

Title: Having Faith in Nabokov's Pale Fire
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There has been considerable critical dissent over Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire, from the level of fabula to larger questions of the novel's mechanics. Indeed, the terms of the critical debate both mirror and contribute to a general sense of bewilderment regarding Nabokov generally—whose works tempt readers to discern a consistent attitude toward psychology, morality, and the nature of human interaction, but leave them hard-pressed to determine precisely what that attitude might be.

Pale Fire is a strange assemblage of seemingly incompatible parts. Written by two separate fictional authors whose literary and personal relationships are impossible to discern, the novel not only poses a distinct challenge to interpretation, but also thematizes the question of interpretation as both a hermeneutic and a moral act. On the one hand, the satire of Pale Fire seems merciless. Behind the text is an icy authorial vision, a playful but nasty sensibility that mocks not just the vanities of academia, but exegetical pretension itself. In this reading, Kinbote is stranded in a chilly universe, trapped within his own subjectivity. On the other hand, fugitive intimations of interpretability, and the even vague connections between Shade's poem and Kinbote's literary criticism, contain hints of a warmer, more generous authorial vision (or at least a less forbidding authorial persona) for whom understanding and intersubjectivity, though unlikely, are not inconceivable.

Critics who have detected both impulses within the novel tend to agree that the reader's challenge is not to choose between the two, but to determine, at a somewhat higher pitch of discourse, what the co-existence of two contradictory interpretations indicates. And to many scholars the reader's inevitable quandary ultimately paints the Nabokovian world as dark and solitary, bereft of communication and community. This paper reads the book quite differently and comes to a contrary conclusion: that the very opacity of the novel, and the incomprehension of both characters and readers, has the strange effect of gathering them into a kind of makeshift community of the perplexed. The very solitude and solipsism of Nabokov's fictional world, in other words, mirrored in the real world by the tension and alienation that the text engenders, creates, if not communion among human beings, then at least a quiet sense of fellow-feeling among the benighted.