

“THE WEB OF THE WORLD”: UNTENABLE BINARIES OF CHAOS AND  
CONTROL IN THE NOVELS OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV

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ABSTRACT

Textual evidence from three of Vladimir Nabokov’s American novels reveals the problematic nature of the oppositional binaries imposed upon terms like nature, civilization, control, chaos, art, and academia by many of the author’s critics and fictional characters. While this tendency is a common one, Nabokov uses these three works to show the ways that such divides cannot stand. The title character of *Pnin* exemplifies these faulty endeavors in his efforts to exert control over his life and maintain his ego through the privileging of civilization and control. These very desires seem to directly contribute to his despair. Similarly, *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert prefers civilization and control over what he often believes to be their threatening opposites. However, Nabokov uses his character’s impulsiveness to work with these relationships in different ways; instead of strictly adhering to his binaristic preferences, Humbert shows, unaware, the supplemental nature of such terms through his desire for chaotic, yet controlled, experiences. Nabokov’s ultimate breakdown of these binaries comes in 1962’s *Pale Fire*, where the reader finds John Shade, an artist who recognizes the interplay between control and chaos. While supporting characters such as Hazel Shade and Charles Kinbote often work to maintain a commanding grasp on chaos and the natural world, their misguided desires and isolation only further demonstrate the flaws of such propensities. Everything, according to Nabokov, is both natural *and* human-produced. Chaos lies in even the most controlled situation, in the same way that artistry exists in science and academia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov, whose complex textual creations have attracted much literary attention since the 1950's, provokes a common tendency among literary critics—to map the vivid imagery of his novels, to pin down their intricacies so that the seeming chaos lying within them is clearly interpreted. From attempting to negate Humbert Humbert's existence in Dolores Haze's life by meticulously picking apart the character's timeline to hastily imposing Nabokov's own attributes upon his notoriously complex characters, literary scholars have chosen to focus upon setting Nabokov's works up in opposing ways: a character either spews falsehoods with every breath or is completely trustworthy; the author himself either fills his novels to the brim with autobiographical information or refuses to include a trace of any personal experiences within them. As a result, Nabokov's works are limited noticeably; the beautiful, fluid details become dry and static. Similarly, many of Nabokov's own explorations and requests for his readers within the texts are lost.

In fact, I found in developing this project that I was struggling with the very same tendencies in myself. While conducting close readings of *Lolita*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire*, for example, I struggled to *fix* Nabokov's works so that they fit my either/or standards. Noticing the natural imagery within these novels, I initially worked to interpret its meaning, resisting Nabokov's sense of play and attempting to pin each character down within a restricted or limited category. After the initial disappointment of realizing such endeavors are futile and the careful consideration of the trends in the field's scholarly

criticism, something became clear—that Nabokov, acutely aware of the human instinct to systematize things, is attempting in these novels to show the problematic nature of this tendency. When one approaches the author’s texts without the desire to strictly systematize them, therefore, one particular facet of this tendency reveals itself: Nabokov’s examination of three binaries, closely related to one another, that humans set up in order to experience feelings of control and security over everything from a slippery text to tragic loss. In shining light upon the way the central characters in his American novels set up oppositional boundaries between nature and civilization, art and academia, and chaos and control, Nabokov shows that such divides cannot stand.

Nabokov would agree, then, as is evident in his nonfiction writings, that literary critics attempting to systematize literature according to an ordering force are treating texts as chaotic creations in themselves. Nabokov’s inclusion of Charles Kinbote, a character in *Pale Fire* prone to textual theorization and analysis does not, however, represent his own opinions regarding how the reader or scholar should treat a text. In fact, Nabokov was quite opposed to Kinbotean readings of literary theorists. As Fredson Bowers points out in his introduction to *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Literature*, the author was “contemptuous of school-and-movement approaches to literature and scornful of critics who treated literature as a medium for socio-political messages” (viii). He attempted instead to “reveal how masterpieces work,” seeking to uncover important details and discover their effects (viii). In studying one of Tolstoy’s novels, for example, Nabokov explains how he “endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead” (qtd. in Bowers viii). Kinbote, then, is no more than what

Nabokov would call the kind of “‘ass [who] assimilate[s] the main points’” in a work in order to “‘perpetuate the pretentious nonsense’” of the literary critic, who treats literature as something chaotic needing to be ordered by theory and criticism (qtd. in Bowers viii).

This critical treatment extends to the common desire of many to reconcile the seemingly opposing sides of Nabokov’s own life as both author and lepidopterist. Taking note of this trend, Stephen Jay Gould discusses the relationship between Nabokov’s art and academia in the second chapter of *I Have Landed: The End of a Beginning in Natural History*, entitled “No Science Without Fancy, No Art Without Facts: The Lepidoptery of Vladimir Nabokov.” Recognizing the importance of butterfly studies in both Nabokov’s academic and artistic lives, Gould discusses the commonly held beliefs regarding the relationship between lepidoptera and Nabokov’s fictional writings. The placement of chaos and nature against civilization as troubling “others” in faulty binaries is mirrored by critical management of Nabokov’s own life, in which art and academia are often mistakenly set up as opposing sides of a more personal binary. The unease critics seem to experience upon encountering inconsistencies in Humbert Humbert’s *Lolita* narrative is echoed by the discomfort Gould recognizes in those who are troubled by Nabokov’s “‘other’ career, concerned that his devotion to entomology may have detracted from his literary genius in some way” (30). Responses to Nabokov’s contrasting careers typically come in one form, Gould claims: a “crav[ing] [for] some linkage between his two lives, some way to say... ‘We may have lost several novels, but Nabokov spent his entomological time well, developing a vision and approach that illuminated, or even transformed, his literary work’” (30). In other words, because the academic and the artistic can only oppose each other, the only way for a reader to feel comfortable with

Nabokov's transcendence of this perceived binary is to console oneself with the knowledge that one side strengthened the other.

While it seems evident that this relationship entails art and scholarship acting as supplements to one another, many critics work to maintain the binary, painstakingly theorizing what Gould calls "two false solutions to a nonproblem" (34). Arguing against both "the argument for equal impact" and "the argument for literary illumination" with compelling evidence, Gould claims that "the solution of accuracy" best speaks for the common theme between Nabokov's lepidoptera and his fictional writings (42). Because critics have "been befogged by a set of stereotypes about conflict and difference between these two great domains of human understanding," he claims, they have "failed to grasp...the major linkage of science and literature" in the "distinctive, *underlying* approach that Nabokov applied *equally* to both domains—a procedure that conferred the same special features upon *all* his efforts" (42, 43). Gould theorizes that it is Nabokov's attention to detail that truly speaks for the importance of this issue:

If we can validate this model for attributing interdisciplinary success to a coordinating and underlying mental uniqueness, rather than invoking the conventional argument about overt influence of one field upon another, then Nabokov's story may teach us something important about the unity of creativity, and the falsity (or at least the contingency) of our traditional separation, usually in the mutual recrimination, of art from science. (43)

Examining Nabokov's texts, then, is best approached once removed from the urge to systematize, classify, and control.

Nabokov seems to depict the problematic nature of these divides most within three of his American works, written between 1955 and 1962. The reader finds in *Lolita*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire* characters that experience the relationship between elements of control and chaos in very different ways. Nabokov presents in each novel characters that either privilege specific terms, do not acknowledge the existence of such boundaries, or fluctuate between the two, asking his audience to consider the motivation to act in such ways. As one might expect, he chooses not to do so in a linear progression, however, working within the three novels with characteristic complexity.

*Pnin*, for example, published in 1957, tells the story of Timofey Pnin, a Russian-born professor struggling to adjust to life in the United States. Just as he pointedly remarks upon the flaws of certain critical methods, Nabokov uses his title character in *Pnin* to expose the problematic nature of a life lived according to stringent binaristic divisions. Pnin remains faithful to his preferred terms of civilization, control, and academia, despite surmounting evidence that such tendencies fail to serve him well. Of particular interest in the novel are Pnin's roles as academic and exile. Living as a non-native American in the academic world of Waindell College, Pnin finds settling in his new life extremely difficult, tormented by the search for his own identity in a chaotic world. As he works to define his ego, Pnin develops a notable tendency—privileging civilization over the natural world. Nature, it seems, represents for Pnin everything that is threatening to his ego in this new environment. The frightening terms of life in America are worsened when Pnin finds himself surrounded by nature and may, in fact, be rooted in a traumatic childhood experience. Pnin's narrative ends with his self-imposed exile from Waindell, which points toward Nabokov's exploration of the character's

rigidity. With Pnin's unhappiness and isolation as the hinging points of the novel's action, Nabokov asks his readers to consider both why Pnin chooses to privilege civilization above nature and how his treatment of the natural world contributes to his despair.

Because Nabokov works with similar dichotomies in *Lolita*, I will analyze Humbert Humbert, the novel's central character, in order to show how the author works with relationships perceived by his characters as opposing one another. Critical response for *Lolita* generally focuses upon the reliability of this rather complex narrator. But it is this complexity that serves Nabokov's exploration of binary construction and deconstruction well. Humbert's complexity, it seems, allows for a clearer sense of play within the novel. For example, Humbert's unpredictability contributes to his fluctuations between preferring either nature or civilization, control or chaos. As Humbert pursues young Dolores Haze, contemplating and ultimately committing murder, taking her in as his daughter, and chasing her across America, he continually shifts between viewing nature as a chaotic threat and finding peace in its design. Similarly, Humbert repeatedly switches from privileging academia to preferring art. Both, it appears, are directly related to the character's indulgent lifestyle, as he occasionally experiences a craving for the chaos he often seeks to control. By presenting both the construction and deconstruction of these terms, Nabokov explores how Humbert's unique personality contributes to and is affected by his sometime recognition of their supplemental nature.

*Pale Fire*, published in 1962, encompasses the epitome of Nabokov's binary deconstruction in its central character, John Shade. Through both Shade's deeply personal poem and Charles Kinbote's corresponding, often delusional commentary,

Nabokov exposes the creation and ultimate breakdown of the nature/human opposition as a manifestation of a character's struggles to maintain control in a chaotic world.

Nabokov uses Kinbote, an academic character who believes himself to be upholding these divides, to illustrate the faultiness of such constructions. An awareness of Kinbote's obviously wishful thinking, manifested in his mostly fictional writings about his neighbor, allows the reader to glimpse these boundaries breaking down. John Shade's musings in his poem, however, take this breakdown one step further; as an artist, Shade recognizes the interplay between civilization and nature, between chaos and control.

Chaos, then, represents not a threat to one's existence but simply a supplemental part of human life. Also of note in *Pale Fire* are Shade's and Kinbote's accounts of Hazel Shade, who ends her own life after years of suffering. Like Kinbote, Hazel works futilely to gain a commanding grip on what she believes to be the threatening presence of chaos in life, reveling in academia for its placement against chaotic art. Examining Hazel's treatment of these dichotomies gives insight into the relationship between Shade's profound reflections on the loss of his daughter and his views on chaos and control.

Where methodology is concerned, this project generally focuses on character analyses and close readings of Nabokov's texts. Additionally, approaches from Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction are used to illustrate the manner in which the characters' binaries dismantle themselves. Logocentrism, the name given by Derrida to the way priority and preference are assigned to privileged terms in what are actually inextricable relationships, aids in a greater understanding of how characters like Kinbote come to rely upon such binaristic notions. Notions of trace and supplement are equally central in this project. Trace and supplement, for example, explain why nature and

civilization are not mutually exclusive. Because neither exists “*present* in and of itself and refers only to itself,” these terms act as supplements to one another, enhancing the other’s already supposedly complete existence and showing through this addition that the terms can never actually be complete (Derrida 924). A trace, or the “‘residue’ of other signs which each sign contains,” demonstrates that “no sign is complete in itself” (Kim 1). The signs by which humanity constructs itself and its world cannot, then, “anywhere ever [be] simply present or absent” (Derrida 25-26). Similarly, the freeplay evident in Nabokov’s texts supports these deconstructive approaches and allows his reader to move away from logocentric thought.

Moreover, ecocritical theories serve this discussion well. This field incorporates a variety of theories united more by topic than a specific methodological approach. Ecocriticism, which emerged in the 1970’s, “focuses on the relationship between nature and literature,” specifically “how people interact with nature and how these interactions inform and are forged by symbolic representations of” the natural world (Fromm 125). Texts written by leading environmental critics such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell explore “the relationship between literary representations of nature and human interactions with the natural world” (Fromm 125). Ecocriticism, Fromm and Glotfelty write, is a “suggestive and open” theory comprised of three loosely defined approaches, two of which are of particular importance for this project: “determining how nature is represented in literature,” “often through an examination of an author’s life in relation to the images of nature in his or her texts,” and exploring how “literary discourse defined the human” by “question[ing] the dualisms prevalent in Western thought...that wrench humanity from nature” (xxiii). While the range of this approach is expansive, it

addresses the common “fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it,” rather than divided from it in a world generally thought to be human-centric (Fromm xix).

Ecocriticism and deconstructionism work together within this project in a specific way, asking the reader to consider how humans construct particular binaries between nature and civilization. Derrida’s deconstructive ideas, for example, point to the problem of defining these two terms as separate or opposing. Having recognized these theories and considered their impact upon how humans view the natural world, one may further consider how ecocritical ideas affect textual readings. As previously noted, ecocriticism seeks to expose the ways in which “Western” binary constructions separate humans from the natural world (Fromm xxiii). Furthermore, ecocritical theorists take on deconstructionist ideas in recognizing the shared effects of environmental crisis—because the human and the natural are not separate, both experience the impact of damage in the world. These two theories, then, work together, allowing for a well-rounded analysis of how Nabokov’s characters view the natural world.

Of the three untenable binaries examined here, this project is focused mainly upon the nature/humanity divide specific characters attempt to uphold. Given the sheer volume of Nabokov criticism that exists today, the fact that the nature/humanity relationship has generally been overlooked is quite thought-provoking, especially given the significant role of nature in Nabokov’s own life. For example, Mary McCarthy, an American author and close friend of Nabokov’s, points out in her review of *Pale Fire* the novel’s “Wordsworthian” qualities, proclaiming the poem within the novel as a “rambling, autobiographical” text, “full of childhood memories, gleanings from Nature, [and]

interrogations of the universe” (124). McCarthy goes on to praise the beauty of Nabokov’s evocations of nature as evidence of the central character’s belief in design but does not go so far as to explore John Shade’s relationship with the natural world as it relates to his experiences working through the pain of trauma and composing poetry. Similarly, critics like Rachel Ronning and Diana Butler in their respective articles “White Spiders and Robert Frost in *Lolita*” and “*Lolita* Lepidoptera” discuss specific examples of natural imagery within Nabokov’s most popular novel but do not extend their theoretical conversations beyond these isolated instances.

Furthermore, some of the most prominent Nabokov scholars have scrupulously detailed the importance of nature in Nabokov’s own life. A devoted lepidopterist, Nabokov was often found traversing the hills of the American countryside in the thrilled pursuit of some undiscovered butterfly. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov writes of his childhood preoccupation with nature, instilled in him by his loving parents. Given that one of Nabokov’s most noteworthy works is his autobiography and that images of his relationship with nature abound within it, it seems necessary to acknowledge this continuity between his fiction and nonfiction without, however, presuming his texts to be autobiographical. In fact, Harold Fromm and Cheryl Glotfelty discusses this common approach in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, noting that “ecocritics have studied the environmental conditions of an author’s life—the influence of place on imagination—demonstrating that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work” (xxiii).

