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Pale Fire

by

Vladimir Nabokov

1962



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Set largely in 1959, the story takes place in a variety of locations, mostly fictional but representative of real places. The main action takes place in "Appalachia," a town in the northeastern United States, roughly where the actual Appalachian Mountains come to their northernmost point. The town in the story is a college town, and some of the action takes place at the private liberal arts college where the two main.....

FORM OF THE BOOK

The form of *Pale Fire* is totally unconventional. The book is really intended to be an explication of a poem, divided into three sections: Charles' "Forward"; "Pale Fire", the poem by John Shade; and Charles' extensive notes on the poem's themes and content. These three are not necessarily in order, and the reader is constantly asked to skip around in the text to gain further background or to add another layer to.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Charles Kinbote - the first person narrator of the story. He begins by telling of his recent life and interests, particularly his connection with his favorite poet, John Shade. In his early forties, Charles quickly reveals himself to be a "character." It becomes clear that he is thinly disguising himself from total recognition as the last king of Zembla. He is really Charles, the Beloved, recently overthrown and hiding out in the U.S. He is flamboyant, raucously emotional, homosexual, self-absorbed and wickedly funny. Although he..... is

John Shade - a famous poet, well known in the U.S. and Zembla. Like Charles, he teaches at a small liberal arts college in Appalachia. In July of 1959, a couple of weeks before he is shot, Shade celebrates his 60th birthday. He has a wife, Sybil, whom he extols in his final poem as the light of his life. They also had

Sybil Shade - John Shade's wife. A specimen of the typical 1950s wife, she is protective and devoted. She belongs to a few social clubs, drives her husband to

Gradus (or *Jack Grey, Jacques d'Argus, Vinogradus, etc.*) - the Zemblan extremist who is sent to kill Charles Kinbote, but who shoots John Shade instead. Gradus is pictured as a lower.....

Minor Characters

Hazel Shade - John and Sybil's daughter. Unattractive from birth, Hazel never overcame her parents' shame. Although she is smart, she is a pathetic figure, particularly in the eyes of her father; he.....

Disa - wife of Charles, the Beloved. Disa is a Zemblan Noblewoman with some Russian heritage as well. She is quite young when she marries Charles, and it takes her a while to figure out that the reason.....

Odon (*Donald O'Donnell*) - Charles' Zemblan friend who helps him escape. Odon is a loyalist who.....

The Gardener - Charles' gardener in Appalachia. He is a young African-American man whom Charles "finds" by the side of the road. The gardener is the only other witness to John Shade's death and later.....

CONFLICT

The form and plot of *Pale Fire* is totally unconventional. The book's most central question addresses the ridiculous nature of Charles Kinbote's life and scholarship and its intersection with the life and work of poor John Shade, a poet and Charles' neighbor and fellow teacher at a private liberal arts college. As a result, the book is best viewed as two separate conflicts with Charles the protagonist of one and.....

Charles' Conflict:

Protagonist - Charles Kinbote is the main character and narrator of the book. A professor at a small, private

liberal arts college, he is a ridiculous figure and a comic pain in the neck. The story is.....

Antagonist - Charles' antagonist is clearly himself. He is a bumbling idiot who unsuccessfully tries to find some meaning for his life after being overthrown as King of Zembla. He is so self-deluded that

Climax - Charles goes into hiding in Cedarn, Utana after John Shade is.....

Outcome - The book ends in tragedy for Charles. Despite his desperate attempts to....

Shade's Conflict:

Protagonist - John Shade is a professor at the same college where Charles Kinbote teaches; he is also Charles' neighbor in the book. Most importantly, however, John is a poet who

Antagonist - Through much of the book, Charles is John's main antagonist, as he.....

Climax - John's climax occurs with his death. Although Charles, as the narrator, reveals

Outcome - The book ends in tragedy for John Shade. Not only has he been mistakenly.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Forward

Charles Kinbote writes a forward to the long poem, "Pale Fire," by John Shade. In the forward, he explains not only how he came to be the editor of the poet's final poem, but how he came to know John Shade. Charles, in rather odd style, makes many references to himself, his living situation, the trouble he has had over his "rights" to the poem, his terrible relationship with the poet's wife, his teaching position at the same small private college where Shade teaches, his affection for his male students, and his vegetarianism. He mentions Zembla, a small country in Europe from which he is presently exiled. He also mentions that his native country has recently suffered an extremist revolution, and the king (also named Charles, "Charles the Beloved") has been deposed and is currently in hiding. Charles then describes a photo of himself and Shade, extols the virtues of their friendship, takes another stab at Mrs. Shade, and then suggests that the reader peruse the notes before and after the poem, and maybe during, or maybe the reader should buy two books and then cut and paste. He finally notes that, after all, it is the commentator who gets the last word.

"Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos"

John Shade's poem begins with his early life, imagining himself the shadow of a dead bird, killed by crashing into a window. His ornithologist parents are dead, and he is raised by a nutty aunt. A clumsy boy, Shade is.....

THEMES

Major Themes

Pale Fire is a complicated, layered meta-fictional text. It is difficult to understand all the points that Nabokov might have wanted to get across to his reader. He wrote the book, along with *Lolita*, after coming to the U.S. in the fifties and teaching at a small eastern private college. As a result of his experiences, *Pale Fire* is a spoof -- a wry look at scholarship, American academics, and small eastern private colleges. The book also.....

Minor Themes

Nabokov also pokes fun of contemporary American poetry. John Shade writes very much in the 20th century American tradition of the personal and confessional poet, loosely interested in form. His poem is an.....

MOOD

Overall, the mood of *Pale Fire* is negative, due to the constant reminder of couples who do not reproduce or do it badly, the dry political systems, the failure of the academic community, the

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Nabokov was born in 1899 in St. Petersburg, Russia, to a Russian statesman and his wife. Having worked for liberal reforms and against the Tsarist government, Vladimir's father found himself in and out of favor with a number of competing political interests leading up to the Russian Revolution. Vladimir himself, at age 16, inherited his uncle's large estate, but the entire family was forced to leave their wealth behind when fleeing the Bolsheviks in 1919. They went to England, where Vladimir attended Cambridge and studied.....

LITERARY - HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Some of Nabokov's books have been quite controversial. His sense of humor is sometimes misunderstood and often criticized. His characters are often "wacky," frequently "deeply disturbed." He investigates the minds of people who live on the edge. Nabokov's subject matter has also been considered daring. *Lolita* develops the sexual relationship between a step father and his step daughter; it is still banned from several libraries in the United States.

Pale Fire is a period piece, depicting a particular view of middle America in mid-century. By placing a deposed "European king" in upper-middle-class New England, he has a chance to expose the quiet.....

SECTION SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

SECTION ONE

"Foreword"

Summary

In this short introduction (twelve pages), Charles Kinbote writes directly to the reader about the poem he is about to annotate, the last long poem by his favorite poet and good friend, John Shade. He explains that the poem is written in heroic couplets, nine-hundred and ninety-nine lines, in four Cantos. The poem is not entirely finished, for the last line is missing; but Charles believes that the missing last line is merely supposed to be a repeat of the first line: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain."

The entire poem was written in the month of July, 1959 and exists on eighty index cards, carefully organized by the poet before his untimely death. Charles describes the qualities of each canto, mentions the existence of alternate sections (pieces the poet had not quite discarded), and complains about the amusement park next door that is very loud. Charles then describes the fight over the publishing rights to the poem. Shade's wife, Sybil, is very angry that Charles is editing the poem; but he defends his own right to be the one to do the commentary. After all, he had Sybil Shade sign an agreement immediately after John's death, giving him the right to edit the manuscript. Charles feels that Sybil's concern is misguided and misled by other would-be editors. He knows that she does not care for him; neither did she under his friendship with Shade, which was brief, but deep. Even though other people may try to defame his effort, Charles considers his attachment to this masterpiece "overwhelming."

Charles explains that he is from a place called "Zembla," which he left due to political unrest. Settling in the United States, he becomes a temporary professor at Wordsmith College, where Shade also teaches. He describes his first meeting with the poet at a faculty club lunch. Charles tells that he offered Shade a ride home from school a few days after the lunch, and when Charles stops to buy caviar and cookies, John sneaks off to buy some alcohol. When they arrive home, Sybil asks Charles to have a drink with her, because John is not allowed to touch alcohol. Charles declines and says he is expecting some boys over at his house, for a "little seminar" and some table tennis.

Charles also describes the house he rented, next door to the Shades. It is a cold and drafty place, especially since the winter is the worst in years. He admits that he often watches Shade's house, staring through their windows to observe what is going on. He also states that he is a vegetarian, cooks his own meals, enjoys his young male students, and keeps two ping-pong tables in his basement.

Sybil frowned upon Charles' attentions towards her husband, and it's clear that Charles and Sybil were not friends. Certainly, all John Shade's friends were envious of the friendship between Charles and John!

Charles discovers that other professors at the college ridicule him. He thinks they are jealous of him because of his friendship with Shade. He also scorns their pettiness and zeal for stupidly mundane academics. Charles also admits that the students get their digs in, too, portraying him in a school skit as a woman-hater with a German accent. Charles was even called in by the department head because of a student complaint.

