Nabokov’s Novels: Unreliable Narration in Pale Fire, Lolita, and Pnin

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Abstract:
When reading a novel, readers expect, perhaps unfairly, that the narrator is telling the truth. Occasionally, a narrator is lying to his audience. In 1961, Wayne C. Booth created the first theoretical definition of unreliable narration. His definition relied on his concept of implied authors, and since then, many critics have expanded on his definition. Ansgar Nünning’s concept places more emphasis on the role of the reader determining unreliability. Vladimir Nabokov creates unreliable narrators in three of his novels: Pale Fire (1953), Lolita (1955), and Pnin (1962). Nabokov’s unreliable narrators manipulate the events within their novels. The narrators’ unreliability ends up revealing the nature of the reader more than the nature of the narrator. Each narrator is unreliable in a different way. In Pale Fire, Charles Kinbote suffers from insanity, and he cannot properly interpret the scenes that he observes. In Lolita, Humbert Humbert purposefully manipulates events in order to make the reader feel sympathy for him. In Pnin, Vladimir Vladimirovich writes about scenes that he did not observe in order to make himself feel better about mistreating the main character of Pnin. In general, these novels create a unified response from readers. The reader ends up hating Kinbote for not creating a cohesive story. She sympathizes with Humbert because his command of the English language creates a beautiful story. She admires Vladimirovich and makes fun of Pnin. Nabokov’s examples of unreliability become a reflection of the reader and force the reader to examine her own concept of the truth and the way that humanity interprets the truth. Unreliability becomes a weapon that Nabokov wields not only to create his character, but also to force readers to examine the expectations of truth. Ultimately, the reader finds that even the truth has its own requirements.
When one reads a novel, the characters become familiar friends or enemies. Readers expect, perhaps unfairly, that the narrator is telling the truth. Although it is rare for narrators to give a completely unbiased account, it is also rare for narrators to provide a completely untrue account. Vladimir Nabokov creates unreliable narrators in three of his novels: *Pale Fire* (1953), *Lolita* (1955), and *Pnin* (1962) in order to confront readers with their expectations of the truth. *Pale Fire* is presented as a commentary by Charles Kinbote on a poem entitled “Pale Fire.” *Lolita* is a fake memoir written by Humbert Humbert, a man who has a sexual fascination with his stepdaughter. *Pnin* follows Dr. Timofey Pnin throughout the everyday occurrences of his professional and personal life and is narrated by the character Vladimir Vladimirovich. Kinbote, Humbert, and Vladimirovich are untrustworthy for different reasons. Kinbote lies to the reader, but he thinks he is telling the truth. Humbert’s self-involvement forces the reader to see only his perspective, manipulating the reader into caring solely about him. Vladimirovich is not present for many of the events that he describes, giving the reader false descriptions to create his own story.

Each of these novels has an unreliable narrator telling a different story, but Nabokov uses the role of the unreliable narrator to reveal the nature of the reader rather than the nature of the narrator. In *Pale Fire*, *Lolita*, and *Pnin*, Nabokov creates examples of unreliable narrators, but each narrator has different reasons for his unreliability, forcing the reader to examine her own concept of the truth and the way that humanity interprets the truth. Kinbote’s madness makes him untrustworthy, as he is not sane enough to properly narrate the events around him. Instead of caring about his mental health issues, the reader ends up hating him. Humbert defends himself against a jury of readers, attempting to show that he cannot solely be blamed for his actions, and the reader ends up feeling sympathy for him. Vladimirovich wants to prove that he is not as awful as others who have picked on Pnin, reminding the reader of her own shortcomings as a human being. By manipulating these narrators, Nabokov manipulates the readership. Each narrator evokes a unified response from most readers. Kinbote’s insanity irritates the reader. Humbert’s defense causes the reader to feel sympathy. Vladimirovich’s justifications emphasize the reader’s ability to justify her own actions. How do readers interpret themselves when they sympathize with a pedophile but abhor a mentally unstable man? What does it say when a reader
laughs at Pnin and sees Vladimirovich as a hero? Nabokov’s manipulations of language force the reader to confront her own concept about truth. How much does the “truth” really matter? These novels confront the reader with what she thought were truths about herself and shows her that she can be manipulated.

During the time period that Nabokov wrote these three novels, the world of art was transitioning into the postmodern period. As critic Steven Connor describes, “Postmodernist work attempts to draw experience and meaning, shock, and analysis into synchrony” (10). Postmodern literature experimented with new narrative strategies and broke down weighty concepts to question the limits of their existence. Nabokov explores both these facets of postmodernism in *Pale Fire, Lolita,* and *Pnin,* as he creates unreliable narrators and plays with the function of truth.