The purpose of this project, therefore, is to demonstrate Nabokov’s depiction of characters who create binaries between nature and humanity, art and academia, and

control and chaos. By presenting John Shade, an artist for whom everything is both human-produced *and* natural, in contrast to the academic characters who place divides between the object of study and academic discourse, Nabokov shows that such divides cannot stand. Such terms are simply not separate, so exploring Nabokov's works according to such strict divides limits the potential of his uniquely complex artistry.

## CHAPTER 1

FLUCTUATING BINARY CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION IN *LOLITA*

In the years since Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* was first published, much critical attention has been devoted to the questionable nature of the timeline provided by the central character Humbert Humbert. This narrative timeline is particularly problematic for many in its failure to correctly align when specific dates are mentioned for both the beginning of Humbert's narrative and Dolores Haze's entrance into the character's life. For either date to be accurate, the other cannot be so. Dating back to 1968, numerous critics have called attention to the fact that such seemingly flagrant errors prompt the reader to question Humbert's reliability as a narrator.<sup>1</sup> While some have simply concluded that Humbert obviously cannot be trusted to narrate his story truthfully, others claim that whole sections of the text simply did not occur—they have, that is, no basis in reality outside of Humbert's distorted imagination. Instead of viewing this slippery characteristic of text, narrator, and author as one of *Lolita's* countless unique traits, many critics have been motivated to scrutinize every detail of the novel in an attempt to pin it down, ascribing the academia of the literary criticism Nabokov so disdained to a text that seems to refuse this kind of systematization at every turn.

This trend is evident in Anthony R. Moore's "How Unreliable is Humbert in *Lolita*?" in which the author carefully examines the details of Nabokov's chronology in the novel. Moore follows the critical trend of emphasizing the more academic but

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<sup>1</sup> Proffer, Carl. "A Calendar of *Lolita*." *Keys to Lolita*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1968.

questionable aspects of the novel and notes that “a close examination of the pointedly detailed chronology of [Humbert’s] last nine chapters throws his writing time awry by three days” (71). Classifying the typical response to such inconsistencies as occurring in one of two ways, Moore writes that critics either “convict an artfully unreliable narrator...whose ego still throbs with the certainty that he manipulates time along with the sympathies of the readers” or “convict an author...who is defiantly unwilling to be enslaved to dates...or prone to errors with them” (72). Moore departs somewhat from the basic reliable/unreliable question in his belief that Nabokov’s “deviant ‘details’” are intentional and can be rendered “less vexing” with the application of a formula that proves Humbert’s questionable calendar to be the “framework on which Nabokov hangs the formal arrangement, thematic significance, and moral sense of the novel” (74). However, the tendency to systematize the text remains. Moore, claiming that “we can view Humbert...as two narrators,” still works to exert control over the text, working to overcome the chaotic narrative by imposing his system of classification upon both Humbert’s timeline and vocabulary (78).

Similarly, Brian Boyd stresses the importance of the effort to control the text in “‘Even Homias Nods’: Nabokov’s Fallibility, or, How to Revise *Lolita*.” As is evident in the title of his article, Boyd works to classify the novel, its fictional narrator, and its actual author, arguing that Nabokov “let[s] pass far fewer errors than Shakespeare” but remains an “absentminded,” sometimes “blunder[ing]” author (63). However, Boyd simultaneously seems to praise Nabokov for the precise “control” he exerted over his works, claiming the author wrote “precisely” for the “careful rereader” (63). Once more, the desire to control this elusive text emerges as Boyd attempts to systematize *Lolita*

through a careful scrutiny of the novel's details. While his thesis differs in that Boyd does not ascribe theories concerning Humbert's reliability to the novel's inconsistencies, he pins the text down in a different way—by concluding that Humbert's uncertain calendar results simply from up to “twenty-one demonstrable errors” on the part of Nabokov himself (65). Systematically working through this “tangle of thorns,” then, becomes Boyd's mission as another literary critic strives to impose the control of academia upon *Lolita* (67).

Among the critics who approach *Lolita* in this systematic way, few discuss or even acknowledge the presence of nature within the novel. Perhaps nature, in its commonly designated position as “other” in the perceived nature/civilization binary, represents to such authors the troubling chaos they are seeking to control through their scholarly systematization of the text. By recognizing the prevalent imagery of flora and fauna within the novel and its relevance in Nabokov's narrative strategies, perhaps they would be acknowledging the persistent presence of seeming chaos within the civilization they work to uphold through scrutiny of the novel's details. Privileging details like dates on a calendar, however, is problematic in itself. Is a basic timeline the most effective tool in determining the reliability of a fictional, eccentric narrator? Are Nabokov's depictions of the natural world within Humbert's narrative somehow less worthy of critical attention because of their potentially chaotic characteristics, their refusal to be pinned down? It seems, in fact, that something notable can be said of the relationship between the artistic creation of an author, fictional or real, and the academic systematization of literary criticism.

Although her company in doing so is scarce, Corinne Scheiner has taken steps in attempting to answer such questions, incorporating the role of lepidoptera in Nabokov's life and writings as a key factor in their arguments. Scheiner, for example, points out in "Teaching *Lolita* with Lepidoptera" how teaching the artistry of the novel in combination with science "provides students with knowledge that enables them to see in a new way and, therefore, to read the text in a new way—that is, with an eye to both the aesthetic and scientific pleasures to be found in Nabokov's attention to detail, particularly in the landscape of *Lolita*" (49). Although Scheiner focuses on the pedagogical possibilities of teaching *Lolita* in this way and does not engage in a detailed textual analysis, she does emphasize the importance of not exerting scholarly control over the text in the way so many critics have. The link between Nabokov's science and artistry need not be separated, broken down, and systematized, she contends, but can be best understood "in the text's production and its style, both of which express the link between seeing and knowing—between aesthetic and scientific pleasure" (50). While Scheiner's chapter is not intended to serve as a thorough discussion of the faulty binary between science and artistry and does not specifically address its implications concerning the nature/civilization relationship, her work suggests the supplemental nature of Nabokov's artistry and scientific interests, motivating readers to consider the text in this light, unhindered by unnecessary either/or associations.

Similarly, Stephen Jay Gould recognizes the way nature and civilization act as supplements to one another in Nabokov's works, as discussed in the Introduction of this project. Although Gould focuses on the lepidoptera issue through a different lens, that of the science/art debate, he does not examine *Lolita* or any of Nabokov's fictional works in

detail. What, one might ask, might be revealed through a textual analysis with Gould's claims in mind? What do images of nature in *Lolita*, for example, say about Nabokov's exploration of the nature/civilization, artist/academic, and chaos/control binaries? How are these binaries upheld or broken down in the novel? Through a textual analysis of *Lolita*, in fact, the reader will find that Nabokov skillfully weaves a web of binary construction and destruction, exploring the ways in which a complicated character like Humbert uses such fluctuations to fulfill his unique desires.

In the first half of *Lolita*, Nabokov seems to be exploring the ways in which the control/chaos, civilization/nature, and academia/art binaries are upheld by the academic character. Humbert, a rather egotistical academic, initially privileges academia above art, seeming to view them as opposing separates rather than supplements of one another. Within the first seven pages of the novel, the reader finds Humbert praising his own academic accomplishments, noting how much scholarly work is required to have one's "torturous essays...published...in obscure journals" (*Lolita* 16). In fact, Humbert places so much emphasis on his academic side that he noticeably departs from vivid descriptions of both Lolita and his childhood love to list his scholastic successes. The artistic narration of both girls is pushed aside as he pauses to make remarks about the "chuckle[s]" inspired in "the six or seven scholars...who read" his paper, "The Proustian theme in a letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey" (*Lolita* 16). Although Humbert does at times exhibit his artistic side, his discomfort and desire to demonstrate its status as "other" quickly appears, assuring him that his role as a scholar is the dominant of the two. For instance, he composes a poem about Lolita, reflecting upon her fiery beauty and profound effect upon him. Immediately following its final line, however, the reader finds

Humbert cannot resist the urge to analyze his own artistic creation. He forces academia upon it, “psychoanalyzing” the poem, noting the way its “stark, stiff, lurid rhymes correspond very exactly to certain perspectiveless and terrible landscapes and figures...as drawn by psychopaths in tests devised by their astute trainers” (*Lolita* 257). By privileging his academic characteristics in such a way, Humbert demonstrates what seems to be an attempt to uphold the academia/art binary.

Of course, Humbert’s emphasis upon the scholarly does not fit within conventional definitions of academia. Discussions of his academic pursuits flow seamlessly into musings on preteen females, as seen in the novel’s opening, when Humbert moves from discussing his job “teaching English to a group of adults in Auteuil” to praising himself for “taking advantage of” his scholarly connections in order to gain entrance to places “where pale pubescent girls with matted eyelashes could be stared at in perfect impunity remindful of that granted one in dreams” (*Lolita* 16). His classifications of nymphets are also presented in a very systematic, scholarly manner, illustrating the link Nabokov is exploring between academia and control as they oppose, or are separate from, art and chaos. Humbert, for example, writes of how he “would have the reader see ‘nine’ and ‘fourteen’ as the boundaries” for true nymphets, going on to describe how only “we who are in the know” are aware of the classifications “between those age limits” (*Lolita* 16). In doing so, Humbert manages to privilege himself in a unique class of so-called academics, above and beyond that of the average scholar, wise to the secrecies of the nymphet world. Classifying his sexual interests in such a way offers Humbert the opportunity for immense satisfaction, both in knowing he is more powerful than the girls and in experiencing the sense of comfort gained from “sort[ing]

out” what he calls “the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world [of] nymphet love” (*Lolita* 135). Although he admits he occasionally experiences the feeling that he “fail[s] to do so utterly,” Humbert continues in his unstoppable efforts to “fix” the “borderline” between “the beastly and beautiful,” the chaotic and the controlled (*Lolita* 135). By simply attempting to impose these academic systematizations upon young girls at what is perhaps their most unpredictable age, however, Humbert assures himself that he holds ultimate power.

This desire for control, it seems, is what initially draws Humbert to relationships with preteen girls. Although he similarly attempts to sexually systematize adult females, as illustrated in his discussion of “a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts,” Humbert does not seem to gain any comfort from his scholarly classifications (*Lolita* 18). Mature women, he claims, are not given to be “wield[ed]” in the same way as “palliative” nymphets (*Lolita* 18). Therefore, partaking in adult relationships with women offers him little satisfaction, though “the sensations [he] derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world” (*Lolita* 18). As a result, Humbert systematically concludes that “the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet’s spell” (*Lolita* 17).

As passages such as this illustrate, however, the boundaries Nabokov is exploring in *Lolita* are not always as strongly upheld or clearly defined as they may appear to Humbert Humbert. While his academic efforts are visible in this detailed systematization

of sexual interactions with nymphets, another element is visible, though less obviously so. Chaos, or the unpredictable, unknown possibilities that exist in these forbidden relationships, seems to act as a supplement to the element of control Humbert desires. A solely academic life fails to promise the thrill Humbert craves, which is particularly evident when he journeys with fellow scholars to an arctic region to conduct scientific research. While he finds that this existence, removed from temptation, initially “promise[s]...some relief” and “improve[s]” his “health,” Humbert soon discovers he is painfully bored (*Lolita* 33). He abandons the strictly academic nature of his research and begins intruding into the private lives of his peers, questioning everything from their “food-fantasies” to their “nocturnal emissions,” eventually “concoct[ing] a perfectly spurious and very racy report that the reader will find” in several scholarly publications (*Lolita* 34, 35). When it comes to the chaos and control of nymphet relationships and academia, then, Nabokov seems to be suggesting that a trace of each element can always be found on the other.

Similarly, Nabokov demonstrates the breakdown of this binary through illustrations of Humbert’s impatience with other solely academic figures or environments. For example, Humbert describes Gaston Godin, an acquaintance, as a “poor fellow...devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert” (*Lolita* 183). For Humbert, the worthlessness of Godin’s second-rate scholastic achievements is worsened by the reality that his personal life is pitifully boring. What makes Godin’s existence particularly intolerable for Humbert, however, is the fact that Godin is completely unaware of the thrilling occurrences surrounding him—being “caressed by the young,” an opportunity that would excite

Humbert considerably (*Lolita* 183). This image of a supplement to the control of academia is echoed during Humbert's sexual encounter with Lolita in her classroom. Humbert's narration of the episode is filled with images of both the scholarly and the unpredictably illicit, evident when he observes his adopted daughter "reading the chapter on 'Dialogue'" while he "unbutton[s] [his] overcoat and...ha[s] Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk" (*Lolita* 198). The simultaneous pleasures of academia and the forbidden encounter represent for Humbert the perfect "combination," one he feels compelled to "take advantage of," aware that it "would never occur again" (*Lolita* 198). Nabokov's experimentation with these binaries, therefore, presents itself in these very combinations, in which the sense of play between two sides of a shaky binary prompts the reader to consider the validity of such constructions.

Further evidence of Nabokov's exploration of these binaries is illustrated in the imagery of nature presented in *Lolita*, particularly as it relates to ideas concerning the relationships between control, chaos, civilization, and the natural world. While Nabokov seems to uphold the control/chaos and civilization/nature binaries in *Pnin*, his examinations in *Lolita* differ slightly, both supporting the binaries and, at times, questioning their construction. Humbert, much in the way he lives by a unique modification of the academia/art binary, seems to buy into the civilization/nature binary—but with a few adjustments for his own satisfaction, of course. Humbert generally seems to privilege civilization above nature, but, as before, he incorporates nature as a thrilling, chaotic supplement to civilization, a tendency that is almost always related to his sexual endeavors with nymphets. His childhood memories are few, save some discussion of "pubertal surprises in the rose garden of the school," illustrating the

interplay among controlled elements of academia, sexual adventure, and images of nature mediated by humans (*Lolita* 11). His first failed sexual encounter as a child takes place on a beach, and after unsuccessfully attempting to rendezvous with Annabel “in her garden,” Humbert spends his life frantically attempting to regain the momentous satisfaction promised at that moment (*Lolita* 12). Remembering his early teenage years filled with chaotic, unconsummated lust most intense within these human constructs of nature, Humbert demands even as an adult to be “le[ft] alone in [his] pubescent park, in [his] mossy garden,” crying out for the perfect balance of both control and chaos in his life (*Lolita* 21).

