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MOONRISE OVER THE MOOR:
HAZEL'S DEATH IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*¹

Ever since Mary McCarthy penned her admiring review of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, only a few months after the novel's publication, readers have searched for puzzles in what she identified as "a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game" (*Pale Fire* 21). She herself unveils the basic levels of understanding in this strange novel, then lets "the twinning and doubling proliferate" (23) so much as to cast a confusing light on the whole. McCarthy claims to solve a number of problems in the story, just as she points to many more. And the search continues unabated after 50 years, with strange twists dominated by proposals that a single author wrote the hybrid work, culminating in Brian Boyd's otherworldly hall of mirrors.²

¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer, Sherman Garnett, Yuri Leving, and especially Mary Schulz for offering encouragement and suggesting improvements.

² Since McCarthy, interpreters of *Pale Fire* have sought grand revelations able to transform one's understanding of the novel. And quite soon in the interpretive history, one revelation was thought to be the discovery that the work was written by a single author. In 1966, Page Stegner suggested that Kinbote wrote both parts (p. 129); within a year, Andrew Field proposed Shade as the sole author (p. 297). And from then much of the scholarly argument about the novel turned on the case for and against these two proposals, the Kinbotean and the Shadean. Most recently, Rene Alladaye asserted that Nabokov's text "will always burden its reader" with this question about single authors (p. 1). Other readers supposed that the key to the work lies in the separate

Boyd's book length study has many virtues, not the least being its arguments against the single author thesis. As he makes clear, the richness and the moving power of the novel ultimately depend on the real interactions between the separate characters, John Shade and Charles Kinbote: "The real reason for the poem-and-commentary form is to be found here, in the human contrast between the fireside poet and the insane commentator."³ Most important of all, Boyd draws attention to Hazel Shade and to her interest in the next world as the true center of the novel. And yet, Boyd's examination of Hazel Shade shares something in common with Mary McCarthy's reading, and that of every other interpreter of this character I have ever encountered: to quote McCarthy, "[Hazel Shade] killed herself young by drowning" (21). But is that really the case?⁴

existence of these two quite different characters. As an example, consider Ellen Pifer, who warns against becoming "preoccupied with unlikely resemblances where Nabokov has sought to evoke individual reality and unique differences" (p. 111). The separate realities of the two characters make possible Shade's "penetrating perception of Kinbote ... to apprehend, behind the screen of Kinbote's pomposity and silly affectation, the unfortunate soul whom all this bravado is meant to hide" (p. 117). Or consider Phyllis A. Roth's insistence that the "different personalities of the authors [Shade and Kinbote]" are essential to understanding the doubling psychology of the novel, in which one finds "a character who is attempting to reduce himself to a false identity at the same time that his author is synthesizing the whole to reveal the failure of the reduction" (p. 216). The pathos of the text depends upon these failures, and on the separate existences of the characters who make these attempts. To unify the parts of the text by means of a single author, what Roth calls a "reductionist approach," weakens the effect of the doubling, and trades the interpreter's cleverness for Nabokov's psychological depth. Boyd discusses this debate with his usual breadth of view, while explaining a need for some "radical revelation" that makes meaningful the many correspondences and "pointed interconnections" between poem and commentary (pp. 111-126).

³ Boyd, pp. 69-70. Boyd explains that, as a teenager, he fell under the sway of Field's Shadean thesis (p. 251). Strange parallels between the parts (poem and commentary) suggested a common author, and for nearly two decades he championed that view. Only upon conceiving of the possibility of an otherworldly influence on the composition of both texts did Boyd abandon the single author alternative for his own, involving multiple authors, especially the "ghost writers:" the dead Hazel and John Shade. See Boyd, Part III, pp. 129-232.

⁴ With a book that has been subjected to so many disparate interpretations, it is always surprising to find a long-standing agreement. And one of the least questioned claims in the text, at least from the perspective of the readers, has been that Hazel committed suicide, and this despite the fact that her father leaves it as an open question in the center of his poem (though he clearly implies suicide) (ll. 488-493). Boyd states with certainty: "it is her own lack of beauty, her *own* ugliness, that drives her to suicide" (p. 64). I know of no commentator who has rejected the idea that Hazel Shade committed suicide.

However loath I am to add yet another path to this novel's twisted interpretive history, I am struck by the common assumption that Hazel Shade's life and death are rightly understood in its comic-book formula: ugly girl, despondent over a failed romance, abandoned on a blind date, kills herself out of despair. Could Hazel Shade really be so conventional? And can it really be that the central figure of Nabokov's most ingenious multi-level fiction is to be taken at a "true-romance" face value? The suspicion that Nabokov is up to something set me on a path of interpretation that uncovered another possibility.

Like Dolores Haze – another poor girl at the center of a novel in which she never gets to speak for herself – Hazel Shade is misunderstood by a poetic father and his romantic friend, who misjudge her because both are hopelessly caught up in their own passionate objects of love, to which Hazel is, in each case, only secondary. John Shade loves Sybil (and the art she inspires); Kinbote loves Zembla (and the artist who can preserve it for eternity). Both assume that Hazel killed herself in despair over the loss of what each possessed, beauty and romance.

But Hazel died only accidentally as she searched for knowledge of a realm beyond this world and the great aunt she believed existed there. She fell through the ice unintentionally, in response to perceiving a sign that she believed had been sent from the beyond. Not despair over her failed picture book romance, but intense curiosity to know "what dawn, what death, what doom / Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb" (ll. 175-176)⁵ led Hazel to her merely accidental death. Or so I intend to argue in what follows.

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Pale Fire, as we are told on its title page, is "a novel by Vladimir Nabokov." And yet, from that point forward, the book presents itself as the first publication of an American poet's last poem, with foreword, commentary and index by the poem's editor, the academic Charles Kinbote. The question immediately arises, in the face of this strange textual form: how can a poem and a line by line commentary ever provide the narrative unity of a novel? The problem is immediately exacerbated by the discovery that the commentator cares little to interpret Shade's

⁵ The citations are from the Vintage edition of *Pale Fire*; the quotations from the foreword and the commentary are referenced with page numbers. The quotations from the poem are referenced with line numbers.

work at all, but instead uses the poem to tell his own story of kingly rule, exile and loss; a story of no direct relevance, it seems, to Shade's poem.

As a consequence, Nabokov's unified novel seems broken into parts that have only an accidental relationship to one another. Perhaps for this reason serious readers have been so easily sidetracked by the question of whether a single author wrote both the poem and the commentary, venturing hypotheses to the effect that Kinbote was impersonating Shade or that Shade was impersonating Kinbote, and even that Hazel or Sybil created both Kinbote and Shade.⁶ In any event, one at last succeeds in connecting the disparate parts of the book so as to make it a unified "novel."