Unreliable narration is a concept that is easily defined but hard to understand. An unreliable narrator is a narrator the reader cannot trust. In 2011, Dan Shen writes, “Unreliability is a feature of narratorial discourse. If a narrator, misreports, -interprets or -evaluates, or if she/he underreports, -interprets or -evaluates this narrator is unreliable or untrustworthy.” Although this definition provides a simple context for unreliability, it is insufficient as it does not set parameters for how to determine unreliability. In 1961, Wayne C. Booth created the first theoretical definition of unreliable narrators in *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* He claims, “For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (158-159). Booth defines the implied author: “The ‘implied author’ chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices” (74-5).

Booth interconnects his notion of implied authors to unreliable narration, and many critics have expanded on his definition. While Booth’s definition places more emphasis on the author, Ansgar Nünning’s concept places more emphasis on the role of the reader determining unreliability. Nünning finds fault with Booth’s definition, commenting, “This canonical definition does not really make for clarity but rather sets the fox to keep the geese, as it were,
since it falls back on the ill-defined and elusive notion of the implied author, which hardly
provides a reliable basis for determining a narrator’s unreliability” (“Unreliable” 53). He
continues, “It would be more adequate to conceptualize unreliable narration in the context of
frame theory as a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual
inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator’s unreliability” (“Unreliable” 54). He believes,
“The information on which the projection of an unreliable narrator is based derives at least as
much from within the mind of the beholder as from textual data” (“Unreliable” 61). This
definition relies solely on the reader’s perceptions. Unreliable narration becomes subjective as it
is based on one person’s textual evidence and allows each reader to interpret unreliability in
different ways.

In order to address the idea that each reader could interpret unreliability differently,
Nünning reconceptualized the idea of unreliable narration based on four principles: the theory
and definition of unreliable narration, typological distinctions of different kinds of unreliability,
textual clues and frame of reference in projections of unreliable narrators, and the roles of the
reader, text, and author (“Reconceptualizing” 90). Nünning writes, “In the end it is both the
structure and norms established by the respective work itself and designed by an authorial
agency, and the reader’s knowledge, psychological disposition, and system of norms and values
that provide the ultimate guidelines for deciding whether a narrator is judged to be unreliable or
not” (“Reconceptualizing” 105). His overarching concept creates a definition of unreliable
narration that is not as reliant on the concept of implied author. Instead, unreliability is
interpreted by the reader. A reader-based interpretation of unreliability changes the parameters
for unreliability, as it forces the reader to examine how she identifies reliability and unreliability.

Greta Olson attempts to rework both Booth and Nünning’s studies of unreliable narration
to create one unified definition. Olsen finds fault with both of these models, explaining, “Booth’s
model gives authority to an implied author whose norms form the basis from which questions of
reliability can be addressed, whereas Nünning’s model assumes the limited validity of subjective
reader response” (99). Olson’s model creates a distinction between fallible and untrustworthy
narrators. Olson describes, “Fallible narrators do not reliably report on narrative events because
they are mistaken about their judgements or perceptions or are biased” (101), while
“untrustworthy narrators strike us as being dispositionally unreliable. The inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest” (102). She adds, “When narrators are untrustworthy, their accounts have to be altered in order to make sense of their discrepancies. Fallible narrators by contrast make individual mistakes or leave open informational gaps that need to be filled in. Untrustworthy narrators meet with our skepticism about their characters, whereas fallible narrators are more likely to be excused for their failures to deliver on the informational goods” (104-5). Olson’s distinction provides the most productive theory to examine Nabokov’s narrators. According to this distinction, Charles Kinbote, Humbert Humbert, and Vladimir Vladimirovich are unreliable narrators, not fallible narrators. Each of these narrators uses unreliability to manipulate the reader’s perceptions.

