolating a little bit in his description of the plot of Goethe's "Erlkönig." The Erlking doesn't fall in love with the young boy—he maliciously lures him away from his father and then kills him. However, the Erlking does at one point claim to love the boy and feel charmed by his beauty, after which the terrified boy informs his father that the Erlking has now grabbed him and hurt him. While the Erlking seems not to actually be a pedophile (but rather a sinister murderer who is trying to confuse and manipulate the boy by declaring his love), Kinbote has a tendency to distort stories so that they're more reflective of his own life. In this way, it seems that he has magnified the detail about the erlking falling in love with the boy (since Kinbote himself is a pedophile) without considering how nefarious the parallel becomes (by analogy, then, Kinbote is also an evil spirit harming young boys). When Kinbote uses the word "fabulous" to describe Charles, it has a double meaning—at first, it seems like he's calling Charles "great," but he also probably means "fabulous" in the sense of "fable"—as in, fictitious. This could be an admission that King Charles is just as invented as the erlking.

Lines 671-672: The Untamed Seahorse. This is a reference to Browning's *My Last Duchess*, and readers should reproach the "fashionable device" of titling a written work with a quotation from a celebrated work from history. These titles have a "specious glamor" that depends on easy allusions rather than original invention.

Kinbote scolds Shade for titling his book after a quote from Browning, saying that this is lazy and merely following a fad when one should be original enough to come up with a title that doesn't rely on allusion. This is ironic for several reasons. First, Kinbote is piggybacking on another writer in a way far worse than borrowing a title—he has hijacked the publication of "Pale Fire" to tell his own unrelated story about Zembla. Second, later on in "Pale Fire," Shade himself subtly pokes fun at the period of his life when he borrowed titles from other writers, and the title "Pale Fire" is itself a borrowed title about borrowing inspiration from more inspired places, so by titling his poem "Pale Fire," Shade is being self-deprecating about his abilities. It seems, though, that Kinbote missed this subtext altogether, or else his critique of Shade would have been more nuanced.

Line 678: into French. A couple of Sybil's translations referenced here appeared in a journal that Kinbote read during the last week of July. Out of tact, he did not send his critiques to her, but he does note that a few of the lines can be "mimed and rhymed" in a lovely way in Zemblan (which Conmal termed "the tongue of the mirror").

Kinbote gives himself credit for his tact when he says that he didn't send Sybil a critique of her translations during the week after her husband's death, but actually this would be the bare minimum of common decency. It's revealing of the nature of Zembla that Sybil's lines could be imitated ("mimed") and rhymed in Zemblan, as Zembla is a delusion that mirrors Kinbote's life in New Wye, and many Zemblan words derive from (or mirror) words in real languages.

Line 680: Lolita. In America, major hurricanes get female names. It's not clear why Shade gave this hurricane an obscure Spanish name rather than an American one like Linda or Lois.

Obviously, Nabokov is playfully referencing his explosively popular (and controversial) 1955 novel Lolita. Some readers have observed a parallel between Hazel Shade's name and Lolita's name (the character Lolita's last name is Haze, and by last name and first initial, she would be "Haze, L.").

Line 681: gloomy Russians spied. Gloom isn't inherent to the Russian temperament—it's just the result of gross nationalism and a sense of inferiority, something that Russians under Soviet rule and Zemblans after the revolution shared. But not all Russians are in poor spirits; the two men from Moscow that the Zemblan government hired to find the crown jewels were fun-loving people. They were wrong to think that the jewels must be in the palace, though—in fact, the jewels are in a "quite unexpected" part of Zembla. When they tore the palace apart, they did find a hidden chamber, but no crown.

Here, Kinbote is subtly expressing his politics—he supports monarchy through and through, and he finds revolutionary societies (Soviet Russia, post-revolution Zembla) to be characterized by gloom and insecurity. There are many parallels between the Zemblan revolution and the Russian revolution, and many people interpret the book's depiction of Zembla as being based, in part, on Nabokov's own experience fleeing Russia after the revolution. The novel never spells out where the crown jewels are hidden, but the Index contains a major clue. The entry for "Kobaltana" describes an old mountain resort that rates an entry in the index despite never being mentioned in the book—it's likely that this is Nabokov's clue that the crown jewels are hidden there, which would indeed be "quite unexpected."

This is all "the rule of a supernal game"—it's fate, not a reflection of the Russian men's skills. Their names (though possibly invented) were Andronnikov and Niagarin and they were quite attractive and nice people. Andronnikov was tall, happy, and handsome, whereas Niagarin was short, squat, and manly. When Kinbote was young, Russia was quite fashionable in the Zemblan court, although this was a "different Russia" that did not abide tyrants or injustice.

While Kinbote is highly critical of Gradus's failure to carry out his mission, he takes care not to criticize these two Russians for not finding the jewels they're assigned to locate—this is merely part of a divine game, he says (extravagantly excusing them), not a reflection of their competence. Perhaps Kinbote is so much harder on Gradus because he is a Zemblan revolutionary (emblematic of everything that Kinbote hates), whereas these Russians remind him of pre-revolutionary Russia when the monarchy was still in place, which Kinbote misses. Kinbote's nostalgia for monarchy and his (false) assertion that Tsarist Russia contained neither tyrants nor injustice suggests something about his background. Professor V. Botkin (Kinbote's true identity) is known to be an exile from Russia, and he may (like Nabokov himself) have come from a wealthy background, socially adjacent to the Russian court, and then had to flee after the revolution, losing the luxurious life he loved.

Line 681: the attack. In October of 1958, Shade had a heart attack, which neatly coincided with King Charles arriving in America. In disguise, Charles dropped from a plane and landed, with a parachute, in a field. Sylvia O'Donnell's chauffeur picked him up in a Rolls Royce, and inside Sylvia had left a newspaper with a story about Shade's heart attack marked in red. "I" had been excited to meet Shade, but—believing he would die—"I" shrugged it off.

Sylvia is Odon's mother—Kinbote previously informed readers that Odon's mother lives in New Wye, and the name "Odon" appears in the first four letters of "O'Donnell." It seems that Odon's final attempt to help Charles's escape from Zembla was to enlist his mother's help. At this point in the story, Kinbote switches to first person when describing King Charles—he's no longer pretending that they're separate people.

Sylvia was Wordsmith's primary trustee, and she arranged for Kinbote's job there. When Charles arrived at her house, she informed him that Shade would be okay, so he would get to meet the famous poet after all. Shade is "strictly hetero," she cautioned, and told him that he needed to be very careful. Otherwise, she thought he would like it in New Wye, although she couldn't understand why anyone would want to teach Zemblan.