His first meeting with Lolita in a garden, then, is quite appropriate. Humbert is initially quite disappointed, having learned that the McCoo home, which promised both “a girl of twelve, and a beautiful garden,” has been destroyed by fire, and finding Mrs. Haze uninteresting, paying her little mind as she leads him on a tour through her home (*Lolita* 35, 38). When she requests that he follow her to the garden, however, Humbert’s interest is piqued. He suddenly takes notice of “a kind of winsome toss of [her] voice,” the mere mention of a garden combined with the knowledge of Mrs. Haze’s preteen daughter somewhere within the home bringing him to a heightened sense of awareness (*Lolita* 38). Stepping out through “a sudden burst of greenery,” Humbert finds Lolita basking in the sunlight, the ostensible duplicate of his Annabel Leigh (*Lolita* 39). This image, it seems, symbolizes for Humbert the perfect balance of control and chaos, of civilization and nature. The challenge of exerting personal power over the unpredictable being that is the preteen nymphet within the confines of the natural world, chaotic in its own way but mediated in its representation of the garden, represents the supplemental

nature of these elements. He finds himself in the role he so desires as a result—a predatory position he describes as “like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in gardens...sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand,” molding the nymphet to fit his fantasies from where he sits “like a wily wizard” (*Lolita* 49). Nabokov, then, is perhaps incorporating such imagery in his exploration of the way in which such binaries can simultaneously be upheld and broken down, maintained by a character in the pursuit of personal control but combined with a supplement for the attainment of a unique excitement.

One finds similar illustrations of this concurrent reinforcement and destruction of binaries as the novel progresses. Although Humbert, especially when the situation involves Lolita, occasionally seems to view nature as a desirable supplement, he often privileges civilization and views nature as an undesirable “other.” Because of its seeming correspondence with chaos and the unknowable, Humbert often attributes bad luck to nature. He often personifies nature, blaming it for unsuccessful attempts to seduce Lolita. Humbert bemoans, for example, how “clouds again interfered with that picnic on that unattainable lake,” and worries that even “the sappy tall trees” are “in the know” of his plans to murder his new bride (*Lolita* 50, 62). He finds comfort in exerting control over nature, particularly in “busy[ing] [him]self with [his] unkempt lawn” (*Lolita* 72). When his thoughts drift to Lolita, however, Humbert departs somewhat from his adherence to these binaries, revealing his preference for some unpredictability within his carefully controlled environment. He allows nature to penetrate the division and serve as a privileged supplement, reveling in the way “Lolita...danc[es] in [him]” as he notices “most of the dandelions,” a troublesome weed he initially set out to eradicate from his

lawn, “had changed from suns to moons” (*Lolita* 73). Images of human control over nature remain present in the scene, however, as Humbert surveys his surroundings, looking upon both two passing nymphets and his neighbor’s “very amiable and athletic Negro gardener” with pleasure (*Lolita* 73). Humbert finds great delight in similar combinations of the human and the natural, commenting “everything was somehow so right” as he observes the “blue and green” around him, “know[ing] the sun shone because [his] ignition key was reflected in the windshield” (*Lolita* 95). A sense of fulfillment, then, is for Humbert occasionally composed solely from aspects of civilization, academia, and control but is more often found in the supplemental nature of these elements with their corresponding “others.” By adeptly mingling his uses of these binaries through Humbert’s fluctuating treatments of them, Nabokov asks the reader of *Lolita* to consider the creation of such boundaries as well as their purposes.

While passages like the aforementioned illustrate Humbert’s supplemented privileging of the academic and civilization sides of the boundaries Nabokov explores in the novel, a definite shift in this treatment can be found when he learns of Lolita’s sexual exploits at summer camp. By choosing to casually lose her virginity at The Enchanted Hunters, “debauched” by Charlie Holmes, possessor of “as much sex appeal as a raw carrot,” Lolita denies Humbert the chance to be her first sexual partner (*Lolita* 135, 137). Control has been snatched from him, and Humbert is left to imagine his beloved stepdaughter traipsing through “the beautiful innocent forest brimming with all the emblems of youth, dew, [and] birdsongs,” only to thoughtlessly “copulate...by turns...among the luxuriant undergrowth” (*Lolita* 137). As Humbert reflects upon this disappointing occurrence, images of nature appear to him as representations of the both

unpredictability and purity of youth. Instead of being threatening in their elusiveness, however, or serving simply as a supplement to civilization, nature somehow becomes privileged in its own unique way. In a different way, then, the binary is reinforced, but with nature as the preferred element, representing all that is separate from the human world in which nymphets like Lolita seem to carelessly discard their virginity with no regard for the needs of a man like Humbert.

Humbert does not surrender his fondness for being in control, however.

Dismayed as he is by Lolita's loss of virginity, Humbert also views her sexual encounters at camp as opportunities to control the reader's opinion of him, to absolve him of the "horror [he] cannot shake off" after his arrest for Quilty's murder (*Lolita* 135). He seems to blame and privilege the natural world simultaneously by pleading "I have but followed nature. I am nature's faithful hound," suggesting that he is but the victim of a chaotic world controlling his life and desires (*Lolita* 135). Appealing to the reader's emotions, Humbert implores, "sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover" (*Lolita* 135). Perhaps because Humbert's grasp on Lolita seems to be weakening, he makes every effort possible to maintain control, even if it means giving the impression of submission to the natural world.

Similarly, Humbert attempts to counteract the unpleasant results of Lolita's encounters at camp by forcing education upon her as a symbol of his power. Because her sexual knowledge is greater than he prefers, Humbert relies on the dominance of his scholarly knowledge to impress upon Lolita his role as both a father to be obeyed and a sexual partner to be pleased. He "decide[s] that anything was better for Lo than the demoralizing idleness in which she lived," taking it upon himself to make strict demands

regarding her education (*Lolita* 173). Humbert finds, however, that though he is able to “persuade her to do so many things—their list might stupefy a professional educator,” he fails to convince her to “read any other book than the so-called books or stories in magazines for American females” (*Lolita* 173). His ability to win Lolita over sexually, although still present, loses meaning when Humbert learns of Lolita’s less than discriminatory practices regarding her sexual partners, and his failure to penetrate the world of her nymphet literature with his “highbrow reading matter” leaves him a struggling other, fluctuating uncomfortably between the sides of the failing binary he has established (*Lolita* 173). Once more, Nabokov illustrates the shakiness of these binaries through a character who both upholds them and incorporates supplements to achieve fulfillment.

What appears to be Humbert’s final effort to impose academia upon Lolita comes during her stay at the hospital. Feeling painfully physically, emotionally, and sexually removed from his stepdaughter, Humbert allows what appears to be the final breakdown of his carefully constructed binaries. He drives for hours in desperation, determined to compile the perfect “load of love” to bring to his ailing Lolita (*Lolita* 242). Straying from the scholarly literature he prefers, Humbert purchases a variety of books Lolita will enjoy, though he is unaware of what makes them so pleasing to her. Humbert’s allowing this element of the unknown to further enter their relationship illustrates both his desperation and the permeation of the chaotic into his world of control. Furthermore, Humbert brings flowers to Lolita. While this may initially seem to represent yet another image of nature carefully manipulated by humans, Humbert did not purchase flowers from a florist but created a “bouquet...composed of wild flowers and beautiful leaves

gathered with [his] own gloved hands on a mountain pass at sunrise” (*Lolita* 242). This synchronized presentation of gifts seems to symbolize the unsteady boundaries between chaos and control. Though Humbert still wishes to exert power over Lolita, he has surrendered to the fact that doing so may mean giving into supplements that cause him some unease.

Nabokov ensures that the reader take note of the breakdown of these binaries by repeatedly illustrating Humbert’s growing pleasure with the natural world. Both prior to and following Lolita’s disappearance with Quilty, Humbert grows more and more enamored with his natural surroundings, travelling across the country in pursuit of natural beauty. He finds a “feeling of well-being” inspired in him by nature, called forth by such elements as a “young summer breeze that envelop[s] the nape of [his] neck” and “the giving crunch of wet gravel” (*Lolita* 214). Though he admits to having a “grudge against nature” because it prevents him from “turn[ing] Lolita inside out” and possessing her completely, Humbert seems to come to terms with the presence of it in his life (*Lolita* 265). In fact, he somehow privileges it and views it as a supplement to his diminishing sense of personal control, even “catch[ing] [him]self thinking” his painful relationship with Lolita “only defile[s] with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country” they traverse (*Lolita* 176). It becomes less and less surprising, then, to find Humbert including extended lists of natural imagery in his narration, noting everything from “winter in the desert, spring in the foothills, almonds in bloom” to “heart and sky-piercing snow-veined gray colossi of stone” (*Lolita* 156). Representations of predatory power, formerly favorable to Humbert, become troubling, evident when he describes “a patch of beautifully eroded clay; and yucca blossoms, so pure, so waxy, but

lousy with creeping white flies” (*Lolita* 156). By including images of Humbert longing to surround himself with “blueberry woods during the bluest of summers,” “stand[ing] still...among...golden rod on the edges of a flowerless forest,” Nabokov suggests that nature may not be as chaotic as Humbert’s initial binaries may indicate (*Lolita* 148, 149).

Nabokov keeps the reader from becoming overly secure in this binary breakdown, however, by depicting Humbert’s preoccupation with systematization and control, which surfaces more randomly after the shift than earlier in the novel. As he frantically pursues Quilty and Lolita across the country, he resorts to relying on hotel guest logs as clues to their location. Seeking a sense of control wherever he can, Humbert takes to classifying various entries, losing himself in these attempts to systematize a situation where control has been stolen from him. He admits that Quilty “challenge[s] his scholarship” and regrets that he “missed some elements in that cryptogrammic paper chase” (*Lolita* 250). Humbert praises his own scholarly awareness, however, describing his achievements—with sexual imagery, characteristically: “What a shiver of triumph and loathing shook my frame when, among the plain innocent names in the hotel recorder, [Quilty’s] fiendish conundrum would ejaculate in my face!” (*Lolita* 250). Bragging that “one hardly had to be a Coleridgean to appreciate the trite poke of ‘A. Person, Porlock, England,’” Humbert continues to privilege his academic side, declaring that “any good Freudian, with a German name and some interest in religious prostitution, should recognize at a glance the implication of ‘Dr. Kitzler, Eryz, Miss.’” (*Lolita* 250). Despite his prowess in deciphering the aliases, Humbert is increasingly troubled by Quilty’s dominance, which exists even within the binaries he set up so that he might always be in the position of power. Not only does Quilty possess Lolita, presumably as a nymphet connoisseur

himself, but he “mime[s] and mock[s] [Humbert],” proving to be a “well-read” individual who “knew French” and “was versed in logodaedaly and logomancy” (*Lolita* 249-250). Nabokov is pointing out, then, that the breakdown of these binaries is not a given, that they may be upheld just when the reader thinks they have disappeared from the novel.

Without attempting to pin down Nabokov’s specific motivations behind these fluctuating binaries throughout *Lolita*, one can safely argue that his explorations ask the reader to consider binary construction in general, especially what each uniquely modified or particularly shaky divide says about a central character. What is of importance, therefore, is not only determining how unreliable Humbert is but also identifying how he shapes each binary to fit his desires, attempting to mold his nymphet love in the same manner. Exploring his tendencies and ascribing them to Nabokov’s intricate narrative strategies allows for investigation of the novel without too much unnecessary academic systematization, leaving the reader to imagine, without the tendency to control, Humbert’s disappointment in finding Lolita “only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet” she once was, “an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricked in the crisp weeds” (*Lolita* 277).

## CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM OF BINARY CONSTRUCTION IN *PNIN*

Considering his exploration of the art/academia, nature/civilization, and control/chaos binaries in *Lolita*, published in 1955, it is not surprising that Nabokov addresses similar dichotomies underlying problematic situations in *Pnin*, his next novel. Instead of demonstrating the way a central character like Humbert Humbert fluctuates between privileging opposite sides of binaries that often break down, however, Nabokov uses the title character in *Pnin* to illustrate the flaws of a strict adherence to the belief that control and civilization are to be valued above their threatening opposites. By shifting his focus to a character who remains rigid in his privileging of these terms and is unaware of the sense of play between nature and human construct, Nabokov once again asks the reader to reconsider such binaries. What is it, he seems to ask, about these terms that speaks to particular human needs, and why would a person adhere to ideas that keep these terms perpetually divided, even when it leads to a profound disconnect on multiple levels?

Critics of Nabokov's works, however, have not chosen to explore this specific idea. Themes such as the Russian exile in America have dominated the field instead. L.S. Dembo, for example, one of *Pnin*'s early critics, discusses in "Vladimir Nabokov: An Introduction" *Pnin*'s "alienat[ion] from American society" (124). Although he briefly notes the character's existence as "the isolated literary man in the modern world," referring specifically to Russian exile and its effects, Dembo does not fully explore the connections between this isolation and *Pnin*'s role as a control-seeking academic (124). In fact, Dembo's notion of isolation in modernity and America seems to be linked to such

discussions of hierarchical dichotomies like art and academia, nature and civilization, and chaos and control in that these relationships are shaped by the very same contexts.

Perhaps a parallel exists not only between Pnin and Nabokov in that they both live in America as Russian exiles but also that both men experience some degree of literary isolation.

Twenty-five years later, the trend continues with Dean Flower's "Nabokov and Nastiness." In his discussion of the critical tendency to depict Nabokov's less than desirable qualities in a positive light, Flower refers to both Pnin and his fictional narrator as Nabokov's "stand-in[s]," representing the pathetic exile who "has no existence apart from the words of his creator" (577). Most recently, one can find similar studies in the work of Mary Besemeres, who explores how "the relation between Pnin and the novel's curious narrator arguably constitutes an imaginative reworking of Nabokov's own experience of American acculturation" (390). In an exploration of the link between Nabokov's experiences and Pnin's, then, the discussion would be enlightened by a consideration of how the relationships between art, academia, civilization, and nature work within the biographical and fictional narratives of both men's lives, a conversation that is not found in current critical works.

For example, the reader finds in *Pnin* Vladimir Nabokov's presentation of a conflicted, struggling title character tormented by both his failure to cultivate personal relationships and his efforts to maintain control in a world in which very little works out the way he hopes. Living as a Russian exile in his isolated, literary world, Pnin is uncomfortable with his status as an outsider, which seems to go hand in hand with his unease with the natural environment. Identifying with nature, a world Pnin sees as totally

removed from the world of American modernity, would only further Pnin's separation from American civilization. However, Pnin shifts within the novel from viewing the natural world as a mysterious threat, a different kind of "other," to attempting to control nature to suit his own purposes. This transformation, it seems, results from his realization that many of his American peers act in the same way, although misguided in their beliefs that they are transcending the civilization/nature boundary they actually uphold. While his changing perspective of the natural world may seem to suggest a growing understanding of his interdependency with the natural, Pnin's exploitation of nature to aid him in forging relationships with his peers in fact demonstrates his failure to see nature as something both Other to and interdependent with him. Pnin fails to realize that nature, a non-threatening presence in his life, does not exist as something to be controlled or manipulated for his own personal reasons, and he continues to struggle in life, disconnected from his surroundings by the unnecessary and flawed divisions he has created.

