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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## THE THREE MOST DISTINCTIVE FEATURES THAT DEFINE PALE FIRE AS METAFICTION

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## ABSTRACT

*Pale Fire* is one of the most representative works of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov. It is always seen by the academia as metafiction. Indeed, several features of this novel show that this novel is clearly metafiction. This article tries to analyze the three most distinctive features of *Pale Fire*, to explain why it is metafiction.

## KEYWORDS

*Pale Fire*; Nabokov; metafiction

## 1. THE DEFINITION OF METAFICTION

The term "Metafiction" was firstly raised by the American critic and self-conscious novelist William H. Gass in his work in 1970. Ever since its debut, numerous scholars have tried to define the term metafiction from their own perspective (Colton, 2018; Gontchar, 2017). There were a lot of alternative definitions of Metafiction before it was officially put forward. There various terms include "the introverted novel", "the anti-novel", "irrealism", "surfiction", "the self-begetting novel", "fabulation", and so forth. All these slightly different terms refer to what we call metafiction today, with only slightly difference between the emphasis on each terms (Ardila, 2018). The most influential definition of metafiction is Patricia Waugh's version. In his work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, he defines it as "Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."

The development of metafiction is as follows: The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century that bore witnesses to a series of vast changes in all aspects (Cope, 2017; Gutkin, 2017; Engelhardt, 2016). Tremendous events took place in the western society such as endless wars, the rise of science and technology, which greatly reshaped the world, leaving people in trauma, agony, disillusionment, and so forth. Progress made in linguistics and philosophy represented by Saussure and Derrida, which revolutionized older beliefs, also triggered new thoughts in various fields, not to mention in literature. Therefore, over the last sixty years, novelists, while becoming more aware of the theoretical issues in construction fictions, tended to explore a theory explore a theory of writing through the practice of writing fiction (Gregori, 2017; Valente, 2016).

The final question arising is, what is metafiction, exactly? The most influential definition of metafiction is Patricia Waugh's version. In his work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, he defines it as "Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such

writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.<sup>[1]</sup>". However, despite its numerous metamorphoses of metafiction such as parody, intrusive author, multi-endings, collage, story-within-a-story, open structures and so forth, its core idea remains the same, which means no metamorphoses will fall outside the concept mentioned above (Waugh and Patricia, 1984; John, 1999; Corn and Ward, 1987).

## 2. PALE FIRE AS A CRITIQUE

How does a critique conform with the definition of metafiction? It is in the way that a critique, be it the critique of itself or other literary theories, theorists, literature, poses question about the fiction and reality., and also, in providing a critique of their own methods of its own, it examines the fundamental structures of narrative fiction. If it is a critique of itself, the original work can be seen as the reality while the critique can be seen as the fiction. If it is a critique of other literary things, other literary things can be seen as the reality and the critique can be seen as the fiction. A literary work with critiques of literary works is able to thus, in doing so, manifest the tension between the original work and the critique.

In traditional realistic literary works, where the plots, the characters, the settings, the themes are all arranged by the Godlike authors, the author cannot display of the construction of the novel because it is already constructed, like one will never see the process of a building when it is built. To such stories, also, the process need to be hidden. However, As Waugh says, the author of the metafiction, while constructing the metafiction, always makes it open the status of himself as a writer, his writing process, and the fictionality of the metafiction. In a way, the author of the metafiction is both the author and the critic at the same time. Therefore, the author will make his or her comments on the his text itself, and the critical theory of fictions.

The novel *Pale Fire* altogether consists of four parts, namely, the "Foreword", "Pale Fire as a poem in four cantos", "Commentary", and "Index". We all know that all of these four parts combined together is the novel which is called *Pale fire*, written by Vladimir Nabokov. And then,

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when we read the novel, we will notice that Pale fire is also the name of the poem, written by Shade, a character made by Nabokov. Therefore, in that sense, Nabokov is not only the author of Pale Fire as the whole novel, but also the critic of Pale Fire as the critic in the way that he creates Kinbote who makes his comments of the poem. Therefore, we can see that Nabokov has displayed us the construction of *Pale Fire*. That is the sign of metafiction from Nabokov's perspective.

If we do a cloze reading of the poem itself, we will see another sign of metafiction from shade's perspective, the fictional author created by Nabokov. In the poem composed by shade, shade is both the creator, and the critic, because, although the poem is mainly about his personal experience, it also contains shade's view towards some theories and critics. Such argument is supported by various evidence in the poem itself. That is how shade thinks of textuality.

But all at once it dawned on me that this  
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;  
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream  
But a topsy-turvical coincidence,  
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

That is how Shade thinks of some critics.