When Sylvia explicitly cautions Kinbote that Shade is heterosexual and that he should be careful in New Wye (presumably about openly expressing his sexuality), she's suggesting that New Wye has more conservative social norms than Zembla. This seems obviously true, as Kinbote's sexuality is certainly a big part of his social isolation there.

Shade recovered quite well, and readers shouldn't take literally the part of "Pale Fire" about the doctor in the front row. Shade said that his heart didn't get manually compressed and there was no emergency surgery; if his heart even did stop, it was momentary. This doesn't undermine the beauty of the lines, though.

It's not clear what to believe in this passage—it's possible that Shade might have invented the doctor to make that section of "Pale Fire" more dramatic and to set up the joke about him being "half a Shade" while he was supposedly dead, but it seems likely that this is another instance of Kinbote being unreliable. If Shade's heart didn't really stop—or if it only stopped momentarily—then that means that his whole experience of being dead (involving seeing the white fountain) was invented, too. That doesn't seem likely, since this is an event whose consequences (finding the woman who he believed had also seen the white fountain) became the foundation of his spiritual beliefs.

Line 697: Conclusive destination. Gradus arrived in the Côte d'Azur on July 15th. His hotel was somewhat squalid, but he liked the noise outside because it kept his mind occupied. He hadn't yet been told that Andronnikov and Niagarin would be helping him, and he passed them on the street having only barely recognized them as being familiar. Gradus got into a cab bound for Disa's villa, but the chatty driver told him before he arrived that nobody lived there at present, so he turned around.

Andronnikov and Niagarin are the two Russians previously mentioned for their role in trying to find the Zemblan crown jewels. It's quite a coincidence that they pass Gradus on the street in France, and it's clear how out of the loop Gradus is with headquarters based on his not knowing that they've been assigned to help. Gradus's actions here also show how bad at his job he is. He gives up easily when a cab driver tells him that nobody lives at the villa right now without knowing if that's even true.

Back at the hotel, Gradus had a telegram from headquarters telling him to pause his work and have fun for a while. But Gradus had no hobbies or pleasures—not even sex, since he'd tried several times to castrate himself—and he felt furious at not having any work.

This is one of the most scathing passages about Gradus, as Kinbote suggests that he is so insipid and deranged that he castrated himself, leaving him unable even to enjoy sex. In this description, Gradus's revolutionary work springs not from moral conviction, but from boredom: an inability to entertain himself without a specific task to do.

Lines 704-707: A system, etc. When Shade repeats "cells interlinked" three times, he does it quite well, particularly because of the resonance between "stem" and "system."

This is, at least, on topic—Kinbote is discussing the language that Shade uses in his poem and not bringing up anything irrelevant for once. He doesn't get into the meaning of this passage at all, though. It's pretty interesting that when Shade was having a heart attack, during the period of time in which he insists he was dead, he was experiencing a pattern that felt cellular. He doesn't say that he felt the presence of God or heard heavenly music or anything like that—he brings up cells, which are bodily and fundamental to life on earth. In this way, he suggests that the seeds of the universe and of eternal life are within him somehow.

Lines 727-728: No, Mr. Shade…just half a shade. This passage makes a pun on the "two additional meanings of *shade*"—plus it being a synonym for "nuance." The doctor is suggesting that, during this "trance," Shade was half himself and half a ghost. But knowing the doctor who treated him there, Kinbote believes he's not clever enough to have actually said that.

Just prior to this, Kinbote instructed readers not to interpret the anecdote about the doctor literally, but now he says that he knows the doctor who treated Shade, which implies that the doctor really was there. This unreliability is maddening and it is actively counterproductive to helping readers understand the poem. When Shade told the doctor that he died during his heart attack, the doctor responded "Not quite: just half a shade." Kinbote points out that this is a pun on Shade's name—he's both saying that Shade only died slightly (he was only "half a shade" dead) and also that Shade was half a ghost (another meaning of the word "shade") and half himself (since he is Shade). Saying that Shade was in a "trance" is different from conceding that he died—in a trance, someone might receive supernatural messages, but they're still alive.

Lines 734-735: probably…wobble…limp blimp…unstable. Here, Shade is trying to make his poem mirror the "intricacies of the 'game' in which he seeks the key to life and death."

The sound of all these "b" syllables does mimic the erratic rhythm of a failing heart. By saying that Shade is using his poetry to mimic the "game" that provides the "key to life and death," Kinbote appears to suggest that mimicry and resonance between things that otherwise do not resemble one another (poetry and the body, for example) is a way of understanding or mirroring the order of the universe.

Line 741: the outer glare. While Shade worked on July 16th, Gradus was bored, sitting in his hotel lobby in Nice. He flipped through the paper and saw that Disa's villa had been burglarized. While trying to figure out how to communicate this secretly to headquarters, a high-up Shadow knocked on his door: it was a man named Izumrudov who wore a green velvet jacket. While his name sounded Russian, it actually referred to an "Eskimo tribe" that liked to boat around the "emerald waters" of northern Zembla. The man told Gradus he would be flying to New York—Andronnikov and Niagarin had found in Disa's home a letter with the King's new address. Izumrudov then left, probably to continue "whoring." Kinbote hates men like him.

*Izumrudov is wearing a green velvet jacket, which immediately evokes Kinbote's previous descriptions of the Wordsmith professor Gerald Emerald. The link between Izumrudov and Professor Emerald is then strengthened by Nabokov's use of the phrase "emerald waters" in describing the origin of Izumrudov's name—*izumrudov, *in fact, is Russian for "emerald." Some scholars believe that Kinbote fabricated the evil Shadows group in the image of the "Shadeans" in New Wye (the English professors who claim to understand Shade better than Kinbote, whom Kinbote loathes). The clear correspondence between Izumrudov and Gerald Emerald gives a lot of support to that theory.*

Lines 747-748: a story in the magazine about a Mrs. Z. With a good library, anyone could find this magazine story and track down the woman concerned, but "such humdrum potterings" are not the stuff of real scholarship.

Actually, a real scholar would likely be very interested to talk to this woman about the conversation that she and Shade had when he visited her house to investigate the white fountain that he thought she saw during her near-death experience. Kinbote finds any work that's not explicitly related to himself and his delusions to be "humdrum potterings."