Before beginning a textual analysis of *Pnin*, it seems important to explore the parallels between Nabokov and his title character, specifically in terms of their both living as Russian exiles in America. Given Dembo's argument regarding the importance of exile in the novel, the apparent connection between this identity and Pnin's sense of isolation should be noted, especially as both seem to contribute to Pnin's investment in civilization above and against nature. In a collection of his interviews and correspondence entitled *Strong Opinions*, for example, Nabokov responds upon being asked if he will return to Russia: "I will never go back...I will never surrender...In America I'm happier than in any other country...I feel intellectually at home in

America” (9-10). He speaks of his memory of Russia as “a tool, one of the many tools that an artist uses” (12). It seems in this 1962 interview, then, that Nabokov is not plagued by a sense of isolation in America and even uses his own memories as implements for artistic creation. However, this characteristic is inconsistent, even appearing to shift within the very same interview, in which Nabokov declares many of his works to be “the waves and ripples of the shock caused by the disappearance of the Russia of [his] childhood” (*Strong Opinions* 13). Similarly, Nabokov claims “[his] private tragedy” to be “abandon[ing] [his] natural language, [his] natural idiom, [his] rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English” (*Strong Opinions* 15). Perhaps it is one’s exile from an ever changing country in turmoil that causes Nabokov to experience this alarm and Pnin to prefer civilization, which seems in America to be perfectly controlled and in opposition to nature, another dynamic and unpredictable environment. How, for instance, is Pnin to be secure in his new identity? Pnin will never be a natural American, but at the same time his memories of Russia and his life there would not be the same if he were to return to the place of his birth.

Like Nabokov, Pnin seems to fluctuate between his new American self and his former Russian self. However, Pnin never seems to gain the sense of peace that Nabokov finds in recognizing that “the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance” (*Strong Opinions* 63). One need not torture himself with worries of exile’s impact on the ego; as Nabokov puts it, “his habitat may confirm the correctness of the determination but should not lead to it” (*Strong Opinions* 63). Nabokov finds balance in his identity as “an American writer who has once been a Russian one,” but Pnin struggles to achieve stability, constantly fluctuating between defending his ego and begrudgingly

allowing its transformation (*Strong Opinions* 63). Conversely, the only trouble caused for Nabokov by the “existence of ego” is “a linguistic” one—“the fact that in Russian the word *ego* means “his,” “him”” (*Strong Opinions* 182).

These similar themes, however, should not lead to conclusions like that of Flower and Besemeres, who assume that Nabokov used Pnin to document in his fiction the search for his own identity in America. Careful to ensure that the opposite is true, Nabokov repeatedly mentions that personal memories “are very brittle and...lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed in his book, when they are given away to characters” (*Strong Opinions* 12). “Like...richly pigmented butterflies and moths,” Nabokov instructs, “a wise collector should keep specimens [of memories] in the dry dark of a cabinet” (*Strong Opinions* 143). Perhaps, though, Nabokov incorporated similar themes from his own life in order to explore the human relationship with binaries of art and academia, nature and civilization, and control and chaos from a specific and familiar viewpoint, factoring in the impact of experiencing alienation in America. Undoubtedly quite aware that his careful readers would recognize the shared theme of Russian exile, Nabokov characteristically keeps his audience questioning their assumptions and asks them to consider how such ideas relate to Pnin’s preoccupations. Is Pnin’s relationship to nature, for example, directly related to his isolation in America?

It follows to search for answers to such questions in a careful exploration of these binaries within the novel. The reader first encounters Timofey Pnin as he journeys by train to deliver a lecture at a nearby college. Instead of enjoying his view of nature from the window of the train, however, Pnin refuses to experience any positive emotions connected to what he sees. It is immediately obvious that Pnin is uncomfortable with

nature as he impatiently “wait[s]...for the confused greenery skimming by to be cancelled and replaced by the definite station he had in mind” (*Pnin* 17). The station, it seems, represents for Pnin a place within the world of human constructs in which one can safely predict the schedule of happenings. Nature, on the other hand, only serves to interfere in his adherence to the human timetable. For example, Pnin loathes how the unpredictable “storm in the middle of the night paralyze[s] the local power station” and “make[s] nonsense” of his “devoutly plugged-in clock,” the ultimate symbol of his attempts to organize time according to human standards (*Pnin* 14). Ironically, only the reader is aware that Pnin is actually on the wrong train, led astray by his “old and in part obsolete” train schedule (*Pnin* 9). Although he believed himself to be “gain[ing] twelve minutes,” he has, in fact, “lost nearly two whole hours” as a result of his human error (*Pnin* 17). This fact demonstrates the flaws in Pnin’s endeavors to systematize the world. Although the human organization of time may seem to be infallible, it is still subject to human error and is, as a result, just as unpredictable as the thunderstorm and blur of trees outside the train. Nabokov, it seems, is pointing the reader towards the flaws of Pnin’s aligning nature with the chaotic.

Pnin’s discomfort with nature is further illustrated as he exits the train in Whitchurch to find himself inconvenienced by the temperature outside. Following the realization that he has both missed his bus and misplaced his speech, Pnin succumbs to panic, wandering through the strange town until he finds himself in a park. The reader here learns of Pnin’s recurring anxiety attacks as he begins to “detach...from reality” and take in his surroundings, which only alarm him further (*Pnin* 19). The “damp, green, purplish park” spins around him, its “rhododendrons, glossy laurels, [and] sprayed shade

trees” heightening his loss of control (*Pnin* 19). Although the park, “closely clipped” and manipulated by humans, seems to represent the element of control Pnin seeks to exercise over the unpredictability of the natural world, he remains “terrified” and is only saved from “collapsing on the sidewalk” by the human-constructed “stone bench” nearby (*Pnin* 19). The human influence upon his surroundings is of no comfort to Pnin as he focuses only on his loss of control over time and his discomfort at the hands of nature. Once more, Nabokov seems to be directing the reader to Pnin’s problematic constructions. Pnin fails to recognize that the park is actually no more than a human construction of the natural world, carefully controlled so that humans may find pleasure in their surroundings. The human element of control found in the park brings no relief to the chaos Pnin experiences there, which suggests that the relationship between nature and civilization is more supplemental than oppositional.

Of particular significance in this episode is the brief shift to first-person narration. Although its true significance is not revealed until the novel’s final pages, the presence of this narrator allows the reader to sympathize with Pnin and gain meaningful insight into his psyche. At this point in the novel the narrator’s identity is revealed to be an old acquaintance of Pnin’s, although his name is not given. The reader finds that this narrator seems to hold beliefs quite similar to Pnin’s when he reveals that “man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings” (*Pnin* 20). He goes on to claim that “it may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego” (*Pnin* 20). The assumption that Pnin’s attack resulted from the breakdown of this barrier, this loss of control, is solidified as the narrator points out “the sensation poor Pnin experienced was something like that divestment, that communion” (*Pnin* 20).

It is no wonder, then, that nature causes such unease in Pnin. Not only does it demand that he acknowledge his inability to predict life's occurrences, it also seemingly poses a menace to his ego and physical well being, specifically in his attempts to create a new selfhood as both a new American and a Russian exile. Pnin relies heavily on his notion of humans' superior place in the world's hierarchy, so facing the fact that he is "porous and pregnable," vulnerable to the changeable cycle of the natural world, renders him petrified (*Pnin* 20). Struggling between these dual sides of himself, Pnin seeks to eliminate similar problems in all other areas of his life. As a result, he chooses to invest in the superior, human term of this binary, attempting to create a situation in which he need not struggle for some sort of new identity or realization. Nabokov's inclusion of this narrator, then, initially serves in a unique way to keep the reader from becoming too comfortable in the conclusions that both Pnin's dichotomies are faulty and that they must result from his status as a non-native American. If, for example, a seemingly sensible voice like the American narrator's sympathizes with Pnin's privileging of civilization and control, are the title character's boundaries really as flawed as they seem to be? Never one to present his readers with an obvious solution, Nabokov offers with this new textual development the opportunity for the "greatest rewards" of his artistry—the "reverberations of [the] mind" that come with the investigation of a far from transparent text (qtd. in Appel 131).

When considering the intricacies of Nabokov's use of the nature/civilization and control/chaos binaries, it is worthwhile to consider how his central character in *Pnin* comes to prefer such strict divides in the first place. Pnin's unease with nature, perhaps not surprisingly, seems to have its foundation in a somewhat traumatic childhood

experience. Transported into his past during the attack he suffers at the park, he recalls being consumed with severe illness, feverish to the point of hallucination. “Near his bed” Pnin believes he sees in a “screen of polished wood...designs representing a bridle path felted with fallen leaves, a lily pond, an old man hunched up on a bench, and a squirrel holding a reddish object in its front paws” (*Pnin* 23). “A methodical child” even then, Pnin struggles to interpret this vision, working to determine the meaning of the natural scenery as well as the squirrel’s possession (*Pnin* 23). He finds, however, that his ego is threatened by the force of his fever’s control. Refusing to surrender, he moves on to reflect upon the images in his floral wallpaper. Once again, the reader finds Pnin extremely troubled even by a human construct of a natural image, seemingly unaware of the fact that this image is mediated by humans in everything from its construction to its place on his walls. Although Pnin is able to find a “soothing” pattern in the wallpaper’s “vertical plane...of three different clusters of purple flowers and seven different oak leaves,” he is greatly troubled “by the undismissable fact that he could not find what system of inclusion and circumscription governed the horizontal recurrence of the pattern” (*Pnin* 23). It seems, therefore, that even the human-made depiction of nature found in the pattern troubles Pnin, who is unaware of this breakdown in his binaristic constructions. “Los[ing] himself in a meaningless tangle of rhododendron and oak,” he can do nothing but “reason that if the evil designer—the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever—had concealed the key of the pattern with such monstrous care, that key must be as precious as life itself and, when found, would regain [him] his everyday health, his everyday world” (*Pnin* 23). Like his struggle to maintain control by keeping a strict track of time, Pnin’s experiences with the wallpaper demonstrate his undeniable drive to know

the pattern of life, especially in nature, where the pattern is most challenging to discover. The fact that the pattern in the wallpaper is created by humans, as is the park in Whitchurch, provides him with no consolation. Even the wind seems to “confuse whatever rational pattern...Pnin’s surroundings had once had” (*Pnin* 24). Unknown plans, patterns, and creators serve only to disturb Pnin’s peace of mind as he finds himself doubly threatened by the “oak leaves,” “autonomous garlands,” and “rich blossoms” of the wallpaper and the “green and purple park” surrounding him in reality (*Pnin* 24). Once again, Nabokov seems to be pointing out that Pnin’s system is quite flawed by illustrating how the character remains unaware of how he is actually troubled by both sides of his strict divide.

Similarly, the human representation of nature in an advertisement disturbs Pnin. As his landlord Joan attempts to analyze the image of a deserted island in the ad, Pnin declares the depiction an “impossible” one, claiming that “so small [an] island, moreover with [a] palm, cannot exist in such [a] big sea” (*Pnin* 60). It is, he argues, an “impossible isolation” (*Pnin* 60). Instead of interpreting the image as a peaceful paradise, Pnin likens it to an “atomic bomb explosion” (*Pnin* 60). The fact that a natural environment can exist totally apart from human control unsettles Pnin. It seems that this image of nature wrenches all sense of control from Pnin, who is forced to acknowledge his loneliness, lamenting “I haf nofing,...I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing!” (*Pnin* 61). His struggle to maintain control, which formerly allowed him to live in denial of his painful solitude, is broken by the image of the deserted island as he is forced to face his total lack of control. Once more, however, Nabokov has taken the opportunity to

reveal Pnin's error—refusing to understand that it is, in fact, the civilized world that forces him to face his own agonizing isolation.

Pnin's recognition of his loneliness seems to serve as the onset of a significant shift in the novel. After acknowledging his solitude in America, Pnin begins to view the natural world in a different way. He walks across the Waindell campus, taking note of the surroundings he struggled to ignore earlier in the novel, noting a "patch of sunlit snow, where a tree trunk's shadow, olive-green on the turf, became grayish blue for a stretch, while the tree itself, with a brisk, scrabbly sound, ascended, naked, into the sky" (*Pnin* 73). His profound attention to detail in this passage demonstrates Pnin's changing attitudes toward nature. Although it is not yet clear what he believes to be the benefit of this fresh outlook, this increased awareness allows him to loosen his grasp on controlling life. Instead of reacting with panic, for example, he actually manages "a solitary smile" in response to a slip on the ice (*Pnin* 73). His book, falling open "to a snapshot of a Russian pasture," further indicates this shift in perspective for Pnin (*Pnin* 73). Instead of viewing this depiction of nature as a disturbing reminder of his struggle to maintain control, Pnin continues his walk across campus. While the significance of this shift is not yet clear, Pnin is now seemingly untroubled by the presence of nature in his life. What is important to remember, though, is that the Waindell campus is not the unmediated natural environment that Pnin seems to think. The element of human control still surrounds him and seems to serve as a supplement to the chaos of nature rather than an opposing other. Although this shift is a noteworthy one for Pnin, Nabokov once more reminds the reader that the character's boundaries are never as clear or as reliable as they seem.

This shift, however, is not a consistent one. Although Pnin seems to be more at ease as he muses upon the “violet-blue air of dusk” and “spidery black twigs,” he remains separated from the natural world by a window “reflect[ing]” the room’s artificial lighting (*Pnin* 78). He desires, it appears, a relationship to nature on his own terms only, carefully controlled by human constructs. Similarly, Pnin considers the landscape as he walks home, characterizing it as “sad” and the “hills...still sadder” (*Pnin* 79). The artificial lights, though, seem to Pnin to be “putting on their usual magic” and ease the unsettled feeling brought forth by the mournful landscape (*Pnin* 79). Just as inconsistent are Pnin’s reactions to a “Soviet documentary film,” which displays various Russian people celebrating with each other, surrounded by nature (*Pnin* 81). Instead of motivating Pnin to seek out a similar feeling of joy with the natural environment or other humans, however, the film, nothing more than another human representation of nature, moves Pnin to “infantine,...uncontrollable” tears (*Pnin* 82). He soon finds himself, however, immersed in the vision of “a haze of sunshine...projecting in vaporous shafts between the white boles of birches, drenching the pendulous foliage” (*Pnin* 82). This vision, filled with images of nature, differs from his previous hallucination in its lack of anxiety. Instead of reminding him of the worries of his childhood or the threats of nature’s unknown pattern, the vision presents him with the image of “a great field unmowed by time” (*Pnin* 82). Pnin’s fluctuations between accepting human constructs of nature and being troubled by its unknown role in his life are underscored by the presence of not one but “two alarm clocks alongside” his bed, once more demonstrating his frantic attempts to control life and time with manmade objects and concepts (*Pnin* 82). This inconsistency suggests that Pnin’s fluctuating connection with what are only fabrications or

manipulations of nature is weakened by his need to maintain a superior role in the world's hierarchy. Although he thinks he is more willing to acknowledge nature with less anxiety, he still finds it necessary to exercise his human control whenever possible. Pnin's binaries, Nabokov points out, are maintained by the character even when he thinks he is transcending them. The fact that they are flawed to begin with only accentuates the unsound nature of Pnin's tendencies.