Brutes, bores, class-conscious Philistines, Freud,  
Marx, Fake thinkers, puffed-up poets, frauds and sharks.

That is how Shade thinks of poets.

Now I shall speak... Better than any soap  
Is the sensation for which poets hope  
When inspiration and its icy blaze,  
The sudden image, the immediate phrase  
Over the skin a triple ripple send  
Making the little hairs all stand on end  
Therefore, we can see that Shade is both the author and the critic.  
Moving on, we can see that Kinbote is still both the author and the critic.  
Kinbote is, without a doubt, the author of the commentary, and also, a critic. Either in the "Foreword" or in the commentary, Kinbote has more or less expressed his critical ideas. For instance, kinbote has talked about the "Foreword" he wrote and the commentary he wrote in the foreword and in the commentary, as a critic of himself. Here is what he says in the foreword.

My Foreword has been, I trust, not too skimpy. Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader.

In my notes to the poem the reader will find these canceled readings. Their places are indicated, or at least suggested, by the draftings of established lines in their immediate neighborhood.

Here is what he says in the commentary.

"I notice a whiff of Swift in some of my notes."

This detailed recollection, whose structure and maculation have taken some time to describe in this note, skimmed through the King's memory in one instant.

Other than that, Kinbote also talks about other things as a critic in his commentary.

"Speaking of novels," I said, "you remember we decided once, you, your husband and I, that Proust's rough masterpiece was a huge, ghoulish fairy tale, an asparagus dream, totally unconnected with any possible people in any historical France, a sexual travestissement and a colossal farce, the vocabulary of genius and its poetry, but no more, impossibly rude hostesses,

That is Kinbote expressing his view on Prust, the famous French novelist.

Other various examples can be given. However, this will suffice. Such a closed and circular system of critiques define Pale Fire as metafiction.

### 3. PARE FIRE AS A PARODY

According to Kiremidjian, parody is "a kind of literary mimicry which retains the form or stylistic character of the primary work, but substitutes alien subject matter or content. The parodist proceeds by imitating as closely as possible the formal conventions of the work being parodied in

matters of style, diction, metre, rhythm, vocabulary (Gontchar, 2017)." Parody is also one of the commonest literary device used in metafiction. How does parody conforms to the definition of metafiction? It is in the way that parody serves both as a creation or as a critique that pose questions between the fiction and reality draws attention to its status as artefact. The original works of the parody can be seen as the reality, while the parodies that parody the original works can be seen as the fiction. Therefore parody poses the questions between reality and fiction. As a critique, however, parody functions, according to Waugh, like this: "The critical function of parody thus discovers which forms can express which contents (Conton, 2018)". Parody as a critique conforms to the definition of metafiction in the way that it draws attention to itself as artefact.

First of all, the title of Pale Fire is a parody that parodies one of Shakespeare's play called *Timon of Athens*. The original text of Shakespeare goes like this:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea. The moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears.

Except for the title, which originally comes from Shakespeare's play. Kinbote, or Nabokov makes up a poem by himself as parody of that of Shakespeare. It goes like this:

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea  
and robs it. The moon is a thief:  
he steals his silvery light from the sun.  
The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon.

Other than that, another parody is that the whole structure of Pale Fire is a parody of the poem *The Dunciad* written by Alexander Pope. Pope's intention in writing *The Dunciad* is to satirize those critics who criticized him. *The Dunciad*, written in heroic couplet, consists of four parts with a commentary made by a fictionalized critic and an Index. Coincidentally, Pale fire written by Nabokov resembles *The Dunciad* in terms of structure, and Nabokov resembles Pope in the way that he is outraged by those critics.

Moreover, Pale Fire is a parody of himself. We know that Nabokov has translated *Eugene Onegin* into English. He is a very unique translator in a sense because, instead of translating the poem in the traditional way in which the exactness of the original poem is destroyed, he decides to translate it in a literary way in which the translation of the poem consists of four parts, namely, the first part that briefly introduces the poem; the second and the third part that provides notes, comments, annotations explaining Russian idioms, background information, meters, rhymes an so forth, with an effort to show the readers the poem as it is; and the last part as an Index. When writing the novel of Pale Fire, he has already finished the translation of *Eugene Onegin*. Therefore, the novel Pale Fire stands as a parody of his own translation.

There are also a variety of parodies in Pale Fire other than the parodies mentioned above. For instance, there are a lot of poems created by Nabokov that parody others. Here is a poem parodies Pope's heroic couplet.

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff - and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

Here is a poem that parodies Wordsworth.