Line 768: address. In April, Kinbote wrote a letter to someone in the South of France that alluded to Shade. Luckily, he preserved it and he includes the text. The letter tells "my dear" not to write to him at home (where his mailbox could easily be raided), but rather at his office at Wordsmith. He has been quite on edge, especially after being betrayed by someone who lived with him, and he has an older neighbor.

Kinbote is suggesting that he was writing to Disa in April. Reading between the lines, it seems that he is continuing to be cruel to her. While previously he told her that she couldn't come visit him in America (which made her cry), now he's telling her that she can only send letters to his office, not his home (which his wife would likely perceive as quite cold). The implication of this passage is that the Shadows likely got Kinbote's address from this letter that he sent Disa.

Line 802: mountain. The morning Shade wrote these lines, Kinbote went to church and felt, because of the cloudless sky, that he might actually be admitted to heaven, despite the "horror" in his heart. As he walked home, he heard Shade's voice telling him to come over tonight, but when he turned around, he was alone. He called and asked what Shade had been doing at noon, then he started crying and said he needed to see Shade immediately. Shade invited Kinbote for a nighttime walk.

At this point, Kinbote is unraveling to a tremendous degree. He is bouncing between extreme emotional highs (thinking that he's bound for heaven despite knowing how bad his behavior has been) and extreme lows (his insistent paranoia, loneliness, and despair). While Kinbote has often hinted that he has hallucinations, this is the first time that he describes one: he thinks that he hears Shade inviting him over, but Shade isn't there (showing how Kinbote's desires become his delusions, as is the case with his notions of Zembla). When Shade gets an unhinged phone call from Kinbote (who starts inexplicably crying), he is tremendously kind in agreeing to take a walk with him.

That night, Kinbote asked Shade what he was writing about that day, and he simply replied "mountains." Of course, this was confirmation that Shade was writing about the Bera Range in Zembla. This so overjoyed Kinbote that he didn't even mind when Shade asked to return home after only an hour of walking so that he could continue working.

The joke here is that Shade wasn't writing about mountains—he was writing about the mountain/fountain mix-up that led Shade to erroneously believe that he had concrete evidence that consciousness survives death. There is no literal mountain in "Pale Fire"—instead, the poem describes the misprint in a news article that led Shade to believe that he understood death. Shade is on a roll with his poem and he clearly would rather be working than spending time with his unhinged neighbor, but Kinbote seems to believe that he himself is being generous when he doesn't complain that Shade only spends an hour with him (which is quite a long time for a nighttime walk with someone Shade doesn't really like).

Line 803: a misprint. Translators of "Pale Fire" will struggle to make "mountain" into "fountain" by changing one letter. It can't be done in several languages, including Zemblan. This reminds Kinbote of a strange coincidental mix-up in which a Russian newspaper twice misprinted by one letter the word for "crown" (*korona*)—making "crow" (*vorona*) and "cow" (*korova*) in the process. It's such an extraordinary occurrence of a kind that Kinbote has never seen anywhere else, and to see something of such slim odds would have delighted Shade.

Kinbote is saying that it's essentially a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence that there would be three Russian words that each differ from one another by only a letter, and their English translations also *happen to differ from one another by only a letter. Shade certainly would have loved this, as he was a word golf enthusiast (a game where players transform one word into another by replacing one letter at a time), and he also found in these kinds of coincidences the very order, design, and beauty that he believes structure the universe itself.*

Line 810: a web of sense. The other day, the owner of the motel where Kinbote is staying loaned him a book, the *Letters of Franklin Lane*. Inside, Kinbote found a passage that reminds him of the end of the third canto of "Pale Fire." Right before his death, Lane wrote about how, in the afterlife, he would seek out Aristotle. It would satisfy him to see Aristotle make human life comprehensible, making "the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line."

Kinbote does seem to be understanding Shade's metaphysics by this point, even though Kinbote hasn't devoted much of his Commentary to analyzing how those metaphysics are apparent in the poem. Shade doesn't believe that human beings can perceive the order of the universe, although he does believe that the apparent chaos of human life is actually linear and orderly ("one beautiful straight line"). Shade also certainly does believe that human consciousness persists after death and that, in death, consciousness has greater access to understanding the structure and order of the universe.

Line 819: Playing a game of worlds. Shade loved word games, particularly "word golf." Sometimes he would interrupt conversations to play, and Kinbote remembers one instance where Shade got from "live" to "dead" in five moves, one of them being "lend."

This might be a misreading—the relevant passage in "Pale Fire" reads a "a game of worlds," not "words." More likely, though, Kinbote is being playful, doing a bit of word golf himself by subtracting one letter from "worlds" to get "words" and then riffing on "words" in this passage. It is, of course, significant that Kinbote brings up how efficiently one can get from "live" to "dead" (since Shade believed that life and death were inextricably connected), and it also suggests—as the novel suggests overall—that the patterns of words on a page are evocative of larger truths in the universe.

Line 822: killing a Balkan king. Kinbote wishes he could say that, in the draft, the line was "killing a Zemblan king," but the draft of these lines wasn't preserved.

It's bizarre that sometimes Kinbote flagrantly invents draft lines (as he did in the note to line 12), and sometimes he admits to his desire to invent them by way of praising his own restraint.

Line 830: Sybil, it is. This "elaborate rhyme" is the climax of the canto, bringing together the counterpoints of "its accidents and possibilities."

The rhyme to which Kinbote refers is Shade's juxtaposition of "possibilities" with "Sybil, it is." The whole phrase in the preceding line is "accidents and possibilities," and by drawing attention to accidents and possibilities as being two parts of the same counterpoint (a musical term describing two different melodies that play, harmoniously, at the same time), Kinbote suggests something that Shade would obviously endorse: that what seems like an accident is actually a possibility, or that accidents and possibilities are two melodies that seem distinct but that actually cooperate to become one piece of music. This is also how Shade sees the relationship between life and death.

Lines 841-872: two methods of composing. There are three methods if one includes the "all-important" one: the "mute command" of subliminal inspiration.

Shade's explanation of the two methods of writing (writing with a pen in hand and writing mentally while out in the world doing something else) seems to encompass what Kinbote is bringing up here—in the poem, Shade notes that sometimes, while he's doing something unrelated to writing, he'll suddenly be struck with the right word or phrase or image. That Kinbote feels the need to note this phenomenon separately shows how important it is for him. *It does seem that Kinbote's delusions about Zembla are given to him via a kind of silent (or "mute") command that he can't account for.*

COMMENTARY: LINES 873-1000

Line 873: My best time. When Shade began this line, Gradus was boarding an airplane and then flying, "desecrating the sky."

