

Sam Healey

Professor James Donelan

Introduction to Literary Theory

18 March 2024

The “Magical Closet” Of Zembla: Power and Sexuality in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is indisputably one of the greatest works of literature to emerge from the 20th century canon, a postmodernist masterpiece with a notoriously experimental format revolving around a 999 line poem, also entitled “Pale Fire,” by the esteemed poet and scholar John Shade. The structure of the novel is thus: a foreword, by one Charles Kinbote, who explains his friendship with the now-deceased Shade and how he came into possession of the “Pale Fire” manuscript; the poem itself, one line incomplete, and likely due for further revision; the commentary by Kinbote, which comprises the bulk of the novel; and a concluding index. Kinbote provides the commentary purportedly for the reader to gain further insight into the poem “Pale Fire,” which in content is Shade’s elegy to his own daughter, who died from a suicide; however, Kinbote blatantly misconstrues this as the story of Zembla, the imaginary nation he once ruled as monarch of, and packs the notes with tales of his childhood, kingship, and exile, as well as the Zemblan Revolution, and the origins of Gradus, the assassin allegedly out to kill him. Woven throughout Kinbote’s fabricated reality is the undercurrent of his own homosexuality, which Nabokov establishes as a critical component of the character’s narcissism. Indeed, sexuality, whether included in, or excluded by, the heteronormative sphere, functions as a key to understanding the power dynamics of *Pale Fire*: characters exhibit their sexuality to varying degrees as a reflection of the power that they wield within the novel,

allowing for Kinbote's Zembla to function as a "magical closet" in which he can express his homosexuality. Given the multiple interpretations of *Pale Fire* within its body of scholarship, chief among them the Shadeans and the Kinboteans, who hold that only one of the two characters are real, this paper will operate under two basic assumptions: that both John Shade and Charles Kinbote exist, and that Zembla, whether real or not, is real in Kinbote's mind.

Charles Kinbote expresses his sexuality with much inhibition in America, reflecting the lack of power afforded to him within his social sphere. As a homosexual during the 1960s, he is already, naturally, an outcast; couple this with his eccentricities and ravings about his kingdom of Zembla, and he finds himself ostracized from his community of academics at Wordsmith university. At times he is the butt of jokes from his colleagues, as when Professor Gerald Emerald describes him as being "quite the fancy pansy, in fact" (268). Therefore, this treatment has resulted in his sexuality being expressed very cautiously, even in his writing—in his foreword he records his first meeting with Sybil Shade and remarks that he must leave early because he will be seeing "two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy" (23). The only place that Kinbote feels truly comfortable exhibiting his sexuality is in the only place in America that he has power: the classroom. Even his dabbling in this theoretically insular environment gets him into a bit of trouble:

There was also the morning when Dr. Nattochdag, head of the department to which I was attached, begged me in a formal voice to be seated, then closed the door, and having regained, with a downcast frown, his swivel chair, urged me "to be more careful." In what sense, careful? A boy had complained to his advisor. Complained of what, good Lord? That I had criticized a literature course he

attended (“a ridiculous survey of mediocre works, conducted by a ridiculous mediocrity”). Laughing in sheer relief, I embraced my good Netochka, telling him I would never be naughty again. I take this opportunity to salute him. He always behaved with such exquisite courtesy toward me that I sometimes wondered if he did not suspect what Shade suspected and what only three people (two trustees and the president of the college) knew. (25)

Clearly, the handling of the incident, both with the administrator and in Kinbote’s own writing, is very subtle; while Kinbote is admonished to “be more careful,” and “that a boy had complained to his advisor,” Dr. Nattochdag ultimately skirts around the subject, substituting in a trivial complaint in order to express the uncomfortable truth—that Kinbote is leveraging his power to prey on his male students—without outright saying it. Meanwhile, Kinbote only says that he will “never be naughty again,” that he will not flirt with the boys in his class again because now his power has been undermined. Ironically, he questions whether Dr. Nattochdag might know his secret, which to Kinbote is his status as the king of Zembla, and to everybody else (for though Kinbote guards it, it is apparent) is his status as a homosexual.