Readers reasonably desire to create a whole of *Pale Fire*, but an attempt to do so must take a more ordinary, if no less difficult route. However much Kinbote may have misunderstood Shade's poem, he must nevertheless be seen as a crucial source of information about the subject matter of "Pale Fire." Kinbote must be seen as the source of a "human reality" which the poem lacks because its author is "too skittish and reticent" (p. 28), and too uncomprehending. Kinbote does indeed tell us something about Shade's life that would be inaccessible for us without his commentary; and the combination of poem and commentary makes possible an insight into the world shared by Kinbote and Shade. That insight will center on Hazel Shade.

John Shade's poem not only investigates his own life, but comments on key events in the lives of his wife Sybil and their daughter Hazel. But is Shade's commentary on his wife and daughter any more reliable than Kinbote's commentary on Shade's poem? With respect to Hazel specifically (as it is here that my interests lie), can the reader trust that Shade's observations are reflective of his beloved daughter's life? By and large, previous scholarship takes for granted that Shade not only can be trusted, but that his powers of perception enable him to fully

⁶ The first Kinbotean, as noted above, was Page Stegner; the first Shadean was Andrew Field. Most recently, Hazel became a candidate for single authorship in Rene Alladaye's *NOJ* article (see pp. 22-26). His discussion includes the suggestion that Hazel is indeed a child prodigy, capable of writing a brilliant work like *Pale Fire*, though Alladaye never stops thinking of Hazel as a child, who in writing the text plays "a schoolgirl prank" (p. 25). Afterwards, he also points out that Shade's wife Sybil is a neglected candidate for sole author (pp. 31-33). Whether Alladaye thinks that any of these suggestions is persuasive is not altogether clear to me, but he does seem intent on scattering seeds for future investigators. He also draws attention to the need to discipline one's imagination when trying to determine Nabokov's intentions.

understand his daughter.⁷ At the center of the 999-line poem is Hazel's death. And in the poem, Shade reports a debate about why Hazel drowned in the lake: was her death an accident or a suicide? (ll. 488-493) Yet, however much debate there was in his community, Shade's answer suggests no ambiguity: "I know. You know" (l. 493). But what did her parents know? Shade never says, but he clearly implies the answer. Spring showed itself once again in the thaw and excitement of a new season of young love; but for Hazel, as John Shade caps the point, the season was "Black spring" (l. 495), and its appearance meant only an opportunity for renewed failure. Rejected on sight, confirming that she was too ugly even to date, Hazel marched herself "[i]nto a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank" (l. 500). John Shade leads his readers to a single conclusion, the last on the list of debated possibilities: "[s]he took her poor young life" (l. 493).

But there are reasons to suspect that, when it came to understanding the love life of his only child, John Shade saw not the true Hazel Shade, but only the figment of his own imagination. From the very beginning of Shade's account of his daughter's life, he notes his bitter disappointment that Hazel inherited not her mother's beauty, but his own unfetching form. Throughout his account of her childhood, Shade records his unhappiness about Hazel's poor looks, and his various attempts to either excuse or improve them. When Hazel looks to be

⁷ John Shade's account of his "fat, plain daughter" (p. 22) is never questioned by Mary McCarthy. In Boyd's study of the family, Shade is described as "stability itself" whose observations contain "no secrets, no surprises" (p. 27). Later, Kinbote is quoted without complaint: "[Shade's] picture of Hazel is quite clear and complete" (p. 47). No need here to second-guess the guileless, sensible John Shade. On the contrary, Shade's powerful imagination allows him "to step outside of himself," and model one who "makes every effort to overcome the natural confinement of consciousness" (pp. 71, 72). Priscilla Meyer sees a divide between father and daughter, for Shade's "narrowness of vision" – his prosaic view of the spirit world results in an "insensitivity to Hazel's magic" (pp. 146, 190). Barbara Wyllie recognizes an even greater distance between father and daughter, noting that Hazel "was a child who figured in his life as an awkward, confusing disruption, a 'difficult, morose' 'darling,' to be pitied, but never truly celebrated" (p. 153). The rare interpreter is Shoshana Knapp, who draws out in great detail the distortions in both Shade's and Kinbote's treatment of Hazel: "Kinbote's dissimilar treatment of Shade's ugliness shows us that Shade could have chosen otherwise. The poet could have written more of Hazel's qualities of mind and spirit. He could have looked for signs of inherited intelligence and inquisitiveness and not merely inherited clumsiness and homeliness. The resemblances on which the poem focuses, however, testify to Shade's skewed perspective – pity for an irremediable handicap – a perspective that has proved irrelevant to his own physical make-up. The similarity between them, therefore, is a prime example of selective interpretation rather than a source of narrative authority" (p. 107). And though Knapp never doubts that Hazel commits suicide, with characteristic insight she calls the act "a grossly disproportionate response to a passing slight" (p. 106).

Lolita's age, at a time when one wishes that a parent cared less about his child's looks and more about the prizes she won for her schoolwork, John Shade confesses that "like a fool I sobbed in the men's room" (l. 314) because Hazel appeared in the school play as a "bent charwoman," "Mother Time" rather than as a fairy (ll. 312, 313). Later, when Hazel was in college, it did not matter to Shade what she was reading at home: "some phony modern poem" (l. 376); what mattered to him instead was that "Old Pan would call from every painted hill" (l. 326) inviting thoughts of love. And after graduation, when Hazel returned home from studying abroad at a chateau in France, she is said to have fallen "in tears, with new defeats, / New miseries" (ll. 337-338) and Shade comments on her behavior as follows: "I think she always nursed a small mad hope" (l. 383) (a point given special emphasis by Shade as the poem's only single line stanza).