Nabokov continues to work with the implications of this shift, however, and they become more evident when Victor Wind, Pnin's ex-wife Liza's son, enters the narrative. Victor, whose last name even calls nature to mind, possesses an influence on his stepfather, it seems, that is connected to what Pnin thinks is his changing perspective of the natural world. From his childhood Victor exhibits what Pnin thinks is quite a different attitude towards nature than his own, preferring to indulge his artistic inclinations by sketching trees and shadows, "avoid[ing] the human form altogether" (*Pnin* 90). This tendency, Pnin believes, to look past human creation towards nature allows Victor "to see...at six...what so many adults never learn to see," to experience life in a fulfilled, artistic way that he, rigid in his role as academic, does not feel himself able (*Pnin* 90). What Pnin does not consider, of course, is the actuality that Victor's drawing is yet another human representation of nature and that Victor is, on some level, still controlling the natural world to suit his creative desires. Pnin seems to see Victor as anything but what he actually is—a different sort of academic, a student of his own art teacher. As his studies of art progress, Victor learns how to accomplish such feats as "immortaliz[ing]" the simplest man-made image by painting it as an integral part of its natural surroundings, which Pnin similarly views as further evidence of the boy's

connection to nature (*Pnin* 97). Depicting “a polished black sedan...parked at the intersection of a tree-bordered street and one of those spring skies whose bloated gray clouds and amoeba-shaped blotches of blue seem more physical than the reticent elms and evasive pavement,” Victor, as any other painter, only displays the natural world as he sees it (*Pnin* 97). The result is pleasing to Pnin because nature is depicted not as something other than or completely separated from the world of human construct but as an existence in which the beauty of nature penetrates the flatness of synthetic objects (*Pnin* 97). This penetration, however, is not threatening to Pnin because it is mediated by Victor. As before, one finds that even what Pnin believes to be another person’s perfect communion with nature is influenced by human control. Instead of recognizing the supplemental nature of control and chaos evident in this fact, Pnin seems to believe that Victor exists, as an artist, apart from his own world of control, isolation, and academia.

For example, simply being in Victor’s presence and believing him to be on the other side of Pnin’s perceived nature/civilization divide inspires him to muse about “a place in the garden and the wonderful atmosphere of youth,” remembering his former strength with nostalgia (*Pnin* 106). Although Pnin had shut the bedroom window to quiet “the noise of an exuberant creek that ran below,” he quickly returns to open it when Victor arrives, letting in “the noise of the rain falling on fragrant bushes in the framed blackness of the open window” (*Pnin* 108). Nabokov illustrates in this scene the way Pnin carefully manipulates nature’s place in his life, deliberately controlling its influence upon his surroundings in an effort to be more like Victor, who seems to symbolize for him both communion with nature and the human world from which he is so painfully isolated. While Pnin initially privileged civilization in an attempt to gain control over the

changes to his identity in America, he now places nature in the superior role as he allows his identity to be transformed by the presence of Victor. Once more, Pnin seems unaware that nature and civilization cannot be as clearly separated in life as in his guest bedroom. Although he is even moved to present Victor with a gift and longs to experience some kind of significant relationship with the boy, he remains too uncomfortable with his shifting ego to carry on any kind of personal conversation with him. Incorporating nature into their brief interactions and allowing its presence to enter through the window, then, demonstrate the beginnings of Pnin's exploitation of the natural world as yet another effort to control the changes his identity is undergoing. While Pnin now recognizes that the experiences of exile will undoubtedly have an effect on his ego, he still struggles to maintain control where he can. Continuing to view the natural environment as an other to be used for his own purposes, Pnin exploits it as a silent tool to strengthen his relationship with Victor, a native of the world in which he feels so foreign. In this way, Nabokov continues to demonstrate Pnin's flawed perceptions of the nature/civilization and control/chaos binaries. Although Pnin believes he is crossing the nature/civilization divide and allowing chaos into his life in order to reach Victor and transform himself into a member of American society, he actually continues to control his surroundings in an effort to compensate for the new, uncomfortable changes to his ego.

Similarly, Pnin continues to use nature as a tool when he journeys to The Pines, a "vast sea of greenery" where his colleagues vacation (*Pnin* 111). It is immediately evident that Pnin is not comfortable in his surroundings as he "move[s] warily and unsteadily," like "an idiot," through the woods, a bumbling fool in a foreign land (*Pnin* 113). Being surrounded by the beauty of "an inscrutable white sky hang[ing] over a

clover field” arouses in him thoughts of “sadness” and “a dim, dead day” from his past (*Pnin* 114). Reminded of his former identity in Russia, Pnin becomes confused—lost in the forest, separated from both Russia and American civilization, left only with what he sees as “the sea of tree tops [which] seemed to harbor no life” (*Pnin* 115). A sudden interjection from the human world, though, quickly changes his negative outlook. When Pnin hears a gunshot, a brief indication of human life nearby, his attitude changes, and he sees his surroundings in a more positive light. “The sun appear[s],” and the trees seem full of life, leading Pnin to The Pines, the site of the potential relief from isolation Pnin so desperately craves (*Pnin* 115). In the same way that he incorrectly considered Victor’s artistry an example of untainted communion with nature, Pnin sees his American peers’ time at The Pines as completely removed from human manipulation and does not realize that it is actually the presence of human control that brings him comfort. While his worries are unconsciously eased with the hopes that his peers will aid him in his identity transformation, Pnin remains unaware of his reliance on control and civilization within the natural world. Nabokov, on the other hand, reminds the reader with the following passages that this environment is yet another human construct of nature.

As before, Pnin’s efforts to control nature in order to forge personal relationships persist when he arrives at The Pines to find his colleagues reveling in the beauty of their surroundings, seeming to commune with nature without regard for the world of civilization they have left behind. Not surprisingly, though, Pnin’s peers only *seem* to be separated from civilization and control, when in fact they are exiles in their own way, just as misguided as he is, working to adapt their identities in a new environment without a loss of ego. For example, Pnin finds Varvara, a Waindell philosopher’s wife, among the

trees and assumes that he might exploit her connection with nature for his own purposes, to fit in within this foreign world. However, the narrator reveals that Varvara, just as removed from her natural state as he is, “could not identify...plants” and even “brought, with pride and panting enthusiasm, for the ornamentation of the dinner tables a profusion of beautiful poison-ivy leaves, hugged to her...breast” (*Pnin* 120). Through this humorous passage, Nabokov points out that Pnin’s colleagues uphold the nature/civilization in their own way, attempting to make up for their separation from their true selves, mistakenly believing that their treatment of local plant life and time spent in the wilderness are apart from civilization rather than mere charades.

Unaware of these unfortunate misunderstandings, Pnin makes efforts to be seen “smiling at the forest” and even accompanies his acquaintances to “a natural swimming pool under the alders and pines” (*Pnin* 127). Even Pnin’s appearance stands out as synthetic in this natural space, his skin tanned by “the radiation of a sun lamp,” an example of the character’s use of another human construct—artificial sunlight (*Pnin* 128). Although he sheds his man-made accoutrements to enter the pool, it is obvious that Pnin’s pained presence there disturbs both his state of mind and his surroundings. After managing to disturb both a dragonfly and a group of butterflies, Pnin wades into the water, only to exit the water after “two minutes” of awkward paddling and don “his cross, his wrist watch, his rubbers, and his bathrobe” once more (*Pnin* 129). Failing to establish a friendship with the men at the pool and bothered by his discomfort there, Pnin recognizes his failure and returns to The Pines. Nabokov demonstrates, therefore, that Pnin’s shortcomings in recognizing human discourses occurring within this natural environment leave him acutely aware of the chaos of nature surrounding him.

Following this bothersome episode, Pnin once more experiences the “extremely unpleasant and frightening cardiac sensation” that troubled him at the park previously in the novel (*Pnin* 131). Though “not pain or palpitation,” the attack brings forth in Pnin “an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one’s physical surroundings—sunset, red boles of trees, sand, still air” (*Pnin* 131). Having relinquished his attempts to exploit nature, it seems that Pnin believes the only alternative to be submitting to nature’s control, ignorant of the fact that the presence of human manipulation is a constant in all his experiences within the natural world. A supplemental balance between the two is not achievable or even recognizable as an option for him, so he panics in the presence of the unknown. Consumed by troubling memories of his youth, Pnin “walk[s] away from the house, through the silent grove” (*Pnin* 133). As he remembers Mira, a childhood love put to death in a concentration camp, it becomes clear that Pnin’s desire to control all elements of his life are tied up with his reluctant recognition that “if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible” (*Pnin* 135). How, then, is Pnin to defend or define his ego in a world where this kind of control is impossible? Pnin must face the fact that his identity development is in turmoil. Neither Russia nor America, neither civilization nor the natural world, allow for the kind of personal control he craves in order to defend his ego. Although it was the human world responsible for Mira’s death, the natural world represents for Pnin a place in which his efforts to control life are futile. Nature, which seems to conceal its pattern from him, threatens the comfort he finds in living by a precise schedule and struggling to command every event in his life. This realization, along with his failure with his peers, leaves Pnin

with nowhere to turn. Privileging civilization and control offered no solace, and allowing nature into his life provides no relief from his isolation. Thus, Pnin's time at The Pines come to an end, as do his misguided attempts to use nature for his own purposes.

As a result of his experiences at The Pines, Pnin moves into a more solitary home with "ivy and spruce muffl[ing] its locked gate" (*Pnin* 144). His efforts to escape isolation no longer consume him, and Pnin finds "the sense of living...all by himself" to be "something singularly delightful and amazingly satisfying" (*Pnin* 144). In doing so, he is able to escape, or at least attempt to escape, his struggles with ego defense and development. His lonely satisfaction, though, is disrupted when the human world he so longed to feel a part of interrupts his solitary existence to shun him once more. Here Nabokov reminds the reader that although Pnin has always viewed nature as the threatening other, the civilized world is no less an unpredictable existence in his life. Pnin is informed, to his dismay, that his position at Waindell will soon be occupied by someone else, leaving him more isolated than he had imagined possible. His self-imposed exile follows, and the reader's last glimpse of Pnin comes as the character disappears into "a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance" (*Pnin* 191). While this final description may seem hopeful, the reader must remember that these words are those of the narrator and do not reflect Pnin's outlook on the situation. Having failed at controlling his life and manipulating his personal relationships by exploiting nature, he gives in to what he sees as its command, leaving behind the human world that has forsaken him time after time.

Ironically, Pnin's self-imposed exile is described by the one person who actually seeks to cultivate a friendship with him—the narrator. The reader finds in the novel's

final chapter that the narrator met Pnin as a child and even attempted on several occasions to begin a friendship with the character, who repeatedly refused his attempts to communicate. As a result, much of the narrator's descriptions of Pnin are actually taken from other people's mocking impersonations and condescending stories of him. Perhaps the narrator serves, then, to provide the reader with a more sympathetic viewpoint toward the pathetic character and to reinforce his need to maintain identity boundaries. He remembers Pnin as a bright child and even reaches out to him in friendly letters and invitations, all of which Pnin curtly denies or declines. As a result of this information, one learns that, although Pnin convinces himself that nature is both apart from his world and a threat to it, even a kind human influence exerts the same kind of unsettling pressure upon him. The boundaries of his ego maintenance crumble from every side as Pnin realizes he cannot define himself according to such strict terms. Nature and civilization, then, are not oppositional to each other and work within Pnin's life in a unique way, though it goes unrecognized by him. Were the narrator not present in the novel to offer a sympathetic lens through which to view the central character, the reader would likely develop a negative opinion of Pnin similar to his colleagues at Waindell.

The narrator's tendency to support Pnin is particularly evident in the way the two characters' views on the natural world correspond throughout the novel. For example, in a descriptive passage early in the novel, the narrator describes nature as an almost threatening presence, much as Pnin seems to find it when he collapses at the park: a rainstorm "keep[s] lashing at the windows" as the "greenery...shiver[s]" menacingly outside (*Pnin* 84). He even personifies the "lilacs" in a way Pnin might, simultaneously noting how they "wildly beat, like shut-out maskers, at the dripping panes" yet seeing

them as a definite other from the human world (*Pnin* 86). Furthermore, the narrator justifies Pnin's hidden fear of walking in the rain, commenting aside that "(it was pouring hard, and the asphalt glistened in the darkness, tarnlike, under large, noisy trees)" (*Pnin* 104). As Pnin's struggle to connect with nature as a means of developing personal relationships continues, however, the narrator's descriptions of the natural world also seem to transform. He remarks, "it was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkles a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags" (Nabokov 110). Just as Pnin is drawn to the natural world only when some sort of synthetic, human element remains involved and he is inclined to take a job on a college campus "characterized by an artificial lake in the middle of a landscaped campus," so the narrator's commentary takes on a similar combination (*Pnin* 9).

These corresponding changes continue when, just as Pnin's despair triumphs, the narrator laments "the sky was dying" (*Pnin* 136). Finally, the narrator personifies nature in the novel's closing pages, seemingly attempting to justify Pnin's decision to reject the human world for a relationship with the natural world. He observes how "lilacs, those Russian garden graces, to whose springtime splendor, all honey and hum, my poor Pnin greatly looked forward—crowded in sapless ranks along one wall of the house" (*Pnin* 145). Although the last words spoken of Pnin in the novel are spoken by a character recalling for the entertainment of others one of Pnin's blunders, the narrator's description of Pnin as simply "my friend" have a far greater impact, both in accentuating the irony of Pnin's exile and moving the reader to sympathy (*Pnin* 191). The narrator's depictions of nature, therefore, serve not only to provide a setting for the events of the story but also

seem to reinforce Pnin's own unsteady binaries—while those that know Pnin are quick to mock him and label him as a pathetic outsider, the presence of the narrator ensures that the reader is not so quick to judge. Nabokov, therefore, seems to include this unseen character for several reasons. The narrator's presence simultaneously strengthens the reader's sympathy for Pnin, keeping him or her invested in the narrative, and provides Nabokov the opportunity to further demonstrate the flawed nature of both Pnin and the narrator's binaristic constructions.

While determining Nabokov's specific reasons for creating a character who mistakenly upholds these binaries would be impossible, it seems evident that he is prompting the reader to consider why a character like Pnin—or any human, for that matter—finds a strict adherence to such constructions necessary, especially when Pnin finds it impossible to connect with both humans *and* the natural world. Nature and civilization work together in ways as complex as Nabokov's own complex approaches to the narrative, and recognizing his decision to expose the faults of an either/or rigidity like Pnin's appears to be of greatest importance in the novel. Realizing that nature and civilization do not exist as opposing sides of what is nothing more than a false binary, then, is as easy as a child's opening "a fairy tale," "climbing into the picture," "and plunging into that enchanted forest" (*Speak, Memory* 157).

## CHAPTER 3

BINARY BREAKDOWN IN *PALE FIRE*

My picture book was at an early age  
 The painted parchment pampering our cage:  
 Mauve rings around the moon; blood-orange sun;  
 Twinned Iris; and that rare phenomenon  
 The iridule—when, beautiful and strange,  
 In a bright sky above a mountain range  
 One opal cloudlet in an oval form  
 Reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm  
 Which in a distant valley has been staged—  
 For we are most artistically caged.  
 (Nabokov *Pale Fire* 37)

Throughout his 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov presents his reader with two distinct types of characters—the artist and the academic. While these characters interact with each other and experience many similar emotions and personal difficulties, one profound difference emerges—their unique treatments of nature. Through his depiction of these characters, specifically Hazel Shade, Charles Kinbote, and John Shade, Nabokov exposes the creation of the humanity/nature binary, set up by his academic characters as a way to deal with personal struggles with control and chaos. Kinbote and Hazel Shade, obsessed with scholarly systematization and a desire to control what they perceive to be threatening unpredictability, create a separation between humanity and nature that prevents them from connecting, or engaging in an interaction in which one accepts the possibility that he or she will be affected by interactions with fellow humans or the natural world. Refusing to recognize the mediation of humans in nature or the influence of nature in the world of human construct, these academics seek to separate the two spheres, viewing nature as nothing more than an object of study for the benefit of their scholarly discourse. Furthermore, the academic creation of this divide automatically

privileges humanity above nature, separating them further as the characters neglect to acknowledge the possibility that the two in fact exist as supplements to one another.