In this passage of "Pale Fire," Shade is saying that he writes best in the morning. It's important that, in the moment when Shade is doing his best work, Gradus is boarding an airplane to America, beginning his final approach to Shade's fated death. This is another example of the novel suggesting that somehow Shade's writing itself propels Gradus.

Lines 887-888: Since my biographer may be too staid or know too little. If Shade had known that Kinbote would be the commentator, he would not have presumed this. In fact, Kinbote once saw Shade doing the very thing he goes on to describe—one morning in March, Kinbote dropped by to see what it was that Shade wanted him to look up at the Library of Congress, and, despite Sybil's objections, Shade allowed Kinbote to speak with him while he bathed. Neither Shade nor Kinbote remembered what it was that he needed to have looked up.

The final canto of "Pale Fire" contains an extended sequence of Shade shaving, and Shade rhetorically justifies subjecting readers to an explanation of how he shaves by saying that his biographer might not know this about him. Kinbote, however—creepy as he is—claims to know from experience how Shade shaves, since he once was in the bathroom with Shade while he was shaving in the bath. It's possible that this is fabricated, though, since it's clear that John and Sybil didn't let Kinbote into their house very much at all and this seems far too intimate for the relationship they had with Kinbote.

Line 894: a king. At the beginning of the Zemblan Revolution, pictures of Charles the Beloved circulated in America. Sometimes, people in New Wye would tell Kinbote how much he looked like King Charles. Once, at a Faculty Club event, a visiting scholar made several comments about it, and Kinbote brushed it off, saying that all bearded Zemblans look alike, and the word "Zembla" itself does not derive from the Russian *zemlya*, but from words related to "resemblance." When the scholar prodded Shade, he denied the resemblance, saying that "resemblances are the shadows of differences."

Kinbote is making an important point about Zembla when he claims that the country's name isn't derived from "Zemlya" (the real name of a Russian island that is sometimes called "Zembla"—the same one that appears in the Alexander Pope poem that Shade cites) but is instead related to the word "resemblance." This echoes Conmal's statement that Zemblan is the "tongue of the mirror"—it's a fictitious language that resembles other languages (many Zemblan words have Slavic or Russian roots) and the world of Zembla overall mirrors the real world with important distortions. Kinbote and King Charles are mirror images of one another—they're both named Charles, they're both narcissists, and they're both pedophiles, but one is beloved and the other is isolated, one is important and the other is marginal. Perhaps when Shade says that "resemblances are the shadows of differences," he's drawing attention to what's different between Zembla and New Wye, since those differences reveal Kinbote's psyche.

Different faculty members started speculating about King Charles's fate—whether he escaped in disguise or was executed, and whether history will treat him unkindly—and then Shade noted that he himself is said to resemble several other people, including a cafeteria worker at Wordsmith who is herself said to resemble Judge Goldsworth.

This passage contains a subtle clue that is key to understanding the novel's true plot. When Shade says that he resembles a cafeteria worker who resembles Judge Goldsworth, he's implicitly suggesting that he himself *resembles Judge Goldsworth. While Kinbote insists that Gradus killed Shade while aiming at Kinbote, everyone else accepts the story that the escaped lunatic Jack Grey came to Goldsworth's house (which Kinbote was renting) to get revenge on the judge who locked him up. That Shade resembles Judge Goldsworth explains why Grey shot Shade—he thought that Shade was Goldsworth. Kinbote will reject this narrative as being a media cover-up (for political reasons) of the attempted assassination of the former king of Zembla, but the Jack Grey story is much more plausible than Kinbote's.*

A professor then told Kinbote that he'd heard Kinbote was born in Russia and his name was an "anagram of Botkin or Botkine." Kinbote replied, sarcastically, that he was mixing Kinbote up with a "refugee from Nova Zembla." Shade remarked that, in Zemblan, *kinbote* means "regicide," and Kinbote affirmed him before Shade told the others that Kinbote is the author of a book on surnames.

That a professor brings up the relationship between the names "Kinbote" and "Botkin" gives further evidence that Kinbote's true identity is Professor V. Botkin—this passage suggests that everyone knows about Professor Botkin's delusions, although they mostly humor him by treating him as if he is Kinbote. Here, they are teasing him by telling him that he resembles the King of Zembla and peevishly pointing out the resemblance between the names "Kinbote" and "Botkin," perhaps seeing if they can get him to break character. Shade seems to be trying to get the others to stop, since he recognizes that this distresses Kinbote. When Kinbote says that they're perhaps mixing him up with a refugee from Nova Zembla, Kinbote might be revealing something about Botkin's background. From other parts of the novel, readers know that Professor V. Botkin is a Russian émigré—perhaps he is actually from Nova Zembla (the Russian island to which Pope alludes), which would mean that Kinbote's delusions of Zembla really are a reflection of his (Botkin's) homeland.

Gerald Emerald, who had left the group to search the encyclopedia for a picture of King Charles, returned to show everyone a picture of young Charles in uniform, calling him a "fancy pansy." Kinbote then insulted Emerald, who tried to make up with a handshake that Kinbote did not return.

Gerald Emerald is consistently antagonistic to Kinbote about his sexuality, often making nasty comments (like "fancy pansy") that deeply hurt him.

Line 920: little hairs stand on end. In *The Shropshire Lad*, Alfred Housman says the opposite: that hairs raising on end makes shaving more difficult. This discrepancy, however, may be due to them using different razors.

In this part of "Pale Fire," Shade is suggesting that the way in which poetic inspiration makes the hairs on his neck stand on end reminds him of the men in highly produced commercials whose neck hair seems to stand up naturally, therefore making it easy to shave. Kinbote's pedantic note about Housman saying the opposite, perhaps because he used a different razor, tells readers about Kinbote's taste (he likes Housman—perhaps in part because Housman was believed to be gay) but says nothing about Shade or "Pale Fire."

Line 929: Freud. Kinbote can still see Shade literally falling down in laughter as Kinbote read to him from an important book on psychoanalysis. The two snippets that Kinbote wrote down, both "quoted by Prof C." from other sources, are about how nose picking is essentially lustful, and how the red hat in Little Red Riding Hood is a symbol of menstruation. Kinbote cannot believe anyone would teach such things.