But could John Shade be trusted to understand his daughter's tears? Were Hazel's new defeats, new miseries anything more than her discovery, yet again upon returning home, that her parents especially cared about one thing: her success in romance? As Shade confesses, "the demons of our pity spoke" to Hazel (l. 327). But what could be more oppressive for Hazel than to grow up, sensitive, intelligent, beloved by an eccentric bachelorette Aunt Maud, yet all the while treated by her parents as a conventional candidate for love and marriage? Might the cause for Hazel's tears have been, not another failed romance, but the fact of having to endure parents who could not see beyond her physical appearance and their conventional expectations of marriage?⁸ Rather than insight, we might expect from Shade a serious misreading of Hazel's true

⁸ Postwar America seems to have been an especially good cultural moment for noting how strong the social pressures were for women to marry and raise a family. Nabokov would likely have seen this ordinary desire of parents (to see their children find marriage partners) raised to an extreme level. Numerous monographs attempt to understand why "postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men" (Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* [1988] p. 9). Demographic data confirms that, at the time when Nabokov resided in the United States, Americans were unusually likely to marry and have children at a young age. See Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, chapter one. As Elaine May remarks, "Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record: 96.4 percent of the women and 94.1 percent of the men... Americans behaved in striking conformity to each other during these years.... not only did the average age at marriage drop, almost everyone was married by his or her mid-twenties. And not only did the average family size increase, most couples had two to four children, born sooner after marriage and spaced closer together than in previous years" (p. 20). Cherlin recently characterized this "unusual interlude in the history of American family life": the 1950's brought to a peak the ideal of "the companionate marriage, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as homemaker" (2009, p. 83). Nabokov would have been perfectly

inner life as she lives trapped at home under the constant sway of those demons of pity, John and Sybil.

And indeed, even among the meager details provided by Shade in his poem, we find indications that life in the Shade nest was not simply harmonious. His most extensive account of his daughter's character, apart from his often-repeated opinion that she sought a romantic mate, was that "she had strange fears, strange fantasies, strange force of character" (l. 344). But what was it that explained her force of character, apart from a longing for that "white-scarfed beau" (l. 333) who would whisk her away from her dormitory room in Sorosa hall? John Shade never gives us any clarity on this matter. And can he be trusted to have been sympathetic enough to have understood more than that "She was my darling: difficult, morose – / But still my darling" (ll. 357-358)? Was there more to Hazel than Shade's own simple desire to have her be a child of romance, fit for a tale of love? What the poem makes clear is that John Shade was consistently uninterested in any of Hazel's accomplishments. As such, he lacked an appreciation of at least one entire dimension of his daughter's life.

In fact, the more one ponders the portrait provided for us of Hazel by her father in the poem, the clearer a simple truth appears: a loving, sympathetic father Shade, for all his concern, never really understood his daughter. We discover in the poem a strange anomaly: Hazel is clearly a more substantial and impressive woman than what can possibly be grasped from the thin character sketch given of her. I would say, above all, Hazel never appears as a woman – she is always a child, little, gentle, a darling, a bird that never leaves the nest.⁹ She is the object of pity caused by the simplest of prejudices: she looks ugly, even monstrous (ll. 350-356). And this prejudice becomes magnified by Shade's unrelenting concern with Pan (l. 326), so that her lack of beauty drives the drawn-out narrative of her hopeless search for love and its end in suicide.

situated to observe the effects of this convention on the lives of those with whom he lived in America.

⁹ Shoshana Knapp catalogues the distortion: "Shade, to begin with, seems to regard Hazel as an eternal infant; she is not only his child, but a child forever. His first mention of her is a reference to 'the phantom of my little daughter's swing' (l. 57). Aunt Maud, he says, 'lived to hear the next babe cry' (l. 90); as Kinbote observes, the 'babe' was fully sixteen at the time of her great-aunt's death. Shade has preserved 'her first toy' (l. 291). He recalls her as 'a mere tot' (l. 508). He considers the possibility of seeing a phantom Hazel near the tree where the phantom swing swayed (ll. 650-652), a swing suitable only for a child. When he alludes to Goethe's 'The Earl-King,' with its reference to a father and his child (l. 664), he is again picturing a younger version of the Hazel who died at twenty-four" (*sic*) (p. 107).

No wonder John Shade thinks that he knows what happened that night after the attempted blind date; he thinks that everyone knows, given the simplicity of his version of Hazel's life story.

John Shade was quite concerned with romance in his own life. Surely he needed the love that Sybil gave him. He broke into hysterical sobbing when she agreed to marry him (ll. 271-274). His art seemed very dependent on Sybil's loving regard, "beneath the word, above/ The syllable, to underscore and stress / The vital rhythm" (ll. 950-952). But was Hazel at all concerned with finding for herself the kind of romantic relationship her parents had? Or might her own physical attributes have kept her at an early age from trying to become something that she knew she could not be: the object of the romantic regard that is based on, or at least begins, in physical beauty? Was there really nothing more to give her life meaning, so that, in the end, Hazel could only prefer "the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (p. 312)?

Perhaps for this reason, in a poem meant to express sympathy for Hazel, she appears almost always as a child or not at all. The mature woman vanishes, except for her main act, what Shade interprets as her suicide. This demonstrates how little we can know about Hazel from the story told by her father, and the very little added by Kinbote, both of whom were primarily interested in other lovely vistas.

Why was Hazel so misunderstood by her parents? My proposed answer is both ordinary and shocking. From Hazel's earliest years they desperately wanted her to have what Sybil had: beauty, love and society. In this respect, they were just typical parents, imposing on their child their own hopes and dreams. Beginning in her childhood, Hazel felt the burden of her parents' expectations and responded with guilt and fear.

Sybil fell in love with John Shade *despite* his ugliness. She saw past his physical appearance in order to love the mind and the character underneath. I assume that Shade never expected to have his love reciprocated by Sybil, the beautiful, slender, graceful woman. And so her acceptance of his marriage proposal prompted an extreme reaction of gratitude, relief, joy, and perhaps even self-loathing, so great was Shade's need of her loveliness (ll. 271-274). Shade says as much, when wondering about who their only child would look like: "Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend/ Your heart and mine. At first we'd smile and say: / 'All little girls are plump'" (ll. 294-296). In other words, from Hazel's very conception, her parents feared that they would raise a girl who took after John. They expressed their fears throughout Hazel's childhood, with ever-growing pity and denial. Hazel's parents dreaded the possibility that she would look

the way she did and they loathed her physical appearance. What was forgiven in John, the poet who could transform the ordinary into beauty, was not overlooked in Hazel, whose primary place in life, despite her gifts, was to fulfill the hopes of her parents, and perhaps of a romantic society that understood the place of women very much in terms of love and marriage. These not mild expectations – these fears that became realized – weighed on Hazel throughout her life.