Nabokov's depiction of John Shade as the artist, however, depicts the ultimate breakdown of this binary and illustrates the benefits of its deconstruction. By recognizing the interplay between nature and humanity, Nabokov's artist accepts that chaos exists in life not as an opponent or a deterrent to happiness but as one factor among many in the "web of the world" (Nabokov 289).

An exploration of the existence of this binary and its deconstruction within the novel is perhaps best begun with a study of Hazel Shade, John Shade's daughter. The reasons for Hazel Shade's misery and early death are many, as are the factors contributing to her father's inspiration in his creation of the poem by the same name.<sup>2</sup> Critical interpretations of both characters vary, and many are focused upon the tragedy of Hazel Shade's early death. In "The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire," for example, David Galef explores Hazel's role in both her father's life and his literature, examining the factors of her search for inspiration and her demise. He explains that Shade's daughter "represents the book's confabulation in miniature, the mixed success of art and annihilation," although she "appears only as a shadow across the work" of both her father and Kinbote (Galef 421). Galef begins his discussion by describing Hazel's discontented existence and her search for temporary escapes, noting her attempts to break from her misery through the "temporary solace" of "books" and "academia" (422). As Nabokov's

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<sup>2</sup> Although Shade is a fictional creation of Nabokov, he will for the purposes of clarity be referred to throughout the chapter as the author of the poem *Pale Fire*.

readers quickly become aware, this “exclusion of social life” in combination with Hazel’s “moody and introspective nature” confines the young woman to a “scholastic seclusion” that “becomes its own prison” (Galef 422). While Galef’s assumptions concerning Hazel’s “social life” focus on a narrower, gendered expectation, Nabokov, through Shade, seems to be implying that this limited notion of Hazel’s life is not of the utmost importance. By striving to control every aspect of her life by denying the entrance of what seem to her chaotic, unpredictable influences, Hazel creates a binary that, for Nabokov and Shade, will not stand. Although Shade reflects societal expectations in his hopes for Hazel to date and gain popularity, his poem illustrates his awareness of a larger connection his daughter is missing in life as a result of her constructing this divide. This connection is present when individuals allow themselves to develop an unguarded union with others, a bond uninfluenced by the individual’s need to control the unknown. Whether this connection is interpersonal or exists between humans and nature, it signifies a relationship in which one actively participates, willing to be changed and open to inspiration. Although Nabokov does not seem to be suggesting that taking “temporary solace” in academia is a profound negative, the successes and failures of *Pale Fire*’s characters imply the damaging influences of a failure to recognize the supplemental nature of art and academia, of control and chaos. It seems, then, that Hazel’s futile efforts to escape herself only further her pain and cause her to destructively suppress her emotions.

Galef continues his discussion with a study of Hazel’s search for an inspiration outside of “her own plaguesome reality” (422). Here the reader finds Galef’s assertion that, “Since the world remains alienating and unchangeable” to Hazel, “she tries to create

a world of her own,” a decision which, made with “perverse” intentions, ultimately leads to her destruction (423). Galef attributes Hazel’s failure and death to the idea that she fails to find fulfillment in personal relationships, choosing instead to focus only on the question of the supernatural, and “eventually turns inward, the imploded art of fantasy” (423). He explains:

Where creation ceases to have any relevance to outward reality, it borders on madness. When art loses the vital connection to a world outside the artist, it becomes bound up with death. Art and obsession can become dangerously, fatally mixed. (424)

By proposing that such a total inward vision is quite damaging, Galef provides for his readers a clearer understanding of how Hazel’s initially creeping demise becomes a total downward spiral. The picture becomes clearer, however, when one considers Hazel’s efforts to control her life, illustrated especially in her vision of a strict human/nature binary. Hazel adheres to binaristic divides in her treatment of nature; instead of viewing the natural world as a non-threatening being capable of bringing pleasure to one’s life, Hazel seems to see it as chaotic and threatening to her carefully constructed world. As a result, she creates a total separation between her academic pursuits and nature, developing a faulty binary in the belief that order can only be achieved through this separation. Nabokov, therefore, seems to be pointing to both this problematic construction and Hazel’s failure to recognize herself as both artist and academic, asking the reader to consider how such issues may affect one’s identity.

A closer examination of these binaries, therefore, reveals them to be the greatest contributing factors to the young Shade’s misery. Hazel’s preoccupation with academia

and the supernatural becomes a near obsession and results in a total inward focus that prevents her from gaining any satisfaction from life. Although Hazel's failures are, as seen during her blind date, made more painful by the inconsiderate actions of others, her refusal to connect prevents her from recovering from such painful events. Through John Shade's descriptions of his daughter's quests to find inspiration in academic pursuit and communication with the supernatural world, the reader finds that Hazel's search for pattern and meaning are consistently either focused inwardly or completely misdirected, a hindrance that only furthers the cycle of destruction in her life. By concentrating all her efforts to find inspiration in such a manner, she becomes tied up with ideas of death long before her own actually occurs. In fact, Hazel Shade's futile pursuits of inspiration and connection as they compare to the successes of her father's similar quests and discoveries illustrate the crucial role of relationships in the world of the artist. Whether one finds value in his or her relationships with loved ones or through a connection with the natural world, inspiration and meaning in *Pale Fire* hinge upon the existence of these living unions. Without them, the individual is doomed to suffer the ruins of what seems to him or her a life without worth, a solitary existence completely separated from its surroundings.

Even John Shade, however, who seems to comprehend the importance of personal connection in life, initially encourages his daughter's detached fixations as a reluctant alternative to the life of social fulfillment he wishes for his daughter. Hazel's successes in academia are noteworthy enough to merit comment by her father in his poem, who notes the "fun" of her "win[ning]" "prizes...in French and history" (Nabokov lines 305, 306). Similarly, Sybil Shade instills in her husband the idea that Hazel, like many other

“virgins,” may become the author of “some *resplendent* books,” a notion Shade promotes by communicating with his daughter through academic language (Nabokov line 323). He allows Hazel to remain removed from any personal connection with her parents by replying to her vocabulary questions “from [his] desk through the closed door” (Nabokov line 374). This impersonal interaction, though, does not satisfy Shade. Although books are, in fact, human constructions, he is aware that studying them alone does not signify a true relationship between humans. Hazel obviously cannot affect the author, the text’s creator, and while the possibility exists that Hazel may be influenced in a personal way by a particular author or text, her will remains in ultimate control. Should she feel uneasy with an author’s suggestions, for example, she may simply close the book without explanation, ending her symbolic interaction with it. Shade’s consciousness of this incomplete interaction is demonstrated as he remains painfully aware of his daughter’s isolated existence while “help[ing] her with a Latin text” (Nabokov line 363). Hazel is not affected, though. She continues to “sit / On the library steps” alone, indulging her “strange fears [and] strange fantasies” through academic pursuit, never demonstrating any willing recognition that the escape these preoccupations offer from the pain of a life without connections is only temporary (Nabokov 340, 344). She struggles against the seeming chaos of life, constantly working to systematize and control her surroundings through academic classification and refusal to indulge in what she believes to be the unpredictability of relationships to humans or the natural world.

Further example of Hazel Shade’s inward destruction can be found in her investigation of possible supernatural activities inside an old barn. While Shade only briefly refers to this episode, Kinbote discusses it in detail. Even without making claims

as to the authorship of Kinbote's account, the information held within it is useful in an examination of Hazel Shade, especially concerning her lack of connections as they contrast her father's more fulfilling ones. Kinbote begins his narration of the events by describing his introduction to the old barn through John Shade. He remarks that even the barn's former owner possessed "an earthy something that pleased John Shade much better than the suburban refinements of the English Department," illustrating Shade's affinity with the natural aspects of the place even before he even set foot inside it (Nabokov 186). Kinbote recalls taking a walk with his admired companion when Shade further demonstrates the strength with which he is drawn to nature by neglecting to indulge Kinbote's insincere motives, allowing himself to be captured by the beauty surrounding him:

Limpidly do I remember one perfect evening when my friend sparkled with quips, and marrowskies, and anecdotes which I gallantly countered with tales of Zembla and hairbreadth escapes!...he interrupted me to indicate a natural grotto in the mossy rocks by the side of the path under the flowering dogwoods. (Nabokov 186)

Shade's understanding of the natural world's importance in his life allows him to balance his relationship with nature and with other people. He fluctuates, therefore, between privileging the natural and the human, breaking down the binary that Hazel creates in order to maintain a sense of control in her life. Though he does not forsake all human relationships, he seems to inherently comprehend when one is disingenuous, realizing that this undesirable quality will never be present in the natural world. He does not,

however, attempt to control Kinbote or his surroundings, demonstrating his comfort in a world that seems chaotic to both his daughter and neighbor.

Hazel, however, denies herself the opportunity of a relationship with both nature and human fellowship on more than one occasion, constantly working to control her environment. Her desire to explore supernatural phenomena in the barn illustrate her search for something fulfilling outside of herself, but these inclinations toward darkness only further disconnect her from the outside world. While the supernatural world has the capacity to bridge the divide Hazel lives by, the young woman's search for it is actually quite similar to her academic pursuits and further illustrates her adherence to the control/chaos and human/nature divide. Just as she can close a book and deny its influence upon her, the option always remains for Hazel to discontinue her investigations and simply deny the existence of the supernatural. In fact, her attempts to discover ghosts inside the old barn seem to mirror her academic need to classify things, to exert control over something chaotic and unknown. Perhaps, though, Nabokov chooses to introduce this supernatural element, which appears to both transcend and maintain the boundaries created by Hazel, in order to call attention to the fact that becoming too secure in any conclusion regarding his work is tricky—while the reader may find it tempting to classify Hazel as strictly living according to one rule or its opposite, the tendencies of his characters are often as fluid as the connection between the human and natural worlds.

Similarly, John and Sybil attempt to encourage their daughter's interaction with others by forbidding her to visit the old barn alone, and while Hazel allows herself to be accompanied by her friend Jane P., she later “flatly refuse[s]” the company of others, limiting the opportunity for unpredictable interactions and “set[ting] off alone” instead

(Nabokov 187). During her first nocturnal visit to the barn, nature itself even seems to intervene, urging her to redirect her efforts with “an electric storm that was to last all night” (*Pale Fire* 187). Hazel, though, declines to acknowledge the beauty of the storm’s seemingly chaotic “theatrical ululations and flashes,” which she cannot control, focusing only on her mission to discover the dead (Nabokov 187). Although Hazel eventually becomes fearful of the “inexplicable and perhaps very evil being” in the barn, she continues to separate the natural world from her own and works to take charge by attempting to systematize something as chaotic as the supernatural (Nabokov 190). Even when she “regain[s] the heavenly shelter of the starry night” and is guided to safety by “a familiar footpath with soothing gestures and other small tokens of consolation,” Hazel does not accept the fact that beauty and meaning are all around her (Nabokov 190). To do so would mean allowing nature to cross the boundary into her carefully controlled human existence and acknowledging the faulty binary she has created for herself.

In order to demonstrate the futility of Hazel’s efforts to discover meaning at the old barn, Galef engages in a close reading of Kinbote’s account, concluding that “Her contact with the spirit world is moot; her hope of abstracting a pattern from what she envisions just a wish” (424). While Shade suggests that a union with the natural world or other people might have allowed the young woman to find a greater meaning in life, her misguided desire to control ghostly entities that in all likelihood do not exist only separates her further from the civilized world she so privileges. Galef goes on to comment on Hazel’s responsibility in the matter, declaring that “If Hazel looks for meaning in a patternless existence or attempts to impose her own meaning, at least she cannot be blamed” (424). What then, can be said for her total disregard of both nature’s

splendor and her father's example? Hazel continues to turn inward when all three Shades make a trek to the old barn, taking offense with her father's reflective silences, which have the capacity to contain unpredictable meanings unknown to her. She stubbornly rebuffs her parents' attempts to connect with her through humor. While John Shade "lights a lantern" in order to explore the natural world at night, Hazel can only be found "quietly weeping in the dark," troubled by the way her father crosses her imposed boundary between human and nature as if it does not exist (Nabokov 192). Her father even finds sufficient inspiration in the event to create a poem, breaking down the divide between art and academia and "showing that art can be derived from any materials, provided it does not lose its attention to life" (Galef 425).

Not surprisingly, the last night of Hazel Shade's sad life is a mingling of unfortunate events commanded by the girl's rigid constructions. Galef's description of Hazel's state of mind at this time is frighteningly accurate: "The urge for creation and the will to hate have reached a terrifying balance. The same madness which reduces her days to misery...also keeps her alive" (425). This "small mad hope," though, is not enough to sustain Hazel when she is rejected by her blind date; the scales are simply tipped too far by Pete Dean's obvious repulsion, which signifies Hazel's total loss of control and rejection by human society (Nabokov line 383). While the pain inflicted by her blind date occurs through no fault of Hazel's, her lack of personal relationships leaves her with no support system during this hurtful time. Her desire but unavoidable failure to exercise total power over every event in her life allows for the entrance of a devastating personal interaction, ending in rejection before it has even begun. Ending her existence, then, serves as Hazel's final endeavor at controlling chaos.

Galef's interpretation of the night, however, only depicts Nabokov's inclusion of natural imagery as symbols of "blurriness and blankness" that represent Hazel's final "attempt to rub out her old identity" (425). In fact, one may even read the passage as proof that the natural world is trying once again to make itself known to Hazel, to reach her during her struggle in order that she may realize she is part of something larger. In spite of this, Hazel persists in her morbid inward-facing vision, noting only that the trees around her seem "ghostly," profoundly removed from her human life (Nabokov 460). In his *Pale Fire* writings, however, Shade acknowledges nature's efforts, which transcend the terms of Hazel's binary, describing how "*Out of his lakeside shack / A watchman, Father Time, all gray and bent, / Emerged with his uneasy dog and went / Along the reedy bank. He came too late*" (Nabokov lines 474-477). He even recalls that the night was one "of thaw...of blow, / With great excitement in the air," demonstrating his ability to connect with nature even in times of despair, while his daughter refuses to do so at every turn (Nabokov lines 494-495). Hazel can only see "The lake, elsewhere in the work a great reflective body," as "an opaque surface" below which she might end her life (Galef 425). One must note that Shade personifies nature several times in the final stanza of *Pale Fire*, perhaps attempting to emphasize for his reader once more the idea that, though he grieves the loss of his daughter, he does not live according to her binary and feels a profound connection to a natural world that is dynamic even in the dead of winter.

