

Pale fire pale fire



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nabokov's "Pale Fire" fractures the traditional doppelganger story (as do other novels of his, such as "Despair," "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight," and "Lolita"), which often relies on clear black-and-white doubles (Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" comes to mind), by coloring in the nuanced tones between the aptly named John Shade and his commentator, Charles Kinbote. Several instances blur the line between the two men; perhaps one invented the other, perhaps they are one and the same, perhaps they invented each other. This is somewhat irrelevant, as there is enough conflicting evidence for all cases to be made in Nabokov's detective story. What is important, rather, is that "Pale Fire," the poem, ties to the commentary – neither of these could exist without the other. In the end it is art that carries through, not any man's personality; as Kinbote concludes, "Yes, better stop. My notes and self are petering out...My work is finished. My poet is dead" (300). Nabokov immediately paints his convoluted double theme with a favorite pigment, numbers. Kinbote tells us that Shade was "born July 5, 1898, died July 21, 1959" – he was alive for 61 years and 16 days (13). Furthermore, the second and third canto's 334 lines double (plus two more) the 166-lined first and fourth cantos. Kinbote, too, has an affinity for doubles, as revealed in the foreword: "nother tormentor inquired if it was true that I had installed two ping-pong tables in my basement. I asked, was it a crime? No, he said, but why two? 'Is that a crime?' I countered, and they all laughed" (21-2). Nabokov is known for his distaste of doppelgangers; "The doppelganger is a great bore," he once lamented. Much of his fiction is devoted to advancing the doppelganger past the relatively simplistic clash of the superego and the id in previous literature. His wordplay – even "ping-pong" sounds like the same word repeated, is often ironic and self-conscious

of its mystery novel intents: "...I was about to have a kind of little seminar at home followed by some table tennis, with two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy" (23). Kinbote explains his purpose, even his existence, by arguing that authorial intent is meaningless without a guiding hand: "...without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his...has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide...for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word" (28-9). Shade's " attachments" seems an oblique reference to Kinbote himself, adding to Kinbote's presumption that not only is an author's work incomprehensible without adding a critic's eye, but that the author's life was, too, tempered by Kinbote's presence. Whether this is Nabakov's view is difficult to ascertain; given his mockery of Kinbote's commentary – on why Shade gave a hurricane the name Lolita: " Why our poet chose to give his 1958 hurricane a little-used Spanish name (sometimes given to parrots) instead of Linda or Lois, is not clear" – it seems more feasible that Nabakov believed the original body of art, and not its layers of skin, should stand the test of time. With its multiple pairings and confusions (one of Gradus's alias is Jacques de Grey, pointing to a possible alliance to Shade; Kinbote's identity complex with Zemblan King Charles II), " Pale Fire" can be read as a detective novel of misplaced identity; allegorically, it seeks to answer the question of what gives art its artistry – here, it is not the poem, nor the commentary, but overall Nabakov's novel that provides the final synthesis. After all, regardless of inner machinations, Nabakov ultimately invented all of the characters.