Is it any surprise, then, that as Hazel grew up under these expectations, a rift would appear between parents and child? Shade acknowledges as much, remarking that “[s]he hardly ever smiled, and when she did, / It was a sign of pain. She’d criticize/ Ferociously our projects” (ll. 350-352). As far as he could see, Hazel was deeply unhappy, sufficiently so as to contemplate suicide. But can Shade be trusted to know the state of mind of that “shy,” “gentle girl” (ll. 308, 312) who became the fierce critic of her parents, moved to tears by something that happened in her household? Rather, might she not withdraw into her own private world, unshared by those who could not escape their pity and see their daughter for her true self? Indeed, what stops one from believing that the rarely smiling, rarely happy Hazel developed, as an adult, the hard outer shell for her gentle soul and needed to distance herself from her parents with whom she had to live and from whose misunderstandings she could not escape? And within the privacy of her own world, what rich inner life did she enjoy, the light of which never seemed to reach her parents?

From this point of view, Hazel had her childhood stolen, and perhaps starting at about the same age as Dolores Haze, at the earliest signs of puberty when the girl is supposed to become the “fairy,” “[a] dream of gauze and jasmine” who would indeed go “to that dance” (ll. 310, 335). The difficult, morose girl about whom John poetized may well have been a creation of her family and of the society that subjected her to the prejudice that an ugly, unmarried woman could have no happiness.

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With what was Hazel primarily concerned? In order to make this odd book a cohesive whole, is there something that we can learn from the commentary in order to properly appreciate the poem? In Kinbote’s commentary, the theme of Hazel’s concern with the supernatural stands

out. As Kinbote tells us there,¹⁰ when Hazel was sixteen, her great aunt Maud, with whom she developed a considerable friendship, grew ill and was moved out of the house into a sanitarium, where she eventually died. Just after Maud's move, her Skye terrier was "destroyed" on orders of Sybil, which suggests a certain coldness on Sybil's part, to say the least. Hazel grew incensed (p. 165). When Maud eventually died, it upset the Shade family, and Hazel in particular, who seemed in this case to be quite sensitive to matters of mortality. The Shade home began to show signs of being haunted: there were noises and movements of Maud's possessions that seemed to have no worldly explanation, followed by other strange events (pp.165-166). The unusual occurrences finally stopped but only after the family threatened to move from their home. Of these particularities, Shade tells us nothing beyond the generalization that Hazel experienced "strange fears, strange fantasies" (l. 344).

Six years later, Hazel sought to contact the spirits, pursuing the lights and sounds during her outings to the Hentzner's barn. Shade acknowledges this detail of Hazel's life, that she investigated "certain sounds and lights / In an old barn" (ll. 346-347), but he does not explain it. It is Kinbote who tells us that she sought to communicate with a spirit, which may well have been her great aunt. Hazel believed that she had received a message from a bobbing light, about the size of a flashlight on a wall, while in the barn (p. 187-190). Commentators have spent a good deal of time making sense of the message.¹¹ For our purposes, it is not the message that matters so much as Hazel's underlying interest in otherworldly matters and the possibility of life after death. And in particular, Hazel's activities demonstrate that there are similarities between her and her father that extend beyond their physical appearance, to her concern with the supernatural that may inform us about our fate after death.

If we return to the poem with these interests of Hazel in mind, we begin to see that the side of Hazel not well understood by her father consisted, ironically, of those very things with which John Shade was most concerned, according to his autobiographical poem. According to

¹⁰ Kinbote's revelations about Hazel's interest in lights and the otherworld are included primarily in two notes of the commentary, one to line 230, about the "poltergeist" in the family home (pp. 164-167); and one to line 347, about Hazel's trips to the Hentzner barn (pp. 185-193).

¹¹ Boyd explains it as a warning from Aunt Maud to Hazel about her father's impending death at the hands of Jack Grey (p. 110). This explanation seems widely accepted. In 1976, David Walker proposed a version of this explanation while discussing the theme of artistic and natural design, "the meaningful pattern ... perceived in the texture of life or art" in Nabokov's novel (p. 213).

him, Hazel had “strange fears” – but what did Hazel fear? Maud’s death occurred at a formative time in Hazel’s life, and her worries about life’s end may well be that which rises so ominously in the dark to scare her (p. 190). Hazel seemed unusually sensitive to exactly the same concerns about mortality that led John, “in his demented youth,” to dedicate his life to investigating “what dawn, what death, what doom/ Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb” (ll. 167, 175-176, 180). Shade even admits, in a later canto, that he had experienced “strange / Nacreous gleams beyond the adults’ range” (ll. 633-634) when he was a child. But somehow he was unable to appreciate in his own offspring the same or similar ability

John Shade gives us no indication that he understood Hazel’s interest in the spirit world. The real quest for knowledge of the afterlife was John Shade’s alone. This similarity between Shade and his daughter (i.e. their shared curiosity about the spirit world) seems to have escaped his notice, or it has been ignored by him. But this adumbrates the fundamental irony of the poem: in telling the story of his daughter’s death, Shade seems unable to see himself in Hazel; he can see only the failed simulacrum of his beloved Sybil. And while Shade blubbered in disbelief upon learning that Sybil loved him (ll. 271-274), Hazel could only harden herself in response to the relentless expectation that she be a beautiful beloved. Perhaps the hidden hero of *Pale Fire*, the novel, is this gentle, shy, sensitive but also very tough-hearted woman who had to turn her back on her parents in order to live her own life.

It is with this fundamental concern – the worries about a next life after death, so central to John Shade but also shared by Hazel – that we decipher a rival pattern in the details supplied by Shade about his daughter in the poem. If Shade looked away from Hazel’s intellectual accomplishments, ignored her fears about mortality, suppressed any interest she might have had in the supernatural, was he not also blind to Hazel’s search for the otherworld? With this clue we can reexamine the meager details in Shade’s poem of his daughter’s life, a life that, to him, was a miserable disappointment.

At an early age (perhaps sometime during Lolita’s nymphet years, between 12 and 14), and despite her ugliness, Hazel not only helped out in the school play, but she also stepped out onto the stage, knowing that her looks did not please her parents. According to Shade, she “appeared as Mother time, / A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom” (ll. 312-313). But what middle-school pantomime would include so innovative a character to perform alongside the usual elves and fairies? Why include a frightful image of age and decay to haunt a presentation

of childhood innocence and beauty? Of course, this could have been an eccentric innovation of some drama teacher, who may have wanted to contrast the sight of youthful beauty with an image of time's doom. But even then, the character of an old, bent woman would cast Hazel in an ugly light. This unusual addition to the cast would have required Hazel's consent at the very least. But I am inclined to guess, given how much else of Hazel's inner life is missing from the poem, that Hazel, wise beyond her years, designed the character herself, wishing to appear on stage so as to remind everyone of the passage of time and the ever-presence of mortality. Is it not possible that instead of being a cruel joke of a bizarre teacher the character of "Mother Time" was the prescient creation of Hazel herself, who chose to personify time as something that steals all beauty and forces us to end our days in ugly decay? And if this is right, we may here be witnessing one of the first signs of Hazel's precocity (one perhaps informed by her great aunt's preoccupation "[w]ith grotesque growths and images of doom" [l. 89]). But Shade can only cry in pity at the sight of that weird or brilliant creature on the stage.