Similarly, Nabokov uses Charles Kinbote's preoccupations and misguided tendencies to illustrate the academic's treatment of the nature/human binary as it contrasts the artist's ability to break down this flawed divide. Consumed by the pain of "solitude," which he calls "the playfield of Satan," Kinbote indulges in both his need to

classify all things systematically and his drive to live solely in a world made more tolerable by what Galef calls the “delusions of grandeur and attendant paranoia” of what is likely a fictional past (426). Kinbote’s intricate stories, however, do not, as Galef points out, “make him an artist” like Shade; rather, “the factors which circumscribe Kinbote in his own little hell...merely provide the impetus for escape” through manipulation and denial (427-428). In fact, both Kinbote’s analysis of Shade’s poem and his efforts to systematize what he sees as the chaos of the natural world demonstrate the depths of his ultimately unproductive escapism, as the reader is once again presented with one of Nabokov’s struggling, unfulfilled academics. Here the reader finds that characters like Kinbote and Hazel, who impose a binary between nature and humanity in order to maintain order over chaos, serve as opposition to Nabokov’s artists, who demonstrate why such a binary cannot stand.

In fact, an overwhelming majority of Kinbote’s musings on the natural world are connected to his attempts to control another human being. By imposing the control of humanity upon the natural world, Kinbote illustrates his belief in the nature/humanity binary. The natural world is for him completely apart from humanity, chaotic, and in need of control. For example, Kinbote’s gardener in New Wye, who represents for him an opportunity for sexual exploit and domination, is often described in conjunction with the natural surroundings in which he is most often found. Kinbote admits that his “knowledge of [the] garden,” a human construct of nature itself, is broadened as a result of his interactions with the gardener (Nabokov 73). This knowledge, then, results from his efforts to manipulate a personal relationship by feigning interest in order to secure “a much-needed rubdown” from the gardener (Nabokov 159). Similarly, Kinbote reflects

upon his first meeting with the “gifted gardener,” whom he encounters “at the top of a green ladder attending to the sick branch of a grateful tree” (Nabokov 291). Were he not so pleased to find himself “alone” with the gardener “in that admirable colonnade of trees,” Kinbote would not likely find it necessary to mention his natural surroundings at all, as he views them as part of a world totally separate from his own (Nabokov 291). Interestingly, these instances both involve the element of control a gardener exerts upon nature, symbolically forcing chaos to fit into his notion of human control, which probably appeals to Kinbote’s academic need to systematize things. The gardener represents to him both an authoritative figure whom he “hugely enjoy[s]...watching...struggle with the earth and turf” and a “completely impotent” individual, so Kinbote’s manipulation of the “strong strapping fellow” allows him to emerge as the one with ultimate power, controlling the one who controls the chaos of nature (Nabokov 291). He even muses about his cravings for total domination over the gardener, “long[ing] to have him...wear a great big turban..and an ankle bracelet” so that he might fulfill every part of Kinbote’s fantasies (Nabokov 292). By controlling the one with power over nature, Kinbote finds comfort in knowing his command extends beyond the reach of chaos. The fact that his intentions are selfish and dishonest, though, illustrates Nabokov’s depiction of characters living by a binary that ultimately falls apart.

Kinbote’s need to manipulate and control is further illustrated in his constant systematization and classification of the elements of nature. Led into the less chaotic, more controlled garden by his interest in its caretaker, Kinbote automatically begins to work in an academic manner, noting how “naturally, every tree top plotted its dotted line toward the ornithological work on my desk to which [he] would gallop from the lawn in

nomenclatorial agitation” (Nabokov 73). Similarly, Kinbote even strays from his descriptions of the gardener so that he can demonstrate his impressive ability to classify trees, making sure to include the scientific name for each species. By imposing his academic preoccupations upon the natural world, Kinbote ensures that his control exists even outside the academic world of the college campus. Nature only exists, therefore, as something else to be studied and controlled by systematization, while humanity exists for the purpose of doing so.

It is not surprising, then, that Kinbote even attempts to systematize the images of nature in Shade’s poem, taking them apart and classifying them for his commentary. Assuming that his systematization somehow makes what he sees as the artistic chaos of *Pale Fire* more controlled and predictable, Kinbote seizes every opportunity to impose his obsessions for power on Shade’s artistry whenever possible. For example, he dissects Shade’s image of “stilettos of a frozen stillicide,” noting that his “dictionary defines [stillicide] as ‘a succession of drops falling from the eaves, eavesdrop, cavesdrop’” (Nabokov 79). He even goes so far as to manipulate the reader, directing him or her to “note the cloak-and-dagger hint-glint in the ‘svelte stilltos’ and the shadow of regicide in the rhyme” (Nabokov 79). This passage demonstrates Kinbote’s skill of simultaneously systematizing images of nature and interrupting Shade’s poetic narrative with his own fantasies of royalty. Likewise, Kinbote praises Shade for his inclusion of a “dark Vanessa” in his poem, declaring “it is *so* like the heart of a scholar in search of a fond name to pile butterfly genus upon an Orphic divinity on top of the inevitable allusion to *Vanhomrigh, Esther!*” (Nabokov 172). Kinbote goes on to discuss the flight patterns of Shade’s butterfly, attempting to remove the artistic beauty from the image and replacing

it with systematic notation. Finally, Kinbote scrutinizes Shade's representation of a "wood duck," applauding it as "a pretty conceit" but continuing to describe its characteristics in detail, concluding that "the popular nomenclature of American animals reflects the simple utilitarian minds of ignorant pioneers and has not yet acquired the patina of European faunal names" (Nabokov 184). The reader, then, is distracted from Shade's artistry by Kinbote's academic interruptions, and the manipulative man's efforts to exert control over the text are realized.

Predictably, Kinbote's control of both reader and text through deliberate depictions of nature does not stop at his intrusion into Shade's text. Further illustrations of his scheming attempts are also present in his poorly disguised personal narrative, in which he weaves the story of the Zemblan King Charles Xavier. Such passages are composed of a clever combination of scientific systematization and artistic maneuvering, demonstrating Kinbote's mastery of manipulation. Shifting from scientifically describing mountain "passes none of which exceeds an altitude of five thousand feet" to beautifully noting "the damp, dark bracken, its odor, its lacy resilience," and the way "its mixture of soft growth and steep ground" called to the king's mind fond memories, Kinbote works to control the reader (Nabokov 139). Similarly, he artistically portrays the nature of Zembla when he notes that "the rain seethed in the black trees, and if you paused you heard your heart thumping, and the distant roar of the torrent" (Nabokov 139). While such passages are aesthetically pleasing to the reader and draw attention to the skills of the narrator, one finds that Kinbote cannot resist including scientific definitions of words such as "*bore*," "*alfear*," and "*steinmann*" (Nabokov 140, 142). The element of control in such instances is increased by the fact that Kinbote's definitions will, of course, be

previously unknown to the reader because of their part in his fictional Zemblan language. These depictions of nature, therefore, support Kinbote's belief in the humanity/nature binary in that their names only exist for the reader within a fictional language, separate from the actual human world but under his own control. Although his depictions of nature are not as obviously systematic as his nomenclatural listings, the way he presents the natural world remains quite deliberate. A mix of his academic classifications and manipulative artistry, Kinbote's depictions of Zembla's natural world illustrate his purposeful attempts to make his narrative a better read, manipulating the reader into experiencing pleasure at his hands. Of course, Kinbote cannot deny his urge to indulge himself through drawing attention to his handiness and concludes his detailed passage with the smug assumption "I trust the reader has enjoyed this note" (Nabokov 147).

Perhaps the most evident illustrations of Kinbote's attempts to control his life, specifically the surrounding natural world, can be found in how he uses nature as a tool for his almost voyeuristic attempts to gain entrance into Shade's life. He seems to see nature as either an inconvenient barrier between his life and Shade's or a tool with which to conceal his presence while spying on his poet neighbor. For instance, his frustration mounts when his "casement window ceased to function" as a point of "happy hunting...because of an elm's gross growth" (Nabokov 87). He moves on, however, to use a "tulip tree" to conceal himself from view, as he also does with his "bodyguard of black junipers" (Nabokov 87). Similarly, Kinbote describes how "from behind a drapery, from behind a box tree, through the golden veil of evening and through the black lacery of night, [he]...watch[ed] that lawn, that drive, that fanlight, those jewel-bright windows" of the object of his obsession (Nabokov 160). While his deliberately crafted depictions of

nature undeniably contain an element of beauty, Kinbote mistakenly believes that his exploitation of them effectively eradicates their artistic, chaotic potential. His attempts to exert control over chaos, therefore, are rewarded with brief glimpses into Shade's life, but Kinbote remains an isolated character like Hazel, so consumed by his preoccupations with power that he denies himself a connection with nature or his fellow human beings. It seems, therefore, that Kinbote's relentless desire to control nature illustrates how the natural world is never completely separate from humanity for Nabokov. Even when his characters refuse to acknowledge the breakdown of their binaries and use the separation they perceive for their own purposes, Nabokov manages to draw the reader's attention to the fact that nature and humanity are never totally removed from one another. Some level of mediation always exists, even though the academic continues to construct this faulty binary.

Nabokov's depiction of Hazel's father, therefore, provides for the reader a clearer idea of how Nabokov's artists often deconstruct these binaries between humanity and nature. Shade finds happiness and inspiration through his connections, uninhibited by the binaries which generally allow such opportunities to go ignored or unrecognized by Nabokov's solely academic characters. He allows himself to participate in the give and take with both nature and fellow humans because he does not view them as opposing sides of an either/or divide, and he is both poetically inspired and fulfilled as a result. In particular, Shade seems to connect with nature in a way unique to Nabokov's artists, a way that allows for a fulfillment that Hazel and Nabokov's other academics do not experience because of their reliance on this wrongly perceived binary. Dustin Condren discusses John Shade's ability to recognize the connection between humanity and nature

in “John Shade Shaving: Inspiration and Composition in a Selection from *Pale Fire*.” He notes the presence of nature in the beginning of *Pale Fire*’s fourth canto, though he does not attribute the poet’s connection to nature as his sustaining inspiration. Condren describes the way in which “Shade’s shaving imagery suddenly blooms” in lines 932 and 937, when the poet recalls the way his razor “Travels across the country of [his] cheek,” describing the “geography of his own face” as “Old Zembla’s fields where [his] gray stubble grows” (141). This passage demonstrates Shade’s keen ability to find comfort in his bond with nature in any setting, even during the mundane act of shaving in the confines of his bathroom. Instead of believing nature to be separate from his human life, existing only as something to be studied and systematized, Shade recognizes how the interaction between the two worlds never ends. “The electric charge of literary inspiration” in this passage, writes Condren, “transforms the routine act of shaving into an act of global import and historic beauty; it allows the artist to transcend the limits of his body, of space, and of time” (143). While the act of shaving might represent for a character like Kinbote a routine human activity with no relation to nature, nothing more than an opportunity to exert control by limiting the growth of his hair, it holds for Shade the potential for reflection and satisfaction. Although Condren does not focus specifically on the natural imagery within the passage, he describes it as “fertile,” calling “the picture of John Shade shaving...the picture of artistic bliss, of poetic creation, of the mind and the body attuned” (144). The poet’s union with nature’s quiet, concealed presence again allows him to transcend false binaries and the restrictions of all things synthetic while discovering inspiration where one might least expect it.

Though Shade seems to draw a great deal of hope and inspiration from nature and the cycle of life he sees within it, nature also often serves as a painful reminder of the loved ones he has lost as well as his own impending death. As he reflects upon the surroundings of the home he shares with Sybil, Shade recalls how even the beauty of “white butterflies turn[ing] lavender” under a favorite tree triggers memories of Hazel (Nabokov line 55). Nature, therefore, is mediated by humanity, just as the reverse is true. Shade does not view nature as an “other” needing to be studied and systematized and, though they are painful, does not attempt to control the unpredictability of these awakenings, but rather accepts them as a part of life, discovering their artistic value and incorporating them into his poem. This instance is echoed in the closing lines of Canto 2, in which Shade explains the circumstances of his child’s death. As previously noted, images of nature abound in this passage as the grieving father tells of the night the “blurry shape” of his daughter “stepped off the reedy bank / Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank” (Nabokov lines 499-500). His personification of the swamp not only likens the natural environment in which his daughter died to a living being but also serves as a metaphor of the death that awaits all living things. Once more, Nabokov deconstructs Hazel and Kinbote’s faulty binary by drawing the reader’s attention to the artist’s transcendence of it. With “Black spring / Stand[ing] just around the corner,” furthermore, the reader must consider the likelihood that Shade views the presence of design in nature as proof of life beyond death (Nabokov lines 495-496). The occurrences of the human life, therefore, are anything but separate from nature, as one continually signifies the other in the life of the artist. While aspects of it may remind him of the ultimate end of one’s physical life, perhaps others establish the existence of a larger cycle

in life—one in which God and a spiritual world need not be recognized, where all beings return to the earth from which they came and remain a part of nature eternally.

A closer examination of Shade's relationship with nature as it compares with his daughter's allows for a more complete understanding of the differences between the artist's and the academic's treatment of the commonly perceived divide between humanity and nature. Nabokov characteristically does not, however, make it easy for his readers to determine the ease with which the artist deconstructs this divide. By balancing his depictions of nature as both dismal and fertile, Nabokov illustrates Shade's inner struggle to search for the meaning of life in a world filled with reminders of his own mortality. Shade's deliberate diction and syntax in the second stanza of Canto One as well as the structure of the poem as a whole exemplify this equilibrium and give the reader greater insight into the conflicting emotions the character experiences when reflecting on his experiences of love and loss. The presence of natural elements throughout Shade's poem illustrates the interconnectedness of human and nature, a relationship that allows the poet to understand his existence on a more profound level during times of crisis and creation, an opportunity Shade greets with acceptance rather than denial or resistance.

Shade begins the second stanza with a request that his reader take a moment to consider the details of a snowfall. This instruction seems to imply that there is something more to "the falling snow" than one might initially think, an idea that is reinforced by Shade's way of seeing each snowflake as a unique being, much like humans themselves (Nabokov line 13). However, Shade artistically contrasts this image by choosing words such as "drifting" and "shapeless" to describe the snowflakes, suggesting a notable

lifelessness (Nabokov lines 13, 14). They manage to be both mediated by images of humanity and nothing more than the products of nature's cycle of precipitation.

Nabokov's artist is aware of this simultaneous existence, recognizing the interplay between what Nabokov's academics would likely proclaim to be separate sides of a clear division. Another noteworthy juxtaposition can be found in Shade's choice to describe the snow as "a dull dark white," implying that though the flakes might have once been the same "pale white" as the sky from which they fell, they have somehow become bleak and shadowy during their descent to the frozen ground, both affected by and a part of the human world (Nabokov line 15).

The possibility of viewing a snowfall as either an aimless flurry or an assembly of unique elements also reminds the reader of the poem's opening lines, in which the poet declares himself "the shadow of the waxwing slain" by its mistaken vision of a blue sky in what is actually only a reflection in the glass constructed by humans (Nabokov line 1). Although the bird's impact against the windowpane ended its life, Shade sees himself as "the shadow" that continues to live on in "the reflected sky" instead of the victim of a chaotic world (Nabokov lines 1, 4). The death of the creature, then, does not signify the separation between humanity and nature as it might for Kinbote or Hazel but instead illustrates the artist's ability to see beyond this divide. Describing himself as a part of both the human and natural worlds, Shade transcends this binary and demonstrates how control and chaos work together as a part of life's greater cycle. Such examples represent the poet's ability to see life in both synthetic human constructs and elements of the natural world, though he remains conscious that his search for meaning will always end in the death of his physical body. Recognizing the connection between nature and

humanity does not, for Shade, mean privileging one sphere over the other or relying on a false divide to guard against chaos or the unknown.

