Hunter Black

Dr. Johnson

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Analysis of *Pale Fire*

Metafiction as a concept can be hard to fully pin down, especially considering the multiple different aspects that can be attributed to metafiction itself. One aspect of metafiction that can be applied to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is the concept of uncertain reality. The confusing nature of the interactions of Charles Kinbote in the commentary of *Pale Fire* with the author John Shade and the Zemblan King Charles Xavier, all of whom are fictional characters conjured by Nabokov, draw severe attention to the concept of what is reality and what is fiction in the setting of this novel, particularly when examining Kinbote’s psychological patterns in his interactions with the other characters of this work. These interactions, cleverly seen solely through the eyes of Kinbote, are as far as the reader is concerned 100 percent true, and yet when further analysis is applied it becomes unclear whether what Kinbote is conveying with his commentary and what actually happened are one and the same. This uncertainty of what is real and what isn’t throughout the interactions of the narrator with the other characters is a definitive reason as to why *Pale Fire* is a work of metafiction.

Early on in the foreword of *Pale Fire*, it becomes clear to the reader that the narrator, Kinbote, is either very unaware of normal social cues or is somewhat psychologically unhinged. This is seen through his unusual way of writing both in past tense regarding his history and unhealthy obsession with the author of the supposed subject of the book John Shade, and in present tense regarding the room he is writing this foreword in. If conventions are followed, and it is assumed that Kinbote is a renowned scholar in literature, it comes across as very odd that this would occur. The pervasiveness of the current reality mixing in with the past is something that would normally not occur in any scholarly writing, which this is assumed to be. Thus Kinbote, either knowingly or unknowingly, sets the stage for himself being viewed as someone who might not be completely mentally sound. Additionally, this in-and-out from past to present progresses as the foreword itself progresses, first showing up on the very first page of the novel when Kinbote informs the reader that “there is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings” (13). Not only by appearing do these interjections draw attention to the ridiculousness of what he is writing, but also plants the first seed of something being off with Kinbote. This outside ‘interference’ appears again near the end of the foreword when Kinbote interjects his deplorable lodgings (and again the amusement park’s noise) into his description of how the reader should approach reading the poem *Pale Fire*. Again, not only does Nabokov poke at the idea of Kinbote’s mental instability (or an extreme case of ADD), he also pokes fun at the reader of this, and any, fictional work in saying that when analyzing a piece of fiction, it would behoove the reader to “purchase two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent positions on a comfortable table” (28).

Kinbote’s psychosis is drawn into question again in the commentary, where the true nature of his obsession with Shade becomes apparent. This is also where the convolution of characters starts to set in when Kinbote starts to interpret Shade’s poem as an analogy of the life of King Charles of Zembla, an analogy that seems incredibly forced from the get-go. As the commentary progresses, it becomes more and more obvious that Kinbote is grasping at straws (or at least to the reader it appears this way) as to the connection between King Charles and *Pale Fire*. Again, Zembla appears in the comment to line 29, line 42, line 49, and so on and so on, occurring with greater frequency as the commentary progresses. Around the middle section of the commentary is when the reader starts to suspect that the characters in Kinbote’s recollection of the history of Zembla have more to them than would originally appear. For example, in the comment to line 286, It is revealed that King Charles’s last name is Xavier, which happens to be Kinbote’s middle name. Additionally, Kinbote’s first name is also shared with the ‘king’, which was discovered very early on but is not as incriminating as both Charles and Xavier being a part of the narrator’s name. With this revelation and from this point forward in the commentary, Kinbote and Charles become more and more similar in demeanor. At the end of the commentary the reader discovers outright that Kinbote and Charles are indeed one and the same, something that was only alluded at up to that point. However, the very last paragraph of, a thought process of Kinbote’s on what he will do now that he has finished his ‘editing’ of *Pale Fire* brings to light the fact that perhaps Nabokov (through Kinbote) is telling the reader that Kinbote does indeed know that everything that he is saying sounds incredibly strange and unbelievable by interjecting that he may “pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire” (301). At first glance, this line causes a double take because it describes the past 200 pages of commentary. It is a definite proof of the fact that some if not all of what Kinbote has described could or could not be made up in his mentally unstable mind.

The clear example of just how unstable Kinbote is shines through in his pseudo-interactions with Shade. Kinbote exhibits a stalker-like behavior towards the poet, spying on his life through his own window in what is definitely considered in the modern sense to be the sign of a psychopath. Even when Kinbote is simply speaking with Shade, his thoughts are consumed with what he perceives as a clear Zemblan epic being composed by the man he idolizes. All of these fantasies Kinbote has of Shade’s poem being essentially a biography of his own life and not the author's life as is perceived by everyone else further show how unstable Kinbote is. All of these examples of Kinbote’s mind being unsettled pose the question to the reader of whether or not everything Kinbote has said throughout the entire commentary is the truth, or simply a figment of his imagination.

Upon reaching this conclusion, the metafictional aspect of *Pale Fire* the novel becomes clear if it is compared against Patricia Waugh’s feature of metafiction: “A pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality”. This attribute of metafiction can not only be contributed to Kinbote’s words possibly being made up, but also to the multiple outside references made in the novel. For example, the poem mentions on line 680 the name Lolita, which is the title of another novel by Nabokov. This *Inception-esque* reference of a fictional work by the same author in another novel by that author which contains a fictional poet who writes a fictional poem and has a fictional narrator commentate it is, as a whole, the perfect example of why this novel is a work of metafiction.