That John Shade did not comprehend the complexity of his daughter's character can also be seen in a frightening image he creates of Hazel. With something of the same intrusive gaze as Kinbote's, Shade recalls times when he peered into Hazel's room and found her sitting on her bed. As is clear from his poetical account, he can only see her misery, which he connects with other signs of her unhappiness in the home – rarely smiling, often criticizing (ll. 350-352). Shade writes that she murmurs "dreadful words in monotone" (l. 356), something that seems to be the evidence of Hazel's morose, miserable state of mind. In a shocking word picture, Shade presents Hazel as a kind of monster: sitting "[e]xpressionless ... on her tumbled bed / Spreading her swollen feet, scratching her head / With psoriatic fingernails,... / Murmuring... in monotone" (ll. 350-356).

Apart from setting up the end of the story – that such a miserable creature might very well wish no longer to be alive – this image also allows us to see the barely contained disgust that John, and perhaps Sybil as well, felt toward their "darling" after she had left the "awkward age" and became an adult. Shade never tells us that he bothered to ask Hazel what she was doing, so his understanding seems to have been limited to whatever life-queenching misery he hears in her "murmuring." He never conveys what Hazel was saying or what he found to be so dreadful in the words that he heard. But we have grounds to look for a different explanation than the one that Shade might expect (i.e. Hazel's relentless search for love). In light of what we learn from

Kinbote about Hazel's interest in spirits, we suspect that even in this scene, Hazel is engaged with the supernatural. When did this bedroom scene occur? Shade does not tell us, but the painful physical description makes one suspect that Hazel is close to her maturity. After Maud's death? After the terrier was "destroyed"? (p. 165). After the basket in which the dog used to sleep "shot out of the 'intact' sanctuary... and traveled along the corridor past the open door of the study, where Shade was at work" (p. 165)? We do not know. In fact, if we had to rely on Shade's poem alone, we would not even know that his daughter was called Hazel, even though he names himself three times, and "Sybil" twice (ll. 273, 727, 984; 247, 830). But might Hazel have been engaged, at just those moments on the bed, not in barely audible complaints against life or her parents, but in attempts to contact Maud Shade in the spirit world, intoning some "dreadful" incantation so as to communicate with the world beyond this one? In any event, Shade explains very little about these events in his daughter's life, events that make public her ugliness in painfully specific detail. And had he perceived that she may have been seeking to contact spirits, he would have likely dismissed her attempts, just as he dismissed the "tasteless venture[s]" (l. 645), he encountered at the I.P.H. As Shade summarizes one thing that he learned from that Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter: "I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled/ Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood / To rap out her pet name; no phantom would/ Rise gracefully to welcome you and me" (ll. 648-651). He was convinced from the time when Hazel was "a mere tot" (ll. 508; 645-647) that no supernatural spirits visit our world. Unlike Shade, Hazel may have been intensely investigating the otherworld and she may have learned to hide this from her father, behind an angry façade.

If indeed Shade misunderstood his daughter; if indeed he made her life conform to his dream world of love and beauty; if he reports to us intimate details of Hazel's life, in each case interpreting them so as to fit his vision of what would make her life worth living – if this be correct, is it not clear how John actually resembles Kinbote when he poetizes about his daughter? Like Kinbote, Shade looked from the outside in, never reaching far enough to be able to grasp the truth of the individual who meant so much to him, all because he could not escape his own romantic vision. Shade is the uncomprehending Peeping Tom on the private life of his "creation," who in his own need for the "roar and rainbow dust" of "the cataract" (l. 250) – his conventional Zembla – could not understand the true life of his darling. And with an added irony, what he could not see in Hazel was himself, his own youthful obsession with mortality, his own

strange experience of lights beyond this world, and his own attempts to discover what awaits consciousness after death.

Thus the Shade household was hardly one of calm self-understanding, as is depicted in the triptych of John, Hazel and Sybil, each reading in separate rooms, each calling out questions and answers to one another (ll. 363-382). Or rather, that picture is only accurate when it is properly understood. For even in this instance of homey warmth, the three are separated, and the help that Shade offers to Hazel, roaring from one private room to another, is with deciphering a poem for which he has contempt (“some phony modern poem” [l. 376] – Eliot’s *Four Quartets*).¹² Shade’s was a cold nest, especially with respect to the relationship between the parents and their only child.

* * *

These difficulties at home highlight the need to reconsider Shade’s account of the death of his daughter. Given that we have good reason to wonder whether Shade had an unprejudiced view of his strange daughter’s motivations and since Hazel had an eccentric aunt who lived a private, celibate life devoted to humorous treatments of gloomy mortality, might there not be an explanation of Hazel’s death that is different from the one her father provides? Because Shade leaves us in the dark with respect to Hazel’s adult life, her personal life, and in particular her capacity for happiness, we are suspicious of the comic-book romance that Shade claims Hazel sought. And to the topic of Hazel’s death we now turn, with a short consideration of the significance of Kinbote’s story of the events in Hentzner’s barn.

Hazel’s strange force of character was directed most fiercely toward investigating certain supernatural occurrences in a barn near the family home. She was already predisposed to take seriously such events, not only because of the poltergeist phenomena in her home after Maud’s death, but also, we suspect, because of Maud’s own curiosity about the possibility of a world beyond this one. When Hazel was inspecting the supernatural occurrences in the barn, according to the private papers Kinbote only paraphrases (and then parodies), she received a message from a circle of light that moved with an animation and purpose that frightened her (pp. 187-189).

¹² Boyd explains that “the three words Hazel asks about all derive from Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’” (pp. 109 and 273n.4). Peter Lubin made the original discovery in 1970 (p. 205n7).

Using a technique that Hazel devised on the spot, she let the light indicate the letters of the alphabet, so as to spell out: “*pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told*” (p. 188). One might remark how much courage and independence Hazel shows during this venture, traveling alone in the night to an abandoned barn in search of signs of ghostly activity, thus rejecting her parents’ wishes, for she refused to be escorted by “the White twins,” fraternity boys she wanted nothing to do with (p. 187). One might note the intelligence and the presence of mind required of Hazel to communicate with the spirit under these stressful conditions. It is a remarkable act, mere months before her death, which testifies to her strength of character. But for our purposes, the point is to recognize that a roundlet of light, “a luminous circlet” (p. 188), may have been attempting to communicate with her from some supernatural domain. Hazel would be highly interested in the possibility of being contacted by spirits by means of a light after this incident, and she returned twice, according to Kinbote, to discover more information (pp. 189-192). The significance of this fact, if it is a fact, will become clear in the retelling of her last hours.

