**JACOB MOOSE American Lit Final Exam Notes**

**Slide 1:** [*Pale Fire* and Early Postmodernism]. Thank you, I will be presenting on Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*.

**Slide 2:** In this presentation, I would like to focus on the following three questions: 1.) Is *Pale Fire* postmodernist fiction?; 2.) What are some ways *Pale Fire* distinguishes itself from “exhausted” literature?; and 3.) Can *Pale Fire* be linked to historiographic metafiction via autobiographic metafiction?

**Slide 3:** One. Is *Pale Fire* Postmodernist fiction?

**Slide 4:** To begin, I return to our first session and Brian McHale’s theory on the distinction between Modernist and Postmodernist fiction – mainly,

**Slide 5**: that the two fictions each revolve around a different type of uncertainty or doubt marked by a shift from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being.*

**Slide 6:** In other words, epistemological versus ontological concerns.

**Slide 7:** While modernist texts primarily question the dynamics of “the mind-in-the world,” asking how can *the* world be interpreted – What is there to be known? Who knows it? And with what degree of certainty? –

**Slide 8:** postmodernist texts primarily interrogate the “world-in-the mind” and ask are there different kinds of worlds? – how are these world constituted? How do they differ?

**Slide 9:** So then, which of these concerns is central to *Pale Fire*?

**Slide 10:** Perhaps the most notable feature about *Pale Fire* is the sheer non-decisiveness surrounding how the novel can be read. Unreliable narration has been pushed to such an extreme that readers have been stuck between many different approaches, including the following four: **(Read from PowerPoint)**

**Slide 11:** With these approaches in mind, it turns out then that our question is somewhat of a trick question. As McHale notes, readers can respond to the uncertainties of the novel from both epistemological and ontological frameworks.

**Slide 12:** For example, when we look back at our four approaches and pay special attention to the Kingdom of Zembla, the first and second approach primarily revolve around epistemological concerns – we can assume Zembla naturally exists, but question its relationship to “Pale Fire” and Kinbote’s commentary. In the third and fourth approach, however, the existence of Zembla is problematized and we doubt whether it is an actual “real” world or not.

**Slide 13:** A similar dilemma occurs in our reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49.* As McHale notes, Oedipa questions her own knowledge and interpretation of the world, but slowly begins to wonder whether another world (the Tristero) exists (the climax of this question being visible in the final page of the novel when she awaits the crying of Lot 49). Importantly, Oedipa’s concern simultaneously reflects the same dilemma the reader faces: we too are unsure if Oedipa is delusional or if the Tristero actually exists.

**Slide 14:** In both Kinbote’s story and Oedipa’s we are left with a big fat question mark and do not have a sense of closure to the ontological doubts that are raised. Though McHale sees the epistemological uncertainties as too dominant for these texts to be strictly considered postmodernist ones (instead defining them under “limit” or late modernism that occurs before the real breakthrough of novels such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*), there *is* a clear shift from problems of knowing to problems of being that define, in part, the Postmodernist movement.

**Slide 15:** Moving then to my second question, What are some ways *Pale Fire* distinguishes itself from “exhausted” literature?

**Slide 16:** According to John Barth’s essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Vladimir Nabokov is a key representative of the technically up-to-date artist. In Barth’s words, this means Nabokov responded to an age of “*felt* ultimacies” – the death of God, the Death of the Novel, etc. – in ways that “[spoke] eloquently and memorably to our human hearts and conditions.” But how exactly is his “up-to-date-ness” used to create such memorable feeling? The answer: by using his knowledge of literary history (19th and early 20th century) with an awareness of the exhausted state of these literatures. From such a position, Nabokov is able to employ the very same ultimacies he is faced with in ironic and playful ways. This results in a sense of originality that is reinvigorating.

**Slide 17:** With this in mind, *Pale Fire* cannot simply be seen as a satire of academic criticism, though Nabokov is certainly playing with this idea and using his own work as a means to do so (such as his massive four volume Introduction, Translation, Commentary, and Index on Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* which was heavily worked on between 1949-1957). On a more intellectual level, *Pale Fire* employs or imitates a conventional form of poetry and its commentary but in ironic ways – As Barth says, [it is] a fine novel by a learned pedant, in the form of pedantic commentary on a poem invented for the purpose.” In other words, a novel written by a “real” scholar (Nabokov), but ironically in the form of a character’s pedantic commentary on a poem that has been invented for that very commentary. Such irony encourages an active participation with literature.

**Slide 18:** The last point I would like to make on *Pale Fire*’s relationship to exhausted literature is its use of textual labyrinths. Barth and Borges both use labyrinths in their stories, and the labyrinth acts as an ironic image of exhaustion; all possibilities most be explored before the “heart” of the maze can be reached. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov essentially employs the image of the labyrinth in the textual entanglement of the book. Kinbote’s own obsessive tendency to cross-reference Commentary, the Foreword, and the Poem throughout different sections of the book make the reader lost in its maze, forced to attempt and ‘exhaust’ its possibilities. In the face of this though, Nabokov ironically has, like Borges and Theseus, bypassed the possibilities through imitation and irony.

**Slide 19:** The last question I would like to ask is whether or not *Pale Fire* canbe linked to historiographic metafiction via autobiographic metafiction.

**Slide 20:** Metafiction refers to the way a text self-reflexively or self-consciously draws attention to its own fictionality and, in the process, draws attention to “the fictious aspects of our own existence” (Barth 73). In other words, it complicates the relationship between what is fiction and what is reality in both the world and the text. Branching off of this, Historiographic Metafiction specifically draws attention to the degree of fictionality in “history.” There is not objective or even neutral understanding of a singular “History”, but rather a new emphasis is put on Histories (in the plural).

**Slide 21:** Critics such as Max Saunders have approached Historiographic Metafiction based on its relationship to developments in studies on autobiography. Discussing the idea of Autobiografiction, which refers to the act of reading autobiography as fiction, Max Saunders looks at the autobiographical tellings of Shade and Kinbote in *Pale Fire.* Throughout “Pale Fire” the poem, Shade tells about his journey with his daughter’s death, while Kinbote, in the commentary, focuses on his alleged journey to Zembla. But both of these can be seen as autobiographies, though they may be “fictionalized” by the characters themselves. Thus the potential fictionalization of their stories within the framework of a fiction novel (*Pale Fire*)complicates the relationship between fiction and reality 🡪 autobiography, biography, and fiction exist in a nonobjective, complex relationship to each other and begs the question Are there objective selves? Are there ways to write objectively about oneself or others? Does all autobiography involve some play of fiction?

**Slide 22:** This then leads to Saunders point. He writes, “Auto/biografiction can be understood as a strand of what Linda Hutcheon defines as ‘Historiographic metafiction’, focusing on the representations of individual life-stories rather than on representations of historical crises or trauma. […] Where historiographic metafiction represents a Postmodernizing of the historical novel, auto/biographic meta-fiction represents a Postmodernizing of auto-biography. Just as Ishmael Reed disallows an objective singular history of Haiti, the autobiographies of Shade and Kinbote draw attention to the multiple perspectives available and the fictionalization of the self.