Coupled with Olson’s definition of unreliable narrators, William Riggan’s 1981 taxonomy of unreliable narrator types helps to put Nabokov’s narrators in context. He believes that first person narration is “always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives. Furthermore, precisely because the narrator sits before us as a human being—albeit a fictionalized one—we naturally react to him in varying degrees in human terms and not just as a disembodied voice providing us with information” (19-20). Riggan divides unreliable narrators into four separate characters: the pícaro, the clown, the madman, and the naïf. A pícaro comes from a picaresque novel, and Riggan claims that by the time the pícaro is narrating his life experiences, he has become a different person, and thus his autobiography is subject to unreliability (42-3). In defining the clown, Riggan returns to the traditional ideal of a fool or court jester (80-2). Clowns are characterized by “a farcical mood rather than one of contemptuous or bitter satire” (107). As Riggan sees it, “the madman’s narrative is therefore extremely unreliable in rendering an accurate picture of the occurrences and actions which constitute his story and also in the valuative and evaluative interpretations which he places on those elements of his narrative” (143). For the naïf, Riggan believes, “the unreliable nature of the narrative is used to convey the implied author’s vilification or at least his serious critique of given social norms and practices” (169). Riggan’s definitions provide a
context for classifying Nabokov’s narrators: Kinbote is a madman, Humbert is a clown, and Vladimirovich is a naïf.

Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is a commentary written by Charles Kinbote. The foreword explains “Pale Fire” was written by poet John Francis Shade. The poem “Pale Fire” splits into four cantos, and it is autobiographical. The four cantos describe all the events of Shade’s life from his childhood to the day before he dies. From the beginning of the commentary, it is obvious that Kinbote is different. After his friend has died, he manipulates Shade’s grieving widow into “signing an agreement to the effect that [Shade] had turned over the manuscript to me” (16). It is a ruthless move that shows the reader where Kinbote’s priorities are. Although Shade’s poem is autobiographical, Kinbote consciously twists the meanings of words and lines to tell a new story. Instead of seeing Shade’s life, Kinbote sees the story of the beloved King Charles, the king of his home country, Zembla.

At first, Kinbote’s unreliability is easy to forgive. He is an immigrant from a distant country, and American customs would be new to him. For example, a good teaching day came for him when he practiced Zemblan wrestling moves on some of his pupils in front of students and teachers (98). He wants to see Zembla in Shade’s poem because he wants to remember his homeland. As the commentary progresses, though, it is hard to trust that his foreign nature is the reason for his interpretation mistakes.

Initially, only Kinbote’s relationship with Shade is doubtful. Kinbote writes, “…I had my full reward in John’s friendship” (25). Kinbote believes he and Shade are the closest of companions, but Kinbote’s documentation of scenes shows that this is not true. For example, Kinbote observes Shade’s birthday dinner, an event to which he was not invited. Kinbote keeps watch over his neighbor’s house, documenting the guests who come and go. He interprets the lack of his invitation as Sybil controlling her husband, instead of realizing that he was not wanted (157-163). Critic Brian Boyd writes, “Kinbote sees himself as Shade’s intimate friend and his male muse, the envy of New Wye. In fact, although Shade shows more tolerance than others toward a disconcerting eccentric, although his essential humaneness make him unwilling to hurt a tiresome neighbor, although he even derives pleasure from the wild colors of Kinbote’s
fancy, he also sees quite clearly Kinbote’s repellant self-obsession and offensive insensitivity to others” (433). What Kinbote imagines as the closeness of friendship is merely politeness on Shade’s part. Sybil’s antagonistic nature toward Kinbote could be real, but it is more likely imagined by the narrator. Kinbote interprets many of the actions against him as jealousy, but Sybil is trying to protect her husband from the annoyance that is Kinbote. For example, the Shades are planning a vacation, and Sybil tells Kinbote that they do not know for sure where they are going. Kinbote finds the destination from a fellow companion and plans to follow them to their location. Kinbote writes, “The more I fumed at Sybil’s evident intention to keep it concealed from me, the sweeter was the forevision of my sudden emergence in Tirolese garb from behind a boulder and of John’s sheepish but pleased grin” (182-3). Kinbote cannot ascertain that Shade is just as reluctant to reveal the location of their vacation, and Sybil is willing to be evasive in order to protect her husband.

Kinbote also has no sense of privacy towards the couple. He writes that the urge to witness Shade working on his poem “led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop” (87). One night, Kinbote sneaks over to Shade’s house to hear him reading the poem to Sybil. Both are crying, but this invokes Kinbote’s curiosity instead of his respect for their privacy. Instead of retreating, he comes closer, knocking over a garbage can. Sybil hastens to shut the window, suggesting they know that Kinbote is spying on them. Still, this act does not discourage Kinbote, and he lets himself into their home (89-91). Boyd remarks on Kinbote’s failure to understand human interaction: “Precisely because we value the differences between people, the independence of the human spirit, we cannot permit others to intrude on the privacy of the soul. Kinbote ignores the basic human decorum” (447). Because Kinbote cannot understand human decorum, he cannot correctly interpret the actions of other people. Kinbote wants to replace Sybil as Shade’s confidante, and he does not understand why she is not easily replaced. His constant interruptions that night keep Kinbote from hearing the poem. He is intrigued by their crying, rather than seeing the matter as private. What he does not realize is that Shade is reading aloud Canto Two, a praise of Sybil as well as a reflection on the life of their daughter Hazel who committed suicide.
Kinbote’s constant desire to read Zembla into the poem is revealed in the fact that he believes himself to be Charles the Beloved, the king who was forced to leave Zembla because of revolutionaries. For a short amount of time, the reader can believe this reveal, as it provides an explanation for Kinbote’s personality. Adjusting to a new life as a foreigner becomes even harder when you have been a king all your life. It also explains his desire to incorporate the story of Charles the Beloved into Shade’s poem. His existence as Charles the Beloved would be immortalized in the poem. As he documents the details of his rule and his escape, it is easy to believe that he is the escaped king of Zembla until the end of the commentary.