John Shade leads “an intense inner existence,” according to Nabokov, despite his prosaic interests (*SO*, p. 119). Kinbote’s imagination burns brightly throughout his commentary. Sybil’s inner thoughts rustle amidst those of the poet for whom she is the muse (ll. 952-954). Maud’s eccentric predilections are on display in the cameo of her bedroom. But what of Hazel’s inner life? Is it that of the child Shade so often describes? Or is she a frustrated teen under the sway of romantic dreams? Or do we grasp her best as a suicidal woman suffering black dismay? Something vital is obviously missing from Shade’s portrait of Hazel. As Shoshana Knapp well advises, “the wary reader, trained by Nabokov to distrust the tale as well as the teller, will beg to differ with the poem and the commentary” (p. 106). And even apart from thinking about Nabokov’s notorious trickery as a writer, we wonder whether the few cards of Hazel’s life that we are given may be reshuffled so as to tell a richer story of her death.

To begin the account, one must again emphasize that John and Sybil Shade were dead wrong about their daughter’s “mad hope.” On the contrary, if there was a deep division between the adult parents and their adult daughter (and let us consider that Hazel died at 23 years old,¹³

¹³ It is shocking to realize that, while we know the day when certain lines of the poem were written, we do not know the dates of Hazel’s birth or death. The absence of such information, apart from drawing attention yet again to how the precise details of Hazel’s life are neglected by

and that she was at least as clever and as willful as her parents), it had precisely to do with John and Sybil's desire to marry Hazel off. Hazel's companions, whom she chose on her own, included not a single paramour, and were primarily composed of celibates: Maud, a Korean student of Shade's and a girl entering a convent (ll. 342, 343). Hazel chose not to mix with the mixing crowd.¹⁴

But if this be true, then the decision to go on a blind date was likely not Hazel's, but her parents'. It was, perhaps, a duty imposed upon her by her parents, who held the key to her domicile. And what they arranged was a *blind* date. Unless Hazel were a hopeless dreamer as an adult, she knew very well what to expect from an outing that would have her escort meeting her for the first time, that is, *seeing* her for the first time. In fact, how cruelly uncomprehending, to subject Hazel to that surprise revelation. Her whole life Hazel suffered from the withering prejudice of those who approved bodily beauty, especially in the case of women. She could have had no misconception about the likely outcome of yet another such romantic arrangement.

And so, we should not be surprised to discover, in Shade's retelling, that Hazel smiled with indifference at the quick departure of Pete Dean, who abandoned her with the flimsiest of excuses (ll. 398-400). Quite understandably, never having wanted the date in the first place, Hazel announced that she was ready to go home immediately, rather than stay at a bar with the well-meaning couple. She showed no sign of desperation or even mild disappointment, but quipped in French and took a bus back home (ll. 391-401). The date was never more than she

Shade and Kinbote, forces us to estimate Hazel's age. On the supposition that Hazel was conceived in late March or early April of 1933 (see lines 430-435 and Kinbote's remark on p. 204), we guess that Hazel celebrated her 23rd birthday sometime in January of 1957, only to die on an unspecified day in March of that same year.

¹⁴ One wonders why Shade could find a mate, but Hazel had difficulty even finding a date. Might Hazel have pushed male suitors away, in the interest of celibacy or lesbianism? While our knowledge of Hazel's sexual life is too meager to allow us to reach any conclusions, there would be a further remarkable correspondence between poem and commentary if the gay Kinbote should find a parallel to himself in the possibility of Hazel's homoerotic tendencies. This could explain further why Hazel might have kept her sexuality hidden from her parents, and why she might have been a critic at home, even of her parents' happy married life. See Jean Walton's thoughtful examination of Kinbote's homosexuality and the seriousness with which Nabokov approaches that theme (pp. 100-103). Such a possibility would offer another example in the defense of Nabokov against "critics who charge ... [him] with homophobia." As Dana Dragunoiu remarks, "not all of his [Nabokov's] gay characters are objects of fun" (p. 175).

expected, and ended a good bit sooner than she could have hoped. As a sign of self-composure, she volunteered to travel alone.

So what transpired on her way home? John Shade tells the tale by means of reciting the television programs that he watched with his wife, concluding soon after 11 p.m. with a flip of the switch that dramatically signals Hazel's death. A night's mundane entertainment parallels Hazel's last moments. From Shade's point of view, the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary must have heightened the tension of the story.

Shade seems to point to the final shock that led his daughter to take her life, as he understands it, in a surprisingly understated way. Night had fallen, as may be evident from the reflections of the neon in the puddles by the "azure entrance" of the bar (ll. 397, 398). Indeed, it may have been close to 10 p.m. by the time the couple had escorted Hazel to the bus stop, and left her on her own. Some time must have passed while she waited for the bus. Shade recreates vivid details from his daughter's perspective as well as from his wife's. Time passes. At home, Sybil waits worriedly, listening for a phone call, or any sign of Hazel's return (ll. 443-447). Simultaneously, Shade presents Hazel on the bus in the dark, looking out the window, watching: "More headlights in the fog," she says to herself. "There was no sense / In window-rubbing: only some white fence/ And the reflector poles passed by unmasked" (ll. 445-447). But we ask, why did John Shade have Hazel watch for lights through the window in his poetical retelling of her last night? Of course, this could be nothing more than a random observation imagined by Shade so as to evoke Hazel's travel on the bus at night. Yet, why would Shade think that Hazel is doing anything other than weeping, or staring fixedly at the road ahead, steeling herself for the end? Why does he suggest that Hazel watched the darkness, noting the lights? Along with the headlights, fence posts and reflector poles, what did Hazel see?

I conjecture that the full moon rose over the horizon just as the bus was passing beside the lake.¹⁵ This is a mere guess, directly attested to by no one in the poem or the commentary.

