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**THE PHENOMENON OF THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN  
V. NABOKOV'S NOVEL "PALE FIRE"****Pulatova Sabina Sharifovna,***Third-year PhD student of Bukhara State University,**teacher of Bukhara State Pedagogical Institute*[s.sh.pulatova@buxdu.uz](mailto:s.sh.pulatova@buxdu.uz)

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu maqolada Vladimir Nabokovning "Rangsiz olov" romani misolida "ishonchsiz hikoyachi" fenomeni va uning matndagi namoyon bo'lish xususiyatlari tadqiq etiladi. Jerar Jenettning roviylik nazariyasiga tayangan holda, bosh qahramon Charlz Kinbotning "paralepsis" (fokalizatsiya kodlarini buzib, kelajakdagi voqealarni matnga muddatidan oldin kiritishi) usulidan foydalanishi matniy dalillar orqali tahlil qilinadi. Maqolada Kinbot obrazining ikki tomonlama tabiati ya'ni o'tkir adabiy sezgiga ega olimlik va o'z uydirmalarini asrash uchun matnni soxtalashtirishga tayyor noshirlik xususiyatlari ochib beriladi. Yakunda ushbu narrativ chalkashliklar ortida V. Nabokovning o'z akademik faoliyatiga (xususan, "Yevgeniy Onegin" sharhlariga) yo'naltirilgan chuqur avtoparodiyasi yotganligi hamda asarning serqatlam tabiati ko'rsatib o'tiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Vladimir Nabokov, "Rangsiz olov", ishonchsiz roviy, paralepsis, avtoparodiya, matnning soxtalashtirilishi, serqatlamlik.

**Abstract.** This article investigates the phenomenon of the "unreliable narrator" and its structural manifestations using Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Pale Fire" as a case study. Drawing on Gérard Genette's narrative theory, the study analyzes textual evidence of how the protagonist, Charles Kinbote, utilizes "paralepsis"—the violation of focalization codes by prematurely leaking future narrative events into his commentary. The article highlights the dual nature of Kinbote's character, balancing his sharp literary intuition as a scholar against his willingness to commit textual forgery to preserve his own delusions. Ultimately, this narrative instability is shown to be a vehicle for Nabokov's deep auto-parody of his own academic endeavors specifically his commentary on "Eugene Onegin" underscoring the polyvariant and open-ended nature of the text.

**Key words:** Vladimir Nabokov, "Pale Fire", unreliable narrator, paralepsis, auto-parody, textual forgery, multi-layeriness.

**Аннотация.** В данной статье на примере романа Владимира Набокова «Бледное пламя» исследуется феномен «ненадежного повествователя» и особенности его структурного проявления в тексте. Опираясь на нарративную теорию Жерара Женетта, автор на основе текстовых данных анализирует использование главным героем Чарльзом Кинботом приема «паралепсиса» нарушения кодов фокализации, выражающегося в преждевременном включении фактов из будущего в линейную структуру комментария. В статье раскрывается двойственная природа образа Кинбота, сочетающего в себе тонкое литературное чутье ученого и готовность пойти на текстологический подлог ради сохранения собственных иллюзий. В конечном итоге доказывается, что за этой нарративной нестабильностью скрывается глубокая автопародия В. Набокова на его собственную академическую деятельность (в частности, на комментарии к «Евгению Онегину»), что подчеркивает поливариантную и открытую природу произведения.

**Ключевые слова:** Владимир Набоков, «Бледное пламя», ненадежный повествователь, паралепсис, автопародия, текстологический подвох, поливариантность.

**Introduction** Vladimir Nabokov's 1962 masterpiece, "Pale Fire", has long been celebrated as a labyrinthine "DIY novel," ("Do-It-Yourself novel") a Faberge toy, and a beautifully constructed trap for the reviewer [1]. Comprising a 999-line autobiographical poem by the fictional American poet John Shade and a massive, erratic commentary by his

neighbor, the self-proclaimed exiled king Charles Kinbote, the novel defies traditional structural boundaries [1]. Ever since its publication, critical reception has fluctuated wildly, ranging from immense praise for its intricate wordplay to utter bewilderment regarding its narrative framework [10]. At the heart of this enduring literary debate lies the fundamental question of authorship and textual reality: who truly commands the narrative, and how much can the reader trust the voices within the text?

While early critics frequently treated Charles Kinbote's narrative instability as a given, a closer textual examination reveals that his "unreliability" is not merely a psychological trait, but a highly sophisticated narrative mechanism. Kinbote's status as an unreliable narrator manifest prominently through what Gérard Genette defines as narrative "paralepsis"—the systematic violation of focalization codes where the narrator provides far more information than the structural frame should logically allow [12]. By constantly overlapping his retrospective knowledge with immediate events, blurring the lines between the mundane reality of the academic town New Wye and his grandiose fantasies of the northern land of Zembla, Kinbote aggressively forces his