Kinbote’s commentary leads readers to believe that the killer accidentally shot Shade when he was aiming for Kinbote. The killer’s name is Jack Grey, and he escaped from the Institute for the Criminal Insane in order to kill Judge Goldsworth, whom he blames for his imprisonment (295). In a previous passage, Shade claims that he looks like Judge Goldsworth (267). Kinbote recalls that he spoke with Grey, who confessed everything, including his true identity as Gradus, a revolutionary on the hunt for King Charles (299). At this point in the novel, the only proof is Kinbote’s word, which is no longer good enough to rely on.

The optimistic reader wants to believe that Kinbote is not insane. He is foreign, so it is quite possible that his misfortunes as a professor and a neighbor happen because he does not know how to act like a normal American, given that he has always been a Zemblan king. The farther the novel progresses, it becomes harder to remain optimistic. Ramona Ausubel calls Kinbote “the ultimate unreliable narrator” because he mimics readers who create their own interpretation of texts (662). Since the novel is filtered through Kinbote’s thoughts, it is hard to determine the level of his insanity, although much of the logic leans toward the fact that he must be insane to some degree. Boyd explains, “Kinbote lives within a complex and intricate network of delusions typical of the classical paranoiac. Not only do his delusions have the fixity and logical coherence of all paranoia, but he even manifests in rotation the symptoms of all three main kinds: the grandiose, the persecutory, and the erotic” (433). He continues, “Delusions of grandeur are the rarest and usually the most severe form of paranoia, and in contrast to the grandiose delusions in mania and schizophrenia they tend to be well-organized, relatively stable,
and persistent” (433). Because of Kinbote’s insanity, he is convinced that he is a Zemblan king, and his delusions support him.

Although frustrating for the reader, this is the strength of Kinbote’s unreliability. Even he is not entirely aware of how much he can be trusted. Because of his delusions and his misunderstanding of human interactions, he cannot accurately interpret everyday life. Kinbote consciously twists the meaning of the poem to create his own story, but he is not consciously lying to the reader. He believes he is telling the truth, which makes him the perfect unreliable narrator. Since Kinbote is constantly changing his story, the reader ends up hating him.

*Pale Fire* is an unconventional novel, and its relentless conflicting information becomes hard to sift through. It is hard to know how to read Kinbote. He provides too much conflicting information for a definite answer on his mental stability. He calls himself a “lunatic who imagines himself to be that king” (301) when he is predicting his next step. This line can be interpreted in many ways, ranging from an admission that he is a lunatic to a mere statement of one possibility among many. Kinbote’s unreliability as a narrator comes from his insanity. No clear answer determines the extent of Kinbote’s insanity, which makes it impossible to determine what is actually real beyond what he believes is real. The novel becomes impossible to interpret, because the reader has no way of knowing what is fact and what is fiction.

Ramona Ausubel claims that *Pale Fire* is a feat for Nabokov. She writes, “…the character Nabokov has written best is his reader. He created a story borne from the complicated and unlikely theories of an absurd academic and, as if drawn magnetically, living versions of the same figure began to inhabit the space around the book. We’re all Kinbotes, reading our own story, our own theories, into the text. I am the unreliable narrator of *Pale Fire*, and so are you” (662). The text provides evidence for lots of different outcomes, depending on the theory that the reader wants to pursue or believe. Many readers write Kinbote off as a lunatic and are unwilling to hear his story, as they become frustrated by the multiple interpretations of the story. Even with his insanity, Kinbote is a difficult narrator to feel sympathy for. What does it mean for readers when they cannot feel sympathy for a narrator because of their frustration? Nabokov’s creation of Kinbote manipulates the reader into hating a mentally ill character, because he does not tell
his reader the truth. This revelation shows that a cohesive story matters and that humanity suffers from a lack of empathy. Readers are not willing to look past their frustration to care about the problems that a narrator suffering from mental illness would face. Instead, it becomes easier to hate and dismiss Kinbote rather than try to understand him.