Both Kinbote and Shade have a lot of antagonism towards psychoanalysis. This fits with a lot of Shade's other beliefs—for example, he hates literary symbolism (finding it reductive of the complexity and mystery of life), and psychoanalysis notoriously proposed that dreams contain various stock symbols that illuminate a person's emotions in waking life—surely, Shade would hate that. It's likely that he is so attuned to mystery and the limits of human understanding that he bristles at the psychoanalytic attempt to find clear answers in the unconscious mind.

Line 937: Old Zembla. Kinbote is tired and sad today. In a draft of these lines, Shade quoted Pope's "Essay on Man": "At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where." While Shade might have meant to put this in a footnote, Kinbote can't believe that this is all that Shade could say about Zembla.

When Shade mentions Zembla in passing in "Pale Fire," it's an allusion to the line quoted here from Pope's "Essay on Man." Kinbote is unbearably sad that, despite feeding Shade all of his incredible stories about Zembla, Shade didn't write about Zembla at all and only mentioned it as an allusion to Pope (who was himself talking about an island in Russia, not Kinbote's imagined homeland). All his efforts to immortalize his homeland in verse by making Shade write about it were for naught.

Lines 939-940: Man's life, etc. If Kinbote is interpreting this correctly, Shade is trying to say that life is essentially a series of footnotes to a "vast obscure unfinished masterpiece."

Kinbote's commentary here is both ironic and true. Shade certainly believed that human life was merely a footnote to the vast and inexplicable universe—a universe that he often explicitly compared to a poem. So it's completely plausible that Shade meant the line "Man's life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem" as a metaphor for the relationship between humanity and the universe. However, Kinbote is missing the obvious fact that this line describes exactly what he is literally doing as he writes his Commentary: he's taking an "unfinished masterpiece" (Shade's "Pale Fire") and telling his own life story as a series of notes on that poem. This is another moment of odd unrecognition; Kinbote usually sees himself at the center of everything, *but he oddly cannot see himself in this line. Perhaps this is because he's in denial about what he's doing—he really believes that he's illuminating the subtext of Shade's poem by telling his stories of Zembla.*

Line 949: And all the time. Shade began these lines on his final day alive. It's possible that Gradus woke at the exact same time.

In the poem, the phrase "And All the time" refers to Sybil's constant presence in Shade's poetry, but Kinbote takes this as an indication that Shade and Gradus have further synchronized their timelines, moving towards Shade's fate later that day.

Line 949: and all the time. Gradus arrived in America to a thunderstorm unlike anything that Gradus, Jacques d'Argus, or Jack Grey ("let us not forget Jack Grey!") had ever seen. The next morning, Gradus awoke in New York and pulled from his suitcase a ham sandwich he'd bought in Nice last Saturday, which he ate for breakfast. Utterly uncurious about New York, Gradus read the paper in the park until lunchtime, when he ate some "pinkish pork" alongside tons of French fries and an overripe melon. It's odd that he ate such a meal when he was about to commit murder, but Kinbote thinks it's fair to assume that he couldn't imagine anything beyond the murder itself. He wasn't aware of the all its possible consequences, the way that a chess player is aware of all possible moves in advance, even as he chooses only one.

Kinbote mocks Gradus by paying close attention to his bizarre eating habits—particularly noting that he ate a perilously old ham sandwich, some alarmingly pink pork, plus some other sickening additions (overripe melon, for instance). Not only is this a strangely large amount of food for someone about to commit murder to be able to eat (showing Gradus's lack of conscience), but it's also bound to make him sick even though he has an important job to do (showing his incompetence). Nabokov was obsessed with chess and he loved designing chess problems (puzzles that challenge the solver to plot a particular course of game play, as opposed to competing against an opponent). In his writing, Nabokov was many moves ahead of the reader (he designed "Pale Fire," for instance, to require several re-readings in order to uncover all the clues and connections that he planted) and he explicitly saw a connection between designing chess problems and writing novels. It's significant, then, that Shade in "Pale Fire" describes human life as a game played by far off players whose design human beings can never understand. Being able to see a matrix of possibilities and project the consequences of human actions into the future is, for Shade and Nabokov, a pale imitation of divine consciousness. It's highly insulting, then, that Gradus cannot do this even at an elementary level.

Gradus then flew to New Wye (the trains would be too slow), and as he came "nearer to us in space and time" than he was in earlier cantos, one could make out more of his details: his rumpled suit, hunched posture, poor complexion, and even—as "phantom-like, we pass through him"—the churning in his stomach. Gradus was soulless and he liked the importance of being assigned to kill someone. He might have even gotten a small, sensual, gross thrill from imagining the act. God made human beings so beautifully that rational inquiry into their motives can never explain why someone would be capable of murder. So, with Gradus, it seems that the plausible explanations for his actions are "human incompleteness" or madness.

As Kinbote describes Gradus, he asserts that "we" (presumably the readers) can "pass through him" like a ghost and see his stomach churning (his food poisoning, probably from the uncooked pork). This is perhaps an acknowledgement that Gradus doesn't have a real physical being—he's a novelistic figment, and therefore readers can literally see inside of him. This is more evidence for the strange notion that Gradus has been given life by Shade's poem alone. Kinbote's religious faith leads him to believe that human beings cannot rationally choose to do something as horrible as murder someone, so he concludes that Gradus is either not fully human ("human incompleteness") or he's mad. Certainly, "human incompleteness" is a fair explanation for Gradus, since he's not *human—he's Kinbote's delusion. Jack Grey, the man who actually does murder Shade, truly is mad.*

On the flight, Gradus's stomach was quite unsettled, and in a taxi to the Wordsmith campus he was so overtaken with misery that he had to use the bathroom immediately after getting out of the car. Even afterwards, as he walked through campus, his stomach continued to churn. Gradus asked someone at the library for Charles's address, but she only knew where Charles might be on campus, and Gradus got lost trying to follow her directions. When he returned to her desk, she looked up and noticed that Charles was passing by; Gradus saw Charles the Beloved disappear behind a bookshelf.

It's pathetic that Gradus, as he attempts to stalk his victim, is too overtaken by food poisoning to focus on his task and instead retires to the bathroom with diarrhea—Gradus essentially has no dignity left as he approaches the moment of truth. This shows how much Kinbote loathes Gradus, and it reflects Kinbote's profound hatred for all the people he sees as persecuting him and undermining his authority and not appreciating him. Instead of engaging with criticism and trying to do better, Kinbote delusionally reduces all his critics to a bumbling idiot assassin whose cause is wrongheaded and who humiliates himself at every turn.