¹⁵ If the fantasy world of Nabokov's *New Wye* operates within the natural oscillations of planet earth, then we can determine which nights in March of 1957 would have been candidates for Hazel's last. It is a strange fact of the text, otherwise filled with such precise dating of events, that the date of Hazel's death is not mentioned. However, Shade's poem implies that Hazel drowned in the lake soon after 11 p.m. Thus a nearly full moon would have had to rise sometime near 10:30 p.m. on that night. On Monday, March 18th, 1957, a waning gibbous moon with 91% of its surface illuminated rose in the region of Tompkins County (Ithaca), New York at 9:45 p.m. The following night, with 83% of the disk lit up, the moon rose at 10:52 p.m. No other night fits

And yet, this single natural event, if it occurred, is capable of bringing into focus John Shade's narrative of Hazel's death, and at another level, of transforming it. This light, on a clear night, even through the screen of trees, would have been nothing more than the moonlight. I believe that on a night with "wet starlight" (l. 497) visible in the sky, Shade thinks that Hazel saw the light as nothing more than the moonlight. From the father's point of view, the rising moon may have oppressed his daughter with its image of the beautiful beloved. Shade would then imply that along with the moonlight, what fell upon Hazel was the shame, not only of this night's hopeless outing, but of her lifelong attempt to become someone's beloved, the very thing that the full moon romantically symbolizes. Shade would have thought, in this interpretation, that Hazel so despaired at the failure of her romantic wishes – those wishes perfectly embodied in that hanging moon – that she then and there resolved to end her life. And from his perspective, that eerie moondrop pale fire (l. 962) would have finally convinced her to take her poor young life.

It is true that Shade could have made our interpretation much easier had he simply mentioned the moonrise directly. But I wonder if a certain reticence, both as regards his daughter's suicide, and as regards his poetic artistry, might explain it. As Kinbote reminds us, Shade always "affected not to speak of his dead daughter" (p. 164). He breaks his silence, in a way, in this poem, telling us many private things, albeit without sharing Hazel's name with us. That is, Shade preferred a certain reticence when it came to speaking about his daughter, especially with respect to Hazel death. Might something about the moonrise have too directly touched on Hazel's last moments, so that Shade leaves it as a mere implication of the text, to be puzzled out by the reader from other hints in the poem? But at a deeper level, there is a surprise of artistic discovery that makes more poignant the moonrise and its effect on Hazel. I suspect that Shade was reticent about this detail for the same reason that Nabokov creates puzzles for his readers – there is a power in discovering for oneself the artist's image that is lessened when the artist speaks too directly. The writer's reserve heightens the impact of the metaphor when it is uncovered by the effort of the reader's imagination.

Thus, the rising moon pulls tightly together the strands of the plot, in order to bring Shade's understanding to its clearest expression. And yet we are not satisfied with Shade's

the timeline set by the television programming in Shade's poem, again assuming that Nabokov meant our moon phase calendar to correspond to that of his fictional world. Of course, the text does not confirm either of these dates, at least as far as I can determine.

understanding of the significance of the moonrise, assuming he meant it in the first place. For Shade also attests that the thaw that night gave rise to haze and obscured vision (ll. 445, 494, 498, 499). When the full moon first showed its light through the fog and the screen of trees, near the horizon beside the lake, it would have appeared as a roundlet of light, perhaps wavering in intensity from the blowing mist. As the bus traveled, so would the light, at least from the perspective of one looking out the window through the trees – the light would have seemed to race along the roadside with the bus. What would Hazel have thought of the sudden appearance of a luminous circle racing in the woods behind the trees alongside of the bus? If indeed the moon rose at this moment, in a fog that was thickened by the mist from the thawing ice on the lake, would she think that she saw, not the moon, but yet another supernatural event? And since the light would have kept pace with the bus, would she not conclude that the light was following her? And then the bus stopped at Lochanhead. What would the light have done at that moment? It too would have stopped its reckless course. Would Hazel not have thought that once again some spirit was trying to contact her from the world beyond, the world that she had every reason to believe now included Maud? Only months before she had faced a similar phenomenon, during the barn outing: “a roundlet of pale light, the size of a small doily; flitted across the dark walls, the boarded windows, and the floor; changed its place; lingered here and there, dancing up and down” (p. 188). Was she not seeing such a light, once again? And if so, would she not, with her forthright strength of character, make the impressive decision to leave the bus in an attempt to find out what the spirit light was trying to show her? “I’ll get off here,” she said (l. 458). And she did.

“It was a night of thaw, a night of blow” (l. 494). The air was filled with mystery. And as Hazel pursued the mist-blown circle, it would have seemed to withdraw, always farther beyond her view, always on the other side of the “ghostly trees” (l. 460). And upon reaching the lake, the light would have suspended itself, in a glowing disk that hung above the entire fog-bound course of the lake. And Hazel, with her courage, and confidence, stepped onto the ice in order to discover what the light was trying to reveal to her. In this manner, not out of suicidal despair, but out of a most impressive longing to know what awaited consciousness beyond this world, Hazel fell through the ice that she would have expected to support her weight.¹⁶

¹⁶ John Shade remarks that ice skaters regularly crossed the lake at this point “on days of special frost” (ll. 488-490).

* * *

It might well seem that this interpretation plays too much with the text, forcing us to guess carelessly about an event that no character actually witnesses. One might argue that having no explicit support from the text, we are left to our own imagination when considering the moonrise hypothesis. But there *is* important evidence in the novel that supports my conjecture. I have already noted how the commentary draws attention both to the troubles in the Shade home, and to Hazel's special interest in a moon-shaped light that might signify the existence of the otherworld. Something important is missing from Shade's depiction of Hazel, leaving absent the account of her inner life as an adult, and thus making questionable the possibility of suicide. Finally, Shade portrays Hazel staring out the bus window at passing lights, as if what she might see there had some significance for the story of her last hour.

But there are two other textual clues that support my hypothesis. When Shade describes Maud's room, preserved just as she left it (*sans* terrier), he notes that "[t]he verse book [was] open at the Index (Moon, / Moonrise, Moor, Moral)" (ll. 94-95). Perhaps this index list is nothing but a chance series of alphabetically related words. And yet, like so many mysterious details in the poem, this random remark can be read as a clue – it can translate into a word sequence that lays out Hazel's death precisely as it is recreated in the moonrise hypothesis. For the moon, I suggest, rose above the "moor" or "swamp" (l. 500) in such a way as to reveal the moral or point of Hazel's death, and therefore of Shade's poem. As Shade writes, "*this* transparent thingum [his new poem] does require / Some moondrop title" (ll. 961-962). But why should that be the case? Might one reason be that such a title refers directly to the central action of the poem, and suggests something crucial about its meaning? The title would capture the moral of the poem to the extent that the moonrise brought into focus Hazel's romantic longings in all their frustration, and thereby drowned her.