While *Pale Fire* makes an innocent man a hated character, *Lolita* achieves the opposite by making the reader feel sympathy for a guilty man. Instead of hating a despicable narrator, the reader ends up feeling sorry for him. The novel begins with a foreword from the fictional John Ray Jr., Ph.D. He reveals that the title is actually *Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*. It explains that Humbert Humbert, the writer’s pseudonym, died in prison. The commentator defends the decision to omit names but keep intimate details because Ray wants to present the story as a case study. He writes, “As a case history, *Lolita* will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles” (5), suggesting that Humbert’s story is a representation of other cases. This foreword serves as a warning for readers who now know what the book is about and can decide to continue reading or not. It also promises salacious details will follow.

*Lolita* is Humbert Humbert’s autobiography. He writes the novel as a defense he could read during his murder trial, so the memoir is meant to make the jury feel sympathy towards Humbert. Humbert traces the beginning of his problems to his childhood. In a story reminiscent of Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” Humbert reveals that as a teenager, he fell in love with Annabel, a young girl who loves him back. The two are set to consummate their love for each other until they are interrupted, and months later, she dies. Because of her death, Humbert’s affections only form toward “nymphetts.” He describes the term as girls between the ages of nine and fourteen, with “certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm” (17).

Unlike Kinbote’s, Humbert’s unreliability is harder to pin down. Kinbote’s unreliability slips through the cracks of his commentary. Humbert’s unreliability comes through in his one-sided observations. The autobiography is meant to be read at Humbert’s trial. Boyd claims, “Humbert’s strategy of course is to seem as if he is not defending himself at all” (230). In many ways, he is brutally honest. He describes his sexual encounters. He plots to hurt his first wife,
Valeria, after she reveals she is leaving him, and he muses on murdering Charlotte Haze. He depicts his obsession with his pre-teen stepdaughter Dolores, whom he calls Lolita. He admits to murdering Clare Quilty, the man with whom Lolita escaped. Boyd describes that “Humbert is puffed up with vanity. He boasts of his looks, his libido, his discriminating sensitivity, his intelligence, his love…he is brutally indifferent to other lives” (232). Despite these prideful descriptions of his nature, the reader has to remind herself that Humbert is a villain. Since he appears to be honest, it is hard to remember his intentions and that he is not being truthful.

Humbert is only concerned with himself, and this is clear through his treatment of Lolita. For Humbert, Lolita is his perfect nymphet. Though he toys with the idea of murdering Charlotte Haze, he does not. Still, Lolita ends up in his care after Haze conveniently dies. It is Lolita who begins their sexual relationship. It is Lolita who manipulates him, who escapes from him when his love was purer than Quilty’s. Boyd writes, “By making it possible to see Humbert’s story so much from Humbert’s point of view, Nabokov warns us to recognize the power of the mind to rationalize away the harm it can cause: the more powerful the mind, the stronger our guard needs to be” (232). Lance Olsen explains, “Humbert carefully manipulates his discourse, over which he is monarch, Humbert the Hummer, selecting, interpreting, and altering details for his own ends. His first-person point of view tends to win our sympathy, primarily during our early readings of the text, because its mouthpiece is savvy, cultivated, fairly well-off, wonderfully educated, and witty” (50). Nabokov’s creation of Humbert is brilliant because he makes it hard for readers to hate him. Instead, readers feel sympathy for a monster.

Humbert’s unreliability is difficult, if only because readers continuously have to remember that he is unreliable when he is documenting his story. Humbert’s self-involvement paints those around him in a negative light, guarding his true nature from the reader, who has to remind herself that she should hate him. Humbert’s command of the English language and his manipulation of the story of his life causes readers to feel sorry for him. He cannot be blamed for the life he has led. He is cursed with this infatuation for nymphaets because he lost his soulmate Annabel. He contrasts himself with Quilty, who he believes is a true pervert because it was Quilty who pressured Lolita into “weird, filthy, fancy things” (276), not him. It does not bother him that his actions have consequences because he only cares for himself. Boyd writes, “His
book may possibly immortalize Lolita, but his conduct has quite certainly hastened her death. The girl he pretended he might have killed as his Carmen he has indeed killed young by thrusting her so early into the adult world” (250). Although he portrays himself as a better man than Quilty, his love for her is not pure or selfless. He had to have her, and one of the consequences of that act was her premature death. Because of his death, the jury never gets to hear his defense, but readers do, becoming the judges of Humbert’s case. Olsen claims:

He is plainly guilty of all the charges we have so far leveled against him, and probably others betimes. Nevertheless, he is more than that as well. Because we hear his story conveyed through his voice, we come to see that at times he is also sadly sympathetic, at times hurtfully human, almost always (if nothing else) spookily understandable. *Lolita* is therefore not so much a novel about Humbert Humbert’s being on trial before a jury (with each reader as final judge) as it is a book about his being on trial before himself, a trial during which he finds himself painfully lacking. From this angle, the narrative is finally one of education—not only Lo’s and ours concerning the horrors inherent in humanity but also Hum’s concerning the horrors inherent in himself. (51-2).

Because the reader believes that Humbert is telling the truth, the reader cannot see beyond his excuses. Instead, it seems as if there were no other alternative way for his life to play out. Even if the reader remembers that Humbert is not trustworthy, he still appears as the victim of all the events of his life. His manipulation of the story causes readers to have sympathy for him, instead of hating him.

If *Pale Fire* makes an innocent narrator into a hateful character and *Lolita* creates sympathy for a monster, *Pnin* varies from these perspectives by having an outside narrator become the hero. In *Pnin*, the first-person narrator is not the main character, Professor Timofey Pnin. Instead, the narrator is a removed “I” who first appears on page sixteen. The narrator comments on the occurrences of Pnin’s life, but he ends up unwittingly revealing details about himself. The narrator begins by recalling Pnin’s trip to Cremona to deliver a lecture, but disaster befalls him as he is on the wrong train. The narrator continues his commentary on the occurrences of Pnin’s life over the course of several years. He documents the reactions of others to Pnin. For example, Professor Clements and his wife are looking for a boarder as their daughter
has recently married and moved out. Clements remarks, “I flatly refuse to have that freak in my house” (32). However, the couple ends up boarding Pnin, and “it should be said for both Laurence and Joan that rather soon they began to appreciate Pnin at his unique Pnian worth” (39). The narrator regales the reader with the story of Pnin’s ex-wife, Dr. Liza Wind, who married him at the behest of her friends, left him for another man, and returned to him to move to America and start over. It turns out, however, that Liza had only returned to him for passage to America, as her lover is still married, and he will be able to marry her in America. She comes to Pnin now to inform him that she is divorcing her husband to be with another man. She asks Pnin to give her money to help her provide for her son. Pnin, who “would have given her a divorce as readily as he would his life” (46), wails to Joan after Liza leaves, “‘I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing!’” (61).

The narrator reveals that there are some people who appreciate Pnin. Coincidentally enough, one of them is Victor, Liza’s son. Liza told Victor about Pnin, and everything Liza says becomes a mystery, so “the figure of the great Timofey Pnin, scholar and gentleman, teaching a practically dead language at the famous Waindell College…acquired in Victor’s hospitable mind a curious charm” (88). Victor gives him a beautiful aquamarine glass bowl as a present. Boyd believes, “Victor’s tribute will be the only victory that nothing can destroy” (276). In the summer of 1954, Pnin travels to spend the summer with his friend, Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov. Here, surrounded by “émigré Russians—liberals and intellectuals who had left Russia around 1920” (117), Pnin is a different person. In this environment, people understand and respect Pnin. It is also revealed that Pnin’s first love, Mira, died in a concentration camp, furthering the romantic tragedies of Pnin’s life.

In chapter six, the narrator sets the stage for his arrival into Pnin’s life. Pnin is renting a house, and he reveals his intentions to buy the house. Dr. Hagen, one of Pnin’s co-workers, tells Pnin that he has accepted another position, and despite his efforts, he cannot find Pnin a job in one of the other departments. Dr. Hagen comforts Pnin by telling him, “‘You’ll be glad to know that the English Department is inviting one of your most brilliant compatriots, a really fascinating lecturer—I have heard him once; I think he’s an old friend of yours’” (169).
Although Pnin is to be fired, Dr. Hagen believes he can appeal to this friend. Pnin replies, “‘We are friends, but there is one thing perfectly certain. I will never work under him’” (170).