After getting lost again, Gradus went to the bathroom and then returned to the library desk, where the woman told him that she just saw Charles leave. As Gradus looked through a directory for Charles's address, Gerald Emerald—who was checking out a bestseller—came up beside him and offered to drive him to Professor Kinbote's house. Gradus told Kinbote all this when Kinbote visited him in jail—quite a divergence from the story that the police spread, in which Jack Grey hitchhiked with a trucker from Roanoke.

In addition to mocking Gradus to get back at all his critics, Kinbote is relentlessly disparaging of Gerald Emerald (who is certainly quite mean to Kinbote)—here, he maliciously notes that Emerald is checking out a bestseller, which is supposed to make the English professor seem lowbrow and unqualified for his job. When Kinbote recounts the official police account of Shade's death, he's actually revealing what happened: Jack Grey broke out of an asylum and hitched a ride to New Wye with a trucker, not with Gerald Emerald. Kinbote is dismissive of this story, claiming that it's false, but readers can intuit that it's more plausible than what Kinbote himself claims.

Line 962: Help me, Will. Pale Fire. To paraphrase, this means that Shade is looking in Shakespeare for a phrase to use as a title, finding "pale fire." It's not clear where Shade got this, though—readers need to do their own research, because Kinbote only has his Zemblan edition of *Timon of Athens*, which doesn't have anything in it that could translate to "pale fire" (if it did, it would be unbelievably lucky).

By this point in the story, it should be clear that the Zemblan edition of Timon of Athens *is the one that King Charles stole from the closet in Zembla before he escaped, which he has since kept with him as a talisman. Kinbote is being obtuse here; it happens that the phrase "pale fire"* is *actually from Timon of Athens, and Kinbote previously translated in his Commentary the very passage from which the title comes without realizing that the phrase "pale fire" was there. This passage draws attention to the fact that Nabokov has written into the novel many extraordinary coincidences such as this one, which—for him—mirrors the way the universe seems (at least to a careful observer) to be patterned and designed.*

Conmal was the first to translate English works into Zemblan, but he was self-taught and he made mistakes. Part of this is because he lived more in the library than in the world—which Shade could also be guilty of. Only one person ever questioned whether Conmal's translations were good, and that academic lost his job. Conmal then wrote a sonnet in "colorful, if not quite correct" English to denounce the man, which included the line: "I am not slave! Let be my critic slave."

This passage intensifies the joke of the previous passage, in which Kinbote doesn't realize that he in fact does *have the Shakespeare book from which Shade's title comes. Since Conmal (the translator of Kinbote's Zemblan edition) obviously spoke such poor English, it's likely that Kinbote's translation of* Timon of Athens *is so full of errors and nonsense that it rendered the "pale fire" passage unrecognizable. Kinbote is not being self-aware when he accuses Shade of being more in the library than in the world—Shade in fact had an extraordinary understanding of the natural world around him and he was close with his family, while Kinbote lives inside his own delusions rather than engaging with the world. Conmal's garbled denunciation of his critic seems to subtly suggest that translators and critics are the slaves of the writers whose books they work with. This echoes one interpretation of the Shakespeare passage from which the phrase "pale fire" comes: that critics steal their pale fire from artists, who are the truly radiant ones.*


Line 991: horseshoes. It was never clear to Shade or to Kinbote which neighbor was playing horseshoes in the evenings, but they heard the clanging sound often. That sound was in the air on July 21st when Kinbote went to Shade's house to check in. Shade was on the porch, looking teary-eyed, and he pulled out an envelope with "practically the entire product"—his poem, which needed only "a few trifles to settle."

It's something of a mystery why Shade would have gotten up from his desk without jotting down the poem's final line, but if Kinbote's narration is correct, it seems that Shade really did see the poem as nearly finished at this point and did not intend to add much more. The sound of horseshoes in the air is meaningful—horseshoes are a symbol of luck, and an upside down horseshoe brings bad luck. The clanging sound of the horseshoes is sort of like a bell tolling—it prophetically fills the air with a sound that evokes Shade's imminent fate.

Kinbote suggested going to his house for dinner and wine, promising that if Shade showed him the poem, he'd reveal "who gave you your theme." Shade asked what theme, and Kinbote spoke of Zembla and the King's escape. Shade cut him off, saying he'd already guessed Kinbote's secret, but that he would love to have wine. Kinbote took the envelope from Shade as they walked across the road.

It's poignant that—in this moment before Shade's death, before Kinbote has read his poem—Kinbote still believes that he has inspired the poem and that it will be all about Zembla. Shade, meanwhile, has been so wrapped up in his work that he has clearly forgotten that Kinbote was tirelessly trying to feed him stories about Zembla for his poem. Here, Shade confirms what readers have long suspected: that he knew that Kinbote believes himself to be Charles the Beloved. He almost certainly humored this delusion out of kindness to his lonely neighbor.


As he held the poem, Kinbote reflected that people find language bizarrely normal—the "miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery…new worlds with live people." By making language banal, people "undo the work of ages," disregarding how "poetical description" developed from "the caveman to Keats." Kinbote asks what would happen if everyone woke up one day without being able to read—it's a miracle that anything is readable. Kinbote can imitate the prose of others quite well (but not poetry), but he isn't a real artist except for one thing: he does what only a "true artist" does in seeing the world anew as a web of things and seeing the components of that web. Carrying the poem, Kinbote felt just as amazed as he would if someone told him that fireflies were sending readable messages from "stranded spirits." He was "holding all Zembla" on his heart.

For a while in this passage, Kinbote really seems to get Shade's point. In "Pale Fire," Shade's poetry suggests something that Nabokov believed: that language itself is so miraculous and full of inexplicable patterns and coincidences that it seems to mirror the miracle of creation itself. Kinbote correctly marvels at the unlikely fact that anyone can read, write, or speak at all—that human consciousness can tie abstract sounds and symbols to objects and ideas in such a way that we can build whole societies and philosophies on them. Shade would see language as akin to life itself—something unbelievably strange and miraculous that people somehow still see as banal, but which should be evidence that the universe is much more marvelous and unexpected than human beings can ever know. He would agree that the mere fact of language existing is akin to learning that fireflies could relay messages from ghosts—if he were to dismiss the latter notion, it would be because it wasn't strange enough. *Furthermore, Shade would agree with Kinbote's conception of a "true artist" as someone who can see the truth about the miraculous nature of the world by understanding aspects of its structure that others don't see (Shade calls this a "web of sense" in "Pale Fire"). Despite Kinbote seeming for a moment to understand the major ideas of "Pale Fire" (even without having read it, strangely), he immediately pivots back to Zembla.*

Lines 993-995: A dark Vanessa, etc. Right before Shade died, as they crossed the road between his and Kinbote's house, a Red Admirable **butterfly** flitted between them in a "frightening imitation of conscious play" and landed on Shade's sleeve before disappearing into a bush.