A similar example of John Shade's varying visions of nature can be found in the description of the night that encroaches during the snowfall. Shade acknowledges the sky's nightly cycle by describing it as "gradual and dual," further personifying the sky by noting its remarkable ability to bring together "the viewer and the view" (Nabokov lines 17, 18). Although the poet and the natural world are separated here by their respective roles, Shade's detailed wonder at the beauty surrounding him implies a communication between "viewer" and "view," one that is a vital part of the poet's childhood and development as an artist (Nabokov line 18). Once again, nature is mediated by humanity, and the artist allows himself to be affected by the natural world instead of insisting upon a separation between the two. Similarly, the way Shade sees the "diamonds of frost / Express amazement" as the morning arrives provides another instance of the life and consciousness the poet finds within the vast unknown of the natural world (Nabokov lines 19-20). By personifying nature instead of simply defining its terms or classifying it, Shade again breaks down the academic's perceived separation between nature and humanity.

These observations lead the poet to the question even the frost seems to be asking: "Whose spurred feet have crossed / From left to right the blank page of the road?" (Nabokov lines 20-21). As before, this inquiry implies a communication between artist and nature not evident in Nabokov's descriptions of solely academic characters. Although the bird that left its tracks does not interact verbally with Shade, the imprints of its steps leave behind a different form of communication, written on the snow. The

season itself provides him with “winter’s code,” a way to cipher the message and trace it back to its source—a pheasant (Nabokov line 22). However, Shade does not rely only on his academic side to systematically interpret the tracks but instead allows himself to be affected by their presence as the separation between himself and the natural world is dissolved. Shade’s diction and style are both significant in this particular passage, especially in his depiction of the “torquated beauty” that is the bird (Nabokov line 25). By choosing words with elusive meanings such as “torquated,” the poet alludes to the mysteries that exist in nature (Nabokov line 25). He does not, though, find himself troubled by nature’s seemingly chaotic mysteries or experience the need to control them in some manner. Although the bird’s world is as foreign to the poet as “China,” Shade does not attempt to systematize his findings, happy simply to discover another creature’s realm so close to his own, a perfect example of nature working within his world (Nabokov line 26). He deepens his symbolic relationship with the pheasant by likening the creature to a character “in *Sherlock Holmes*,” figuratively bringing one of Mother Nature’s beings into the man-made world of fiction and once more illustrating humanity’s constant mediation of the natural world (Nabokov line 28).

Shade explains the importance of this relationship with nature later in Canto 1 of *Pale Fire*, when he declares that his “God died young” (line 99). While the absence of a connection with the Christian religion, which seems to privilege humanity and support the nature/humanity binary, causes the poet to question the meaning of life and death, his bond to the natural world is constant. Shade explains this in line 102 by proclaiming: “How fully I felt nature glued to me.” From a young age he finds comfort in the beauty of his surroundings in a way that his own daughter would not, again acknowledging the

consciousness he sees in nature by describing “the rainbow of a thunderstorm / Which in a distant valley has been staged” (Nabokov lines 112-113). His recognition of this “stag[ing],” suggests that, though religion provides no comfort for Shade, the artist in him recognizes that everything, human or nature, has a creator. While Nabokov’s academic characters might feel the need to classify this designer according to the humanistic confines of an organized religion, Shade is comfortable without privileging humans in this way. For him, it is just as likely that the simultaneous pattern and mystery of the natural world serve to create the rainbow, which in all its beauty is anything but separate from his human world. Although Shade does not claim to know the intricate way in which nature presents this beautiful occurrence, he takes comfort in a way that his daughter was not able—knowing that, while living on this earth until our death, “we are most artistically caged” (Nabokov lines 114). For Shade, humans live in nature and are only controlled by the limits and divides they place upon themselves. Interactions between poet and nature such as these bring life to a poem that is otherwise filled with experiences of death, doubt, and worry.

Although nature does not consciously offer Shade the comfort that he finds from the presence of his loved ones—hearing Sybil’s “steps upstairs” and knowing “all is right,” for example—it does eliminate a great deal of his fear simply through its existence, even during his moments of semi-consciousness (Nabokov line 245). He says of “cross[ing] the border” during a spell of unconsciousness: “Everything I loved was lost / But no aorta could report regret. / A sun of rubber was convulsed and set; And blood-black nothingness began to spin / A system of cells interlinked within cells interlinked / Within one stem” (Nabokov lines 100-106). Just as he uses Shade’s personifications of

nature to illustrate the problems with the humanity/nature binary, Nabokov seems to include this passage with a similar purpose in mind. Elements of the natural world participate actively in this reflection, almost characters in themselves, once again rupturing the divide between humanity and nature. While Nabokov's academic character would likely only view the experience and the images of nature within the vision as a total, devastating loss of control at the hands of chaos, his artist understands that nature and humanity exist as vital supplements to one another and therefore cannot be divided. As a result of this evident connection between nature and Shade's mortal life, the character's need to constantly lament his physical and emotional losses is eliminated. Although he briefly allows himself to be distracted by his vision of the white fountain, the central symbol of humanity within the vision, Shade at last grows secure in his realization that "the real point" is "not text, but texture, not the dream / But topsy-turvical coincidence, / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense" (Nabokov lines 807-810). The poet needs not torture himself with questions of heaven and hell; the truth of life, the fact that humanity and nature are forever interlinked, is woven into the natural world surrounding him. Shade confirms his philosophy when he writes, "I awoke / Safe in my bed as day its eggshell broke, / And robins walked and stopped, and on the damp / Gemmed turf a brown shoe lay! My secret stamp, / The Shade impress, the mystery inborn. / Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn" (Nabokov). Once again, one finds that Shade's diction is a compilation of natural images and human constructs, resulting in a synthesis of elements that assure the artist of his place in the natural design of life.

Shade does not, however, seem to be confident in the fact that his being a part of the natural life cycle will be sufficient to preserve the emotion that can only be felt during

the creation of one's art. By "Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" through his poetry, he discovers what seems to be a sense of fulfillment (Nabokov lines 829-830). Shade's decision to "cry out as / None has cried out" through the "wonderful machine" of composition is intertwined with his relationship with the natural world (Nabokov lines 836-837, 839); his consciousness of the way his "pen...swoops to bar / A canceled sunset or restore a star," "physically guid[ing]" his words "Toward faint daylight through the inky maze" makes it clear that his creative process is one connected to nature, supported by the endurance of the natural world (Nabokov lines 849-852). While this artistic process might initially seem to be quite similar to the human production of literary criticism like Kinbote's analysis of *Pale Fire*, it seems that for Nabokov art is actually quite different. Literary criticism relies on literature, a human construct, as an object of study to be systematized and analyzed according to human theories and notions. Nabokov illustrates his objections to literary criticism through Shade, who comments, "there are certain trifles I do not forgive": such as "looking in [a text] for symbols," never failing to declare the "critic," who "speak[s] of an author's sincerity" as only a "fool" would do (Nabokov 156). Art, however, has the capacity to be inspired by connection to either nature, humanity, or both, and does not rely on such a strict binary between systematization and the "other" for its creation.

Through this comprehension of the link between nature's creation and his own creative process, Shade reaches a peaceful sense of awareness, unhindered by a division between human creation and the natural world. The poet expresses this state through a relation of poetic form and the universe: "I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only through my art, / In terms of combinational delight"

(Nabokov lines 971-974). Once more, the reader finds evidence that the artist's creations connect him to something, whether it be nature, humanity, or his own self. Although he will undoubtedly experience pangs of grief for his daughter and the pain she endured until her death, Shade seems to accept that loss is a natural part of life—it is the anguish that humans bring upon themselves through unnecessary separation that removes them from their native state of harmony. He expresses this relief of sorts by writing “I am reasonably sure that we survive / And that my daughter somewhere is alive” (Nabokov lines 977-978). This assurance, though somewhat indefinite, is enough for Shade, whose deconstruction of the control/chaos binary allows him to accept the simultaneous existence of both elements in humanity as well as nature.

Brian Boyd describes this passage in *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, noting how Shade “expresses his confidence, despite his daughter's suicide, in the sense of harmony he feels around him in the slowly gathering summer evening, in the accidents of the real” (77). Although Boyd claims that Shade's “confidence” is “grotesquely misplaced” because of the character's unnecessary and meaningless death, it seems that the ending of Shade's physical life actually demonstrates the artist's ability to make beauty of chaos (78). While Shade's unpredictable and untimely death signifies to Boyd the ultimate loss of control in a chaotic world, Nabokov seems to be once more drawing the reader's attention to natural design. Just as the gardener mediates nature through his work, the “flowing shade and ebbing light” affect the artist's life in profound ways (Nabokov line 996). These influences are evident even the structure of Shade's poem, which seems to relate to nature in its own unique way, each canto a symbolic spring, summer, fall, and winter in the poet's life, each iambic line resonating in the

rhythm of the world. Shade recognizes that all of nature's beings, while being connected, are unique by calling this equilibrium his own "private universe" (Nabokov line 975). It is this comforting knowledge that functions as his foundation as a poet, father, husband, and man until his untimely departure. Boyd does, however, note that a second reading of *Pale Fire* allows less optimistic readers an opportunity to read Shade's death as something other than "the cruel last laugh," explaining that "if we feel the presence of death and disorder when we return to reread *Pale Fire*, we also see much more that we had not seen on a first reading: more life, and more design" (79). This notion, however, only works to further strengthen the faulty binary supported by Kinbote and Hazel. "Death and disorder," which Boyd seems to be suggesting are related to nature and chaos, should not, according to Nabokov and his artists, be defined solely by their opposition to ideas of "life" and "design," or humanity and control.

Accordingly, Shade concludes his deeply personal *Pale Fire* with a stanza combining elements of natural imagery and human construction, demonstrating the interconnectedness between the two. Personifying the "sun" by describing how it "attains / Old Dr. Sutton's last two windowpanes," Shade reminds the reader of the seemingly conscious, personal qualities that can be found in nature (Nabokov lines 885-886). Similarly, his depiction of "A dark Vanessa with a crimson band" asks the reader to consider the feminine characteristics the poet perceives in a passing butterfly (Nabokov line 993). Shade's sense of connection with nature intertwines in his placement of "horseshoes" and "garden," as well as in his choice to describe the butterfly's "wingtips" as "ink-blue," demonstrating the connection between nature and the poet's medium (Nabokov lines 989, 991, 995). Although the void Shade felt upon

the loss of his daughter, symbolized perhaps by the “empty barrow” pushed by the unnamed man, does find its way into his thoughts on occasion, he is consoled by the knowledge that he is a part of both nature and humanity, separate from neither (Nabokov line 989). Even the way he sees “Part of [Sybil’s] shadow near the shagbark tree” reassures him that those he loves are all connected to nature and therefore bound to him eternally (Nabokov line 990).

The images and intricacies of interpersonal and natural connections in Shade’s *Pale Fire* are vital to an insightful reading of the poem as well as a greater understanding of how Nabokov uses academic and artistic characters in the novel as a whole. By recognizing the academic construction of the humanity/nature and control/chaos binaries as they contrast the artist’s deconstruction of this divide, the reader is better able to comprehend Nabokov’s inclusion of both character types. Ironically, it is in the words of Charles Kinbote that this sense of connections is perhaps best described, the “artist” is open to the “web of the world” that grants one a sense of “indescribable amazement,” “as if...fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits” (Nabokov 289). Although Nabokov’s poet in *Pale Fire*, as all people, lives a physical life dappled with periods of doubt and despair, he finds solace in the knowledge that he is connected with those he loves and exists a part of natural world rather than separate from it, secure in his “Nest” as “the tide of the shade” draws nearer (Nabokov lines 287, 290).

## CONCLUSION

Textual evidence from three of Vladimir Nabokov's American novels reveals the problematic nature of the oppositional binaries imposed upon terms like nature, civilization, control, chaos, art, and academia by many of the author's critics and fictional characters. While this tendency is a common one, Nabokov uses these three works to show the ways that such divides cannot stand. The title character of *Pnin* exemplifies these faulty endeavors in his efforts to exert control over his life and maintain his ego through the privileging of civilization and control. These very desires seem to directly contribute to his despair. Similarly, *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert prefers civilization and control over what he often believes to be their threatening opposites. However, Nabokov uses his character's impulsiveness to work with these relationships in different ways; instead of strictly adhering to his binaristic preferences, Humbert shows, unaware, the supplemental nature of such terms through his desire for chaotic, yet controlled, experiences. Nabokov's ultimate breakdown of these binaries comes in 1962's *Pale Fire*, where the reader finds John Shade, an artist who recognizes the interplay between control and chaos. While supporting characters such as Hazel Shade and Charles Kinbote often work to maintain a commanding grasp on chaos and the natural world, their misguided desires and isolation only further demonstrate the flaws of such propensities. Everything, according to Nabokov, is both natural *and* human-produced. Chaos lies in even the most controlled situation, in the same way that artistry exists in science and academia.

The conclusions in this project may appear problematic, however, when one considers the way in which all three of these novels end—in death, murder, or exile. Suggesting that John Shade recognizes supplemental relationships in a more honest way than Humbert Humbert or Pnin is tricky, given that Shade's achievements do nothing to prevent his murder or keep his poem out of Kinbote's hands. Despite Shade's breakdown of the human/nature opposition, his story ends just as badly as Humbert's and Pnin's do. In fact, Kinbote remains the only character with a grasp on at least part of what he desired—Shade's autobiographical poem. How, one might ask, can the theory of Nabokov's binary exposure withstand the fact that the only character to truly break down such barriers dies in such a chaotic, violent way? The answer to such complications, though, seems to exist once more in the resistance against such either-or conclusions. Declaring Shade's death to be a dismal ending for the novel presupposes a binary between murder and some kind of fairy tale ending. Evidence from these novels suggests, though, that this divide may not be as clear as it seems. Although Shade is mistaken for someone else and murdered in his yard, this final event in his life should not define the entire novel or Nabokov's intentions for it. Instead, it is useful to take note of Shade's journey through despair to peaceful awareness. While Humbert, Hazel Shade, and Pnin suffer imprisonment, suicide, and self-exile resulting from their own efforts to control their lives and the world around them, Shade's life ends in a way that seems to further support Nabokov's dissolution of these binaries.

While the novels in this project point towards the problems with the human desire to systematize the world, perhaps it would be interesting in the future to consider the author's Russian works as well. Considering the ways in which Pnin's Russian heritage

and estranged life in America contribute to his problems with ego identification and efforts to maintain control, exploring these works may further inform the conversation. Should Nabokov's explorations be discovered in his Russian works, perhaps critics could more closely analyze any similarities or differences between the author's American and Russian novels. Nabokov's works, when freed from the limits of binary imposition, provide endless possibilities such as these, allowing the audience to better understand both his literature and their own human tendencies.

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