The ginkgo leaf, in golden hue, when shed,  
A muscat grape,  
Is an old-fashioned butterfly, ill-spread,  
In shape.

Parodies can almost be found everywhere in Pale Fire. Such frequent use of parody serves as a solid foundation for Pale Fire as metafiction.

### 4. PALE FIRE AS A STORY WITHIN A STORY

The uses of the story within a story is one of the most commonly used literary feature or literary device in metafiction. Although it is often neglected, the story within a story is one of the most distinctive feature of Pale Fire as metafiction. The uses of the story within a story is unique in

*Pale Fire*. According to Peggy Ward Corn, there are two types of story within a story traditionally. "Traditionally, works employing the story within a story have consisted of a frame story introducing but almost never concluding the "real" or main story (Ardila, 2018)" and "Another type of story within a story reverses the emphasis: in this second type the outer story is the main one, and the inner story is the fragment (Ardila, 2018). The use of the story within a story in *Pale Fire* falls into the third type of Peggy called the Russian doll fiction. He says that "Like the first two types, it consists of two distinct narrative planes, on which reside two distinct stories (Ardila, 2018)".

There are two seemingly completely different story in *Pale Fire*. One is the story of Shade, mainly manifested in the poem he wrote, while the other one is the story of Kinbote, manifested in the commentary. *Pale Fire* as a story within a story conforms with the definition of metafiction in the way that both stories pose questions between reality and fiction, explore fictionality outside literary works, and that when readers try to combine the two stories, they have, in a way they ordinary tend to neglect, seen *Pale Fire* as artefact.

When we read *Pale Fire*, one of the most important question that firstly pops out is that what is the relationship between the two irrelevant stories. What should we, the readers, do to understand such a story? Obviously, the answer lies in the interplay of the two stories. Like Peggy said, "In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov makes the most of the interplay between the two narratives to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts (Ardila, 2018)". Therefore, what the readers should do is to find things in common between the two stories. Peggy has also expressed it similarly, "The essence of the Russian doll work lies in its doubleness, in the way it compels a reader to shuttle between the two stories and somehow synthesize them (Ardila, 2018)". If we take a look at the first story of Shade, we will find that the theme of Shade's poem is about the existence of human lives. As Peggy said: "Each canto meditates on death and the possibility of an afterlife for his daughter and himself (Ardila, 2018)". Shade is obsessed with the afterlife of human beings, so that he even takes a visit to the woman who is died and then revived. Shade tries to make sense of whatever it is after death. After Shade finds out from the reporter that the woman witnesses a mountain instead of a fountain, he comes to a conclusion that goes like this:

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight;  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is an iambic line.

Shade eventually begins to seek harmony in verse. From that story, we can see that Shade's story not only poses a question between reality, his current being, and fiction, whatever it is after death, but also raise the question of, or the fictionality of what is after life. As of Kinbote's story, we can also see a story similar in the way of thinking the questions between reality and fiction. Kinbote, unlike Shade, who is keenly aware of his reality, cannot distinguish between reality and fiction. Kinbote always thinks that the poem that Shade makes is a one about his fictionalized country, Zembla. In fact, according to the Index, Kinbote's real name is Botkin, an American scholar of Russian descent. Moreover, in real life, Kinbote is only an aging homosexual who is unattractive to young men. His whole endeavor of making up a fictionalized story of Zembla in his annotations of the poem is his way to escape from reality. In that sense, Kinbote's story also poses a question between reality, Kinbote as who he really is and the original meaning of the poem, and the fiction, his whole fictionalized story of Zembla.

These two stories reflects one another in a unique way. Kinbote's searching for the affirmation of his delusions is in sharp contrast with Shade's attempt to harmonize the current life and whatever it is after death. One thing they have in common, however, is that they both try to solve the question between reality and fiction, although in a opposite way. We, as the readers, in figuring out the two stories, are also subconsciously engaged in a quest similar with that of Kinbote's and Shade's. We also, after sorting out the two stories, try to solve the question between the two stories, which can be seen as fiction compared with the whole novel, and the whole novel, which can be seen as the reality as the whole novel as *Pale Fire*. Also, when we try to solve the question between the fiction and the reality, we can only do so with the presupposition that there is a fictionalized novel called *Pale Fire* as a whole. Because without that presupposition, there is no unifying the two stories as *Pale Fire*.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Pale Fire* is not the like ordinary literary works that we usually know. It is undoubtedly splendid metafiction. The three most distinctive feature that define *Pale Fire* as metafiction are all very peculiar literary phenomena rarely seen in other traditional literary works.

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