The Red Admiral butterfly (also known as the Red Admirable butterfly or the Vanessa butterfly) is associated—particularly for Russians—with impending death (this is because the Red Admiral population was unusually large just before Tsar Alexander II was assassinated). In this light, this moment quite literally foretells the assassination that's about to happen when Jack Grey kills Shade. The notion that the butterfly is imitating "conscious play" is quite interesting—it suggests that the butterfly is behaving in a strangely humanlike manner, and it also evokes Shade's notion that human life is a game played by faraway players. Some scholars believe that the Vanessa butterfly is an embodiment of Hazel Shade's consciousness, and she is either warning her dad about what awaits him or merely trying to be with him in an important moment in his life. If this is the case, it explains why the butterfly is so humanlike in this moment.

Line 998: Some neighbor's gardener. It's weird that Shade is vague about this, since he often saw Kinbote's gardener. Kinbote must pay tribute to his gardener because he saved Kinbote's life. The gardener and Kinbote were the last two people to see Shade alive, and right before Shade died, the gardener had a premonition that made him walk towards Gradus on the porch.

The gardener did not save Kinbote's life—the bullets that struck Shade were never intended for Kinbote, despite his delusions about Gradus. Furthermore, Shade's reference to Kinbote as "some neighbor" emphasizes that they weren't very close at all, no matter what Kinbote wants to believe. The gardener walking towards Shade (out of a supernatural sense of something about to happen) in the moment before he dies is reminiscent of Shade's first experience of death, when he was playing with a toy gardener in the moment that he had his first seizure. This pattern of gardeners preceding experiences of death hints at Shade's ideas of a designed universe that people cannot comprehend.

Line 1000: [=Line 1: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain]. As Shade and Kinbote crossed the road, they noticed a visitor on Kinbote's porch who had just rung the bell. Quietly, Kinbote said he would kill the man, upset that this might delay his encounter with Shade's poem, and he rushed ahead of Shade towards the porch. Two bullets flew past Kinbote, but it's "evil piffle" to say that Gradus was aiming at Shade rather than Kinbote. No, he was aiming at Kinbote and missing—one of those bullets happened to hit Shade in the heart. Then, the gardener hit "gunman Jack" on the head with his spade.

At this point, Kinbote is commenting on a line of the poem that was never written—he's assuming that this would have been the final line, but Shade didn't actually write it. Nonetheless, there's a lot of resonance between the line (Shade declaring himself the "shadow of the waxwing slain") and what Kinbote is about to narrate (Shade's death). In describing the moment of Shade's death, Kinbote seems to protest too much—he emphasizes and re-emphasizes the possibility that the gunman wasn't aiming at him and then pushes that aside without evidence.

The poem was fine, but Shade was laying on the ground bleeding. Dazed, Gradus sat on the porch holding his bloody head. Kinbote ran inside and hid the poem in a closet before calling the police. Outside, Shade's open eyes pointed at the "sunny evening azure" while the gardener and Gradus smoked together, with Gradus totally ignoring Kinbote. When the police arrived, Gradus said his name was Jack Grey and he'd just escaped from an institution for the criminally insane.

Kinbote's concern here isn't that his supposedly close friend Shade has just been shot and appears to be dead—he is wholly focused on Shade's poem, which he hides in his house before he even calls the police. This is psychotic behavior. The use of the word "azure" to describe the sky towards which Shade's dead eyes are pointed evokes, of course, the "false azure" of the windowpane into which the waxwing flies in the poem's second line. Nabokov also uses the word "azure" to describe the lights outside the bar when Hazel leaves her blind date for the lake where she drowns, so "azure" in this book is irrevocably associated with death. That Gradus completely ignores Kinbote after killing Shade suggests that he was never after Kinbote at all—he believes that he has killed his target (since he mistook Shade for Judge Goldsworth), so he sits and smokes and waits for the police. Kinbote's belief that he was the target of an assassination attempt defies all evidence.

Later that night, Kinbote was able to read "Pale Fire," and the reader knows the disappointment that awaited him. Kinbote didn't expect that the *whole* poem would be about Zembla, but he was sure that at least some of his stories would make it in—when he realized that "Pale Fire" was an autobiographical narrative without the wild magic of Zembla, he was anguished. However, after calming down and re-reading the poem, Kinbote found in it—especially in the drafts—the "echoes and spangles of [Kinbote's] mind, a long ripplewake of [his] glory."

Throughout the three weeks of Shade's writing "Pale Fire," Kinbote believed—despite evidence to the contrary—that Shade was writing his poem about Zembla. Here, he recounts his disappointment at finally reading the poem and learning that it was actually an autobiographical poem about Shade himself. Of course, Kinbote struggles to accept difficult realities, so it makes sense that his delusions soon took back over. In re-reading "Pale Fire," he invented drafts that pointed more explicitly to Zembla and figured out ways to read Zembla into the final copy: as he has done throughout the Commentary, Kinbote interprets even fairly straightforward passages about Shade's life as coded references to Zembla or uncanny prophecies of the moment when his life would intersect with a Zemblan assassin. Kinbote's megalomania is on display in his insistence that the poem be about him, and also in his notion that the poem reflects his "glory" by showing "echoes" of his own mind—as though "Pale Fire" could not be great without Kinbote's "contribution."

The Commentary to "Pale Fire" has tried to reveal those "wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me." Kinbote has tried not to be vindictive, despite everything that reporters and Shade's so-called friends made up about his death. These people will surely question much of this material; Sybil likely won't remember having seen some of the drafts, and the woman at the library desk will have been instructed not to remember Gradus asking for Kinbote's address.

Kinbote is incredibly conspiratorial here. He is pre-emptively suggesting that the reason that nobody will corroborate his invented draft variants or his story about Shade's death is that everyone is working together to thwart him and he is persevering heroically in spite of this—in fact, the reason that nobody believes his story about Shade's death is that it's untrue, and people will attack his Commentary because it is abysmally poor scholarship, not because people are unfairly trying to impugn Kinbote's genius. Kinbote claims that the poem reflects the "pale phosphorescent hints" of Kinbote's "fire," suggesting that Kinbote himself was the sun—the brilliant, original, burning presence—whereas the poem is merely the moon, stealing its own luster from Kinbote. Obviously this is a play on the title "Pale Fire" and the Shakespeare passage from which it comes.