It is obvious that Charles is attracted to Shade and other men. Charles expresses his wonder at his divine friendship with Shade, the marvelous and magical poet. When he looks at Shade, he perceives him transforming the world in wonderful poetic order; he considers Shade an organic miracle at work. He carefully describes the poet's physical appearance, his awkward, but adorable gait, his gray hair, and his stooped shoulders. Charles lauds Shade's imperfections and poetically states: "He was his own cancellation." He treasures the picture of Shade and himself, taken by a young man staying with him. He remembers how the young man had taken advantage of him, bringing a red-haired whore to the house. Charles could not forgive the treason.

Charles next asks the reader to turn to the poem. He states that his extensive notes on the poem should satisfy any curious reader. Charles suggests reading the notes first, then reading the poem. He even suggests buying two copies of the book, in order to cut the notes and paste them in the appropriate place in the poem. Such cutting and pasting would prevent the reader from having to flip back and forth between the notes and the poem. Finally, he states that the poem has no "human reality" without his notes. It is too big to contain a single life, and too much has been carelessly thrown out. Charles claims that he, the commentator, has the last word anyway.

Notes

The Foreword gives the reader a taste of the bizarre writing style of the narrator, Charles Kinbote. As the exclusive editor of Shade's poem, "Pale Fire," he uses his commentary to tell about himself more than to analyze the poem. Since most of the book is Charles' editorial notes, all of his weird comments and mis-typings are included, as well as his endless asides about boys, ping-pong, and Zemblan life. Amidst the ramblings of Charles, the reader is able to obtain the general gist of what has happened: Shade, Charles' favorite poet and friend, has been recently killed. His last poem, "Pale Fire," is being edited by Charles. Charles reveals that many people object to his editorial comments. Sybil Shade, the poet's wife, is particularly angry about his handling of the poem. She believes that Charles has stolen the poem, which he essentially did, even though he claims a right to it. The entire poem is to be presented after the foreword to the book.

During the foreword, Charles give small hints that he may be Charles the Beloved, the deposed King of Zembla. He also alludes to the fact that he is a homosexual. More importantly, during the foreword, Charles makes it clear that he is an amusing character although he seems a bit crazy. It becomes obvious that he is to be a naive narrator who does not always present the whole truth (or possibly no truth). It is always necessary to read through his claims and complaints and to understand that he is usually not "on target". Although he is editing "Pale Fire," he has really "stolen" the poem in order to tell his own story. In fact, the "Foreword" is a genius piece of writing, a perfect take-off on academic forwards that use lofty language to.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Charles Xavier Kinbote (*Charles II, Charles the Beloved, Charles Xavier Vseslav*) - Charles is one of the marvelous characters of twentieth century literature. By the end of *Pale Fire*, the reader has been led to doubt his sanity and even his identity; but his sense of humor, his wild stories, his droll delivery, and his bizarre phrasings make him very memorable. If any epitaph is fitting for this character, it is that "madmen are poets."

During the time Charles Kinbote gets to know John Shade, they are both teaching at a small liberal arts college, and Charles is only there for a semester. He has rented a house next door to the Shades.....

John Shade - John Shade is an American poet whose work is not particularly good, even though Charles Kinbote judges it as marvelous. He is a literature professor at Wordsmith College, where Charles also teaches for awhile. He is married to Sybil, whom Charles judges as mean and cruel; Shade, however, praises her profusely in his poem. Shade's life is not particularly eventful, and he has a wry way of.....

Sybil Shade - Being a nemesis to Charles and having a husband who is pursued by him seems to be Sybil's main purpose in the book. As a wife, she is the perfect picture of the faculty spouse who dabbles in scholarship herself; she also is very protective of her husband, trying to keep him in line at every.....

Gradus (Jack Grey) - According to Charles, Gradus is an extremist Zemblan who has been ordered to kill the deposed king. Of course, it is never clear in the book if Gradus, like King Charles, is a real person

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In no way is *Pale Fire* a standard novel, nor does it conform to the standard unities of character, plot, time, and place. It is loosely held together as a supposed "scholarly text" with a Forward, Text (the actual poem), Commentary (written by Charles Kinbote), and Index. It never follows a chronological order, for Charles Kinbote, who serves as the narrator, constantly interrupts himself to give flashbacks

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Social satire is evident throughout *Pale Fire*. Set in the United States in the late 1950s, the book satirizes the social and political state of the country, as seen through the eyes of an educated European. It also takes aim at Communism, which was frightening Americans and Europeans alike in the fifties. Nabokov pokes fun at royalty, too, suggesting that royal families are good-timers and flakes who are unable to govern a country. Finally, he pokes fun at false scholarship, the American academic community, the caliber of most.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the two plots that occur in the book. Why do both plots end in tragedy?
 2. Is Charles nothing more than an impostor? Fully support your opinion with details from the book.
- What opinion does Nabokov, a true poet, have of American poetry? Specifically explain how this brought out in the book.....

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