However, Kinbote is not the only character whose sexuality is repressed due to their lack of power in America. Another character whose power mirrors their ability to operate within the heterosexual normative sphere is John Shade’s daughter, Hazel, about whom he composes his poem. It is unclear what Hazel Shade’s sexuality is: it could be lesbian, asexual, or even straight, but no matter its orientation, she suffers from being unable to express it. In Canto Two of his poem, John Shade grapples with her unseemly appearance and her inability to obtain male attention:

“But this is prejudice! You should rejoice  
 That she is innocent. Why overstress  
 The physical? She *wants* to look a mess.  
 Virgins have written some *resplendent* books.  
 Lovemaking is not everything. Good looks  
 Are not *that* indispensable!” And still (320-326)

First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that Hazel’s perspective is entirely absent from the novel; all that the reader is given is her father’s impression of her in his poem. Accordingly, the very fact that all he focuses on is her appearance and the impossibility of her achieving a male partner reflects the intrinsic link between sexuality and power in *Pale Fire*. She is assigned very little character traits other than physical ugliness, but this element of her appearance inevitably relegates her as destined to be one of the “virgins,” something Shade resents because they lack power in the world as Nabokov has constructed it. Moreover, she is driven to suicide after a getting stood up by a blind date—missing another chance to express her sexuality—a tragic action in which she takes the only power, that of her own life that she has left into her own hands. Whether she opted into this paradigm of sexuality being linked to power, or whether her father forced it upon her, is unclear, but also unimportant; no matter her interior motives behind the action, her suicide is undoubtedly a reflection of her powerlessness in a sexuality-driven society.

In America, John and Sybil Shade, and their heterosexual triumph, present an interesting contrast to the two previous powerless characters. John Shade, esteemed poet and scholar, is Wordsmith University’s “brightest star,” and consequently “strictly hetero,” as Sylvia, the

university's main trustee, puts it (248). The Shades are emblematic of the ultimate power that can be achieved in *Pale Fire*'s America: an entrenched social presence reflected by a stable heterosexuality. This power is displayed most prominently on John Shade's birthday party, in which numerous important academics of Wordsmith University are invited to the Shades' house; notable is the exclusionary dynamic at play with the guest list—by excluding Kinbote, the Shades are keeping the members of the party to those in power, which has a direct correlation to those who have succeeded in expressing their heterosexual identity. Interestingly, the only times the Shades' social power is in danger is through a threat to their triumphant heterosexuality. First and foremost, is the horrifying fracture of their domestic life due to the suicide of their daughter Hazel. Of course, such a catastrophic incident shatters their comfortable, powerful standing in ways that are primarily outside of the representation of their sexuality; importantly, though, the impetus behind the suicide was due to that notion of failed heterosexuality. Even before the suicide, she presents a challenge to their power: “that flabby, feeble, clumsy and solemn girl... was the agent of the disturbance” (166). The other foil to their quintessential marriage is the presence of Charles Kinbote, who develops a fascination with John Shade that is adjacent to infatuation. While Kinbote is not a threat to their union, as John does not reciprocate his feelings, Sybil does emerge as a victorious rival to Kinbote's homoerotic attention. Thus, the only expression of Kinbote's sexuality regarding John Shade is a powerless, voyeuristic “indulge[nce] in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop” (87). The Shades' successful expression of heterosexuality in America contrasts Kinbote's failed expression of homosexuality and highlights Kinbote's need of Zembla as an outlet.

Contrastingly to America, Zembla is the realm in which Kinbote is free to express his sexuality, yet even here, it revolves around his power as king. Zembla is portrayed as, arguably, a sexual utopia for Kinbote, almost akin to ancient Greece, in which male homosexuality and pederasty are acceptable for the ruling class. The homosexuality is *possible* due to Kinbote's monarchical power, while pederasty, in turn, is a *manifestation* of Kinbote's monarchical power. Consider the king's sexual awakening as an adolescent, in which he enters a "magical closet" with his "bedfellow" Oleg, and finds himself deep in a subterranean passage and deep on a homoerotic journey. On the other side, they hear noises that are, once again, representative of sexuality as an expression of power:

Two terrible voices, a man's and a woman's, now rising to a passionate pitch, now sinking to raucous undertones, were exchanging insults in Gutnish as spoken by the fisherfolk of Western Zembla. An abominable threat made the woman shriek out in fright. Sudden silence ensued, presently broken by the man's murmuring some brief phrase of casual approval ("Perfect, my dear," or "Couldn't be better") that was more eerie than anything that had come before. (127)

Confronted with this commotion, they hurry back the other way and come out of the closet, literally:

The recent thrill of adventure had been superseded already by another sort of excitement. They locked themselves up. The tap ran unheeded. Both were in a manly state and moaning like doves. (127)