Still, Kinbote has had a "little revenge," since his gardener skewed the story of Shade's death a bit and told Sybil that Kinbote threw himself in front of the gunman's bullets. This attempt to save Shade moved Sybil, and she told Kinbote that nothing could ever repay him, who countered that something could: she could give him permission to edit and publish "Pale Fire." The very next day, she signed a contract that Kinbote's lawyer drew up.

Recall that, in the Foreword, Kinbote alluded to his peers finding the contract that Sybil signed to be evil. He dismissed those criticisms then, but now—seeing the full context—it's difficult to believe anything else. Kinbote manipulated a grieving widow within 24 hours of her husband's death into signing over the complete rights to his final poem based on a lie that Kinbote tried to save Shade. In fact, Kinbote left Shade's body on the pavement while he went into the house to hide the manuscript of "Pale Fire" and he only called the police after the manuscript was stashed in a closet—he didn't care about Shade at all in that moment, only the poem (which Kinbote cared about because he thought it was about himself*).*

It was so difficult for Kinbote to make people see that he was not an accidental witness to a tragedy, but its "protagonist" and intended victim. This "hullabaloo" made it necessary for Kinbote to escape New Wye to the cabin where he is currently writing, but before leaving town, he did interview Gradus (perhaps even twice) in prison. Kinbote claimed that he could testify at trial to help Gradus, which made Gradus confess to posing as Jack Grey, an escaped lunatic who mistook Shade for the judge who sentenced him. Soon after, Gradus took his own life, unable to live with himself after killing the wrong person.

Kinbote seeing himself as the "protagonist" of Shade's death is obviously an example of how unpleasant his megalomania is. While Kinbote doesn't specify what the "hullabaloo" that made him leave New Wye was, readers can infer that Kinbote's reaction to Shade's death (including his horrific manipulation of Sybil in getting her to sign the contract turning over the rights to "Pale Fire") was likely so distasteful for the community to witness that they drove him out of town. It's not clear what the truth is about Kinbote's interviews of Gradus—his uncertainty over whether he interviewed Gradus once or twice in prison suggests that he may never have interviewed Gradus at all. If he did an interview, though, it's not hard to imagine Kinbote manipulating Jack Grey by saying (as Kinbote himself suggests here) that he could get the man out of prison as long as he parroted Kinbote's harebrained story. Of course, it's quite clear that Jack Grey's story is more plausible—he was an escapee from an asylum who murdered Shade accidentally while trying to murder Judge Goldsworth as revenge for sentencing him.

Kinbote will stop there, since his "notes and self are petering out." Moving forward, he hopes that God will prevent him from "follow[ing] the example of two other characters in this work." Instead, he will wear different disguises. He might surface on a different campus as a happy, heterosexual Russian writer in exile who has nothing—no fame, future, or audience—except his art. He might work with Odon on a movie about escaping Zembla, or pander to middlebrow theater critics by writing a melodrama about a lunatic trying to kill an "imaginary king," a different lunatic who believes himself to be that king, and a famous poet who dies in "the clash between these two figments." No matter what happens, though, someone will be coming for him—a more effective version of Gradus.

This passage strongly hints that Kinbote is about to kill himself. First, he says that his "self" is "petering out" alongside his notes—this suggests that, as he has no more work to do on his Commentary, he has lost his will to live. Second, he's clearly in danger of following "the example of two other characters in this work," which refers to Hazel Shade and Gradus, both of whom died by suicide. Third, when he notes that no matter where he is or what he does, a more effective Gradus will be pursuing him, he's suggesting that he cannot escape his own internal assassins—assassins that he's already suggested can only be thwarted via self-destruction. When Kinbote imagines alternative futures for himself, one of them looks remarkably like Nabokov himself: the happy, heterosexual Russian writer and professor with no literary reputation. When Nabokov immigrated to the United States, his published works (written in Russian) were unknown there, so he had to rebuild his reputation entirely while he taught at American colleges and wrote novels in English in his spare time. That Nabokov insinuates himself into Kinbote's story as a possible alternate identity adds another layer of confusion, suggesting that perhaps Nabokov is an invention of Kinbote's rather than the other way around.

INDEX

The index is an alphabetized list of topics referenced in the Foreword, poem, and Commentary. Mostly, the index lists Zemblan people, words, and places—but it also has entries for Kinbote, each member of the Shade family, and V. Botkin, the Russian scholar at Wordsmith. Hazel Shade's entry notes that she "preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life." In the entry for "variants," Kinbote notes that several of the referenced drafts are "K's contribution," and the entry for "waxwing" notes the "Bombycilla shadei."

This index is (like much of the commentary) a sort of joke—instead of indexing the content and references of the poem "Pale Fire" (which Kinbote is supposed to be interpreting), this index is eclectic and self-centered, almost entirely concerned with Kinbote's own stories about Zembla. In other words, he has completely abandoned his duties as a scholar, focusing instead on himself (not a surprise, of course, considering the Commentary). Nabokov has hidden a few really important things in this index, the most important of which is a major clue to Kinbote's identity. The only non-Zemblan people with index entries are the Shade family and Professor V. Botkin—the fact that Botkin (barely mentioned in the Commentary) rates an entry at all suggests what a careful reader might already have suspected, that the book's narrator is not the exiled King of Zembla who is disguised as Kinbote. In fact, the narrator is the insane professor Botkin, a Russian immigrant to America; both Kinbote and Charles the Beloved are Botkin's delusions. Another important revelation in the index is Kinbote's explicit confession that some of the draft variants that he quoted and attributed to Shade in the Commentary are actually Kinbote's own writing—presumably he wrote the references to Zembla that he wished he'd found in the poem, conveniently giving himself an excuse to digress in the Commentary about his Zemblan delusions. Kinbote's praise of Hazel Shade's suicide hints at his own fate. Finally, the reminder that Shade's father had a type of waxwing named after him (the Bombycilla shadei) draws the reader's attention to the first line of "Pale Fire," showing that Shade was not merely referencing a dead bird, but also his dead father. The index contains many other jokes and pieces of trivia, including a suggestion that the crown jewels are hidden at an old Zemblan resort called Kobaltana.

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