In chapter seven, the narrator is finally revealed as Vladimir Vladimirovich, that lecturer and friend Dr. Hagen had described. Boyd claims, “Chapter 7 closes the novel and suddenly opens it up. Only now does the story’s hitherto virtually faceless narrator come to life as a distinct individual” (276). The narrator recollects meeting Pnin for the first time. At twelve-years-old, he visited Pnin’s father, the ophthalmologist, Dr. Pavel Pnin, since a piece of dust had become lodged into his eye. During his visit, Dr. Pnin brought Pnin into his office to praise him for receiving an A+ on an algebra examination (177). Five years later, the narrator saw Pnin again when Pnin and his friend are staging a play. Years later, the narrator and Pnin meet again in Paris; Pnin is an “erudite young author of several admirable papers on Russian culture” (179). The narrator tells Pnin and their group of friends of their other encounters, but Pnin does not remember any of it. Instead, Pnin discredits each of these meetings. Vladimirovich recalls, “He said he vaguely recalled my grandaunt but had never met me. He said that his marks in algebra had always been poor and that, anyway, his father never displayed him to patients; he said that in Zabava (Liebelei) he had only acted the part of Christine’s father” (180). The narrator believes, “Our little discussion was nothing more than good-natured banter, and everybody laughed; and noticing how reluctant he was to recognize his own past, I switched to another, less personal, topic” (180). It is also revealed that Vladimirovich had a love affair with Liza, Pnin’s ex-wife, before she married Pnin. At an informal gathering six years later, the narrator sees Liza and Pnin. They become friends, and “one night, as Dr. Barakan, Pnin, and I were sitting at the Bolotovs…when Pnin suddenly cried to Dr. Barakan across the table: ‘Now, don’t believe a word he says, Georgiy Aramovich. He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor…’ Barakan and I were so astounded by this outburst that we just sat and looked at each other in silence” (185). Pnin’s outburst dismisses Vladimirovich as a liar, but the reader is already aware of this fact. Otherwise, he would not be willing to narrate events that he was not present for.

Vladimirovich reveals that when he accepted the job at Waindell, he offered Pnin a position. Pnin refuses, which he says “surprised me and hurt me” (186). Pnin is retiring, and he
will be leaving Waindell days before Vladimirovich is meant to give a lecture. Vladimirovich stays with the Cockerells. Cockerell imitates and regales Vladimirovich with stories of Pnin for hours, and he writes, “I must admit that Jack Cockerell impersonated Pnin to perfection” (187). After the group has had some Scotch, Jack recommends they call Pnin. In a poorly disguised voice, Pnin answers to tell them that he is not home. Jack proposes driving out to see him at home, but his wife discourages them. The next morning, Vladimirovich goes to see Pnin, but he is driving away, but he does not see nor stop for Vladimirovich even though he calls out. He watches Pnin drive up the road, “which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen” (191). Returning back home, Cockerell tells him, “I am going to tell you the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women’s Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture” (191). Thus, the novel ends as it began.

Vladimir Vladimirovich is an unreliable narrator in that he describes events for which he was not present. He recounts specific details about Pnin’s life, even going so far as to describe his innermost thoughts. Boyd describes, “Mistake-prone Pnin comes to sum up all human mishaps and misfortunes, the strange blend of comedy and tragedy in all human life” (272). Thus, Vladimirovich becomes the author of Pnin’s life, manipulating the events that happen to him every day to create a story. These dishonest descriptions show that Vladimirovich is willing to take liberties with Pnin’s emotions and thoughts in order to tell his own story. Boyd reveals:

From the first [Nabokov] designed Pnin as a contrast to Humbert. Humbert, a foreigner easily accepted in America, thanks to his good looks and his suave English, conceals a rotten heart beneath his reputation as a scholar and a gentleman. Pnin’s noble, generous heart, on the other hand, beats within the body of a clown whose every phrase in English is an unwitting joke. Humbert marries Charlotte Haze for his own sordid ends. Pnin marries Liza only to become the pawn in her callous games. And where Humbert abuses his role as Lolita’s stepfather, Pnin’s relation to a son not his own will be the purest and most touching triumph in his story. (274-5).
Undoubtedly, Pnin is a better person than Humbert, but he is not as respected. Boyd interprets that “Nabokov…suggests how far the easy images that we make of one another fall short of the truth and become less than human. Unwilling to see beyond Pnin’s looks, his clumsiness, his cracked English, most at Waindell College fail to recognize Pnin’s high standards and refuse to see that his bizarre idioms may be an index less of innate grotesquerie than of the pain and dislocation of exile” (278). Because the characters surrounding Pnin view him as a source of amusement, the reader ends up viewing Pnin as a comedic, rather than a tragic or even heroic, figure.

In describing Pnin’s life, Vladimirovich attempts to redeem himself, as well as Pnin. By the end of the novel, he has shaped Pnin into a noble, heroic character. In contrasting his behavior with those of the people around him, Vladimirovich hopes to prove that he is not as much of a bully as these other figures. As he chronicles the events of Pnin’s life, he ends up making himself into a hero and ignoring Pnin. By manipulating the events of Pnin’s life, he takes liberties that he does not deserve, as he creates descriptions of Pnin’s thoughts and emotions, revealing matters that are private. A reader cannot fault Vladimirovich for his behavior, however, because she has often justified her own behavior by comparing it to the actions of others. Nabokov’s narrator forces the reader to confront her own complicity in treating people as though they are lesser.

Nabokov’s unreliable narrators can be categorized into Riggan’s categories. Kinbote of *Pale Fire* fills the role of the madman. Riggan writes that madman narrators “very soon evoke doubts in the integrity and trustworthiness of their narration through sundry reasoning, gross errors or contradictions in fact which they unwittingly expose, stridency of tone and unwarranted defensiveness of posture, blatant absurdities in ideas or supposed facts, and obsessive preoccupations which unconsciously dominate their minds and therefore their narratives” (143). Kinbote believes that he is the king of a foreign country. He creates a connection between himself, Shade, and Gradus. He believes himself to be the closest companion of Shade’s. But the reader sees through the holes in Kinbote’s madness and cannot trust in Kinbote’s sanity.
At first, it would appear that Humbert Humbert should also be a madman. After all, no sane man would commit Humbert’s acts. However, Riggan sees Humbert as a clown. He describes, “Much of Lolita’s parody, cynicism, and irony is Humbert’s own: the ironic projection of himself as ‘nastiness’ and ‘beastliness’ personified, the many elaborate masks and voices, the subtle literary and cryptogrammatic games, the identification with and subsequent destruction of Quilty, the elegant and bemused satires of towns and travels and people” (95). Humbert’s dark humor keeps his story fresh and makes his moments of seriousness surprisingly poignant. By adopting this persona, Humbert is continuously distancing himself from the jury of readers set to judge him.

Vladimir Vladimirovich becomes the naïf persona. By writing this memoir of Pnin, Vladimirovich hopes to separate himself from those who are cruel to Pnin. Riggan writes, “The naïve narrator embodies in his actions, words, and character a positive opposing spirit to the malaise, though he may demonstrate some of its superficial symptoms” (170). In protecting himself, Vladimirovich mistreats Pnin. Vladimirovich refuses to disclose what he told Liza that made her attempt suicide, but he copies word-for-word Pnin’s private love letter to Liza. He refuses to acknowledge how his actions have hurt Pnin (182-3). Although he wants to believe that his intentions are good, he ends up making himself a hero and disregarding the pain of Pnin’s life.

At the end of Kinbote’s forward, he writes, “…it is the commentator who has the last word” (29). Ausubel thinks Nabokov wanted critics to realize that “neither the writer’s image nor the reader’s is more real than the other. Neither is more correct. Between them, in that space, might be where the truth is. Keep writing, keep reading, keep talking and maybe we’ll get some truth. Anything but silence” (664). She asserts, “The whole project of Pale Fire might be to say that there is, finally, happily, no such thing [as the last word]” (664). With Lolita, Nabokov manipulates his readers again. Olsen writes, “The book urges us to re-experience the beauty and intricacy of expression” (9). Humbert’s command of English paints his experiences in a positive light. Boyd claims, “Because Nabokov leaves the story to Humbert, every page of the novel crackles with tension: between Humbert’s free self-consciousness and his unrelenting obsession, between his sense of guilt and his confidence that his special case renders other people’s codes of
conduct irrelevant” (227). *Pnin* forces the reader to reconsider her habit of viewing people as entertainment. Boyd writes that in the end *Pnin* “confronts us with our complicity in treating Pnin as an object of amusement” (278). Kinbote’s unreliability is a function of his insanity and his misinterpreting other people’s behavior. Humbert’s unreliability is because he is protecting himself. He wants to be seen as the victim of the tragedies in his life, rather than the cause. Vladimirovich’s unreliability stems from his desire to make himself into a hero. Nabokov’s creations become a reflection of the reader. Unreliability becomes a weapon that Nabokov wields not only to create his character, but also to force readers to examine the expectations of truth. Ultimately, the reader finds that even the truth has its own requirements. Because the truth only comes from one perspective, it is elusive, and neither the character nor the reader are ever going to find a single, pure truth. Nabokov’s novels confront the reader with what she thought were truths about herself and shows her that she can be manipulated.

**Works Cited**