While Kinbote's lovemaking is not "dominant," unlike the heterosexual couple that it directly contrasts, it is enabled by his power as the king of Zembla. Moreover, Kinbote's expression of

sexuality through his writing is much more apparent when writing about the king of Zembla (Kinbote, for the majority of the novel, attempts to posit the king as a different person than himself); the power of the king, even through writing, affords him the confidence to be more homoerotic in his prose. This boldness is apparent in lines such as, “Oleg walked in front: his shapely buttocks encased in tight indigo cotton moved alertly” (126). Here, Nabokov is emphasizing Kinbote’s homosexuality for comedic value. But Kinbote also strays into the territory of pederasty, which is utilized by Nabokov for a demonstration of the occasions in which the character is in power, such as when he can “amuse himself with a band of Eton-collared, sweet voiced minions imported from England” (209). For Kinbote, Zembla is the magical realm in which he holds power, and thus is able to exert his sexuality, both in his internal reality and in his writing.

However, even in Zembla, Kinbote does not wield unchecked power regarding his sexuality. As the king, he is socially beholden to “give up his copious but sterile pleasures and take a wife” (173). Homosexuality is not frowned upon, necessarily, but following the association of sexuality to power, a king must maintain dynastic power through an heir, which requires an expression of heterosexuality:

It was not a matter of morality but of succession. As in the case of some of his predecessors, rough alderkings who burned for boys, the clergy blandly ignored our young bachelor’s pagan habits, but wanted him to do what an earlier and even more reluctant Charles had done: take a night off and engender an heir. (173)

The facade of a stable, heterosexual relationship is necessary for even the ruler of Zembla, but alas for Kinbote, his sexuality does not permit him to do so, and thus, he does not obtain the

power that is linked to such action. However, this inability to do so is not for lack of trying; Kinbote recognizes that consummation between himself and his wife Disa is requisite for his status as king, and “strenuously trie[s] to possess her but to no avail” (207). Despite taking aphrodisiacs, such as tiger tea, and even attempting to coerce her to “comply with an expedient” that might, for him, make such copulation possible, he is forced to tell “her that an old riding accident was incapacitating him” (208). Fatefully, Kinbote’s reign becomes overthrown, and though forces outside of his control enable its fall, the story of the failure of his rule, of his power, is in some ways the story of the failure of his ability to express sexuality within the heteronormative archetype.

Throughout Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, in both John Shade’s poem and in Charles Kinbote’s deranged commentary, a framework is established in which the power afforded to the characters is represented by how freely they can express their sexuality. The question that arises, then, is: why does Vladimir Nabokov make Charles Kinbote a homosexual? According to literary scholar Steven Belleto, the answer lies with Nabokov’s tenuous relationship with his own brother Sergey, who was homosexual. In Nabokov’s own autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Sergey and his sexual orientation are scarcely referenced, yet within *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s homosexuality is an inherent component of the plot. At age 16, Vladimir stumbled upon his brother’s diary, which revealed “Sergey's homosexuality, about which the grown Nabokov had long felt uncomfortable” (1), and ended up showing it to his tutor, who in turn showed it to his father. Arguably, this action can be considered one of persecution, as Steven Bruhm argues; later, when Vladimir had fled to America, his brother Sergey was left behind in Germany and “imprisoned by the Nazis for his homosexuality” (15) in a concentration camp in which he ended up dying.

*Pale Fire*, perhaps, represents Nabokov's conveyance of homophobic persecution, a possible regret which he never fully expressed in his letters but is certainly present in this novel. While from a 21st century standpoint, the linkage of homosexuality to pedophilia is problematic, by granting Kinbote the Zembla of his fantasies and contrasting it to the Cold-War era shunning of homosexuality in America, Nabokov may be critiquing the prevailing popular attitudes toward sexuality at the time.

## Works Cited

1. Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Pale Fire*. Vintage International, 1989.
2. Belletto, Steven. "The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov's 'Pale Fire', Chance, and the Cold War." *ELH*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2006, pp. 755–80. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030034>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2024.
3. Walton, Jean. "Dissenting in an Age of Frenzied Heterosexualism: Kinbote's Transparent Closet in Nabokov's *Pale*." *College Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2, June 1994, p. 89. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9503103031&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9503103031&site=ehost-live).
4. Etkind, Alexander. "Left Side of the Moon: Nabokov's Personal Terminology of Homosexuality." *CoSMO (Turin, Italy)* 7.7 (2015): 55-. Web.
5. Bruhm, Steven. "Queer, Queer Vladimir." *American Imago*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1996, pp. 281–306. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26304519>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2024.
6. Ohi, Kevin. "Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*." *Nabokov studies* 5.1 (1998): 153–178. Web.