More can be said about how the title of the poem gives evidence for this moonrise conjecture. Most commentators complain that the title "Pale Fire" does not fit the poem well.¹⁷

¹⁷ Andrew Field uses the title of the poem as a strong piece of evidence that only a single author could have composed both the poem and the commentary. He states, "The title *Pale Fire* itself presents, moreover, another most interesting point: it is incorporated in the poem's text, was

For as Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* makes clear, the *moon* is the true pale fire: "the moon's an arrant thief, /And her pale fire she snatches from the sun" (Act IV, scene iii, lines 422-423). That is to say, "Pale Fire" means "moonlight." But commentators are unhappy with the title in great part because the moon is not seen to be a significant feature of the poem, as we noted before. How much more logical is that title, then, if the light from the moon leads the action of the poem to its key moment, as opposed to supplying a mere metaphor for the ideas of reflected genius, indirect knowledge, and artistic inspiration? But the logic of the title is less important than its artistic fit. And from Shade's perspective, the fit is both precise and poignant. For Timon's moon is a thief; it steals its light from the sun. In Shade's narrative of his daughter's death, this receives a powerful throb of recognition in the discovery of the image of the thieving moon. The title, understood in this way, cries out that the moon is a thief that stole Shade's daughter – that is the lament that the title articulates. Thus the poem would achieve a powerful restatement of its tragic central action in the image of Timon's moon.

Finally, one can consider Nabokov's own guide for interpretation: does a possibility suggested by the details in the text raise the short hairs at the back of one's neck, the surest proof that we are following Nabokov's design?¹⁸ It seems to me that the pathos of the thieving moon

supposedly not the title Kinbote was hoping for, and yet it has absolutely no relevance whatsoever to Shade's poem taken by itself, making sense only when applied to the constellation of author, poet, and mad scholar that constitutes the novel" (p. 198). Boyd almost agrees, noting that the title seems a "stopgap" reluctantly chosen, acknowledging "the pallid glow" of Shade's work compared to "the heat and light Shakespeare radiates" (p. 33). But Boyd corrects Field's overstatement by showing the many images of reflection and dappled light that echo from the title throughout the poem (pp. 34-36). Surely the "faint hope" which ends Canto Three anticipates the "pale fire" of Canto Four, each naming the limited evidence of "the ultimate design of things" discernible in the accidents of our world. Priscilla Meyer also considers the title misleading, at least insofar as it supposedly comes from *Timon of Athens*. She judges that connection a "false bottom," and prefers *Hamlet* as the true source of the title, where she finds another incidence of the phrase, and an anticipation of Hazel's "Ophelia-like drowning" (pp. 110-113).

¹⁸ See *Strong Opinions*, (p. 66). Advising potential literary critics, Nabokov says: "Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint.... Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs." My sense is that interpreters of *Pale Fire* have been too impressed with their own subtle footprints, and insufficiently attentive to how Nabokov's "chess moves" lead, not just to an unexpectedly elaborate game, but to one that is ultimately connected to the deepest pathos of literature. Too often the interpretation shows more of the ingenious thought of the interpreter than of the revelation of Nabokov's genius, grounded in the heart of the story. In almost every case, the claim that a single author wrote the text undermines the pathos of the narrative. Boyd's

can have this effect on one's sensibilities. But at another remove, according to this conjecture, Hazel was not stolen by the moon's romantic pull; rather the moon's mysterious light was interpreted by her as a signal from spirits. Thus, a deeper meaning of the lament articulated in the title "Pale Fire" lies beneath that intended by John Shade. And when it comes to artistic surprise, all I can say is that no greater mirror of *Lolita* could be found in *Pale Fire*, than to discover that neither the child Dolores Haze, nor the woman Hazel Shade, were truly understood by the men who transformed their lives into art.¹⁹ In the case of *Lolita*, a vision of the nymphet was imposed on a beautiful girl, and her childhood disappeared in the dust of a romance that she could not comprehend. In the case of Hazel Shade, a conventional romantic vision was imposed on an ugly girl, and her true life was lost in the haze of the conventions of marriage.

* * *

In sum, this account of Hazel's accidental death depends upon information that no single character in the novel could provide. Neither Shade nor Kinbote had the knowledge that would have enabled them to piece together this account of Hazel's death. But each knew a part of the story, and passed it on, in his own way, for his own purposes. Kinbote recognized the importance of Hazel's curiosity about the supernatural, and gave us the necessary details about her fascination with circles of light that reveal the possibility of an intelligence from the beyond.

focus on Hazel and the Otherworld and its many webs throughout the text, while suspiciously ingenious, still brings us to one of the most moving issues of the novel, the meaning of our mortality, and whether or not there is life after death.

¹⁹ Boyd describes this same dynamic in all three works of Nabokov's triptych: "Our situation as readers [of Kinbote's commentary] resembles very much our predicament in reading *Lolita* or *Ada*: there too intelligent and eloquent narrators, imprisoned in their own self-regard, make it anything but easy for us to discern the real *Lolita* or *Lucette* and *their* claims on our consideration" (p. 71). Now the same can be said of Shade's poem in its portrait of Hazel. Priscilla Meyer explains at length the many mirror-like correspondences between *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. But when it comes to Hazel and Dolores, Meyer is satisfied with the two being opposites, the one "fatally unattractive," the other "fatally winsome" (pp. 216-220). The two, however, have a deeper similarity in being misunderstood by their intimate, lover-artists.

Kinbote had no reason to think that this helped at all to understand her death, which he reports to have been the result of a suicide.

Shade knew (as I conjecture) that the full moon rose that night during Hazel's ride home. He knew that she could have seen it rise. And as a result of yet another romantic misunderstanding of his daughter, he may have concluded that the sight of the rising moon brought vividly home to his lovelorn girl that she would never be that pure beauty sought out by the men whom Hazel so desperately wished to marry. Shade assumed that the moon was a thief, that its beautiful light drove his daughter to her final act, ridding herself of a world that tortured her with its impossible to realize yearnings.

But neither Shade nor Kinbote could put the pieces of Hazel's puzzle together properly, because neither was able to see Hazel for herself. Shade never understood how very much like him in his youth she was in soul (and not just in appearance). Kinbote never for a moment thought that the tedious narrative of her drowning warranted speculation about her interest in the next world. But without the information that these two unknowing, unperceiving narrators provide, the reader could not find the world that lives, as it were, between the lines of the story. Hazel's reality cannot be seen directly, and must be reconstructed through the distorted vision of the two authors of her story. The heart of *Pale Fire* is this poignant misunderstanding; it haunts the center of a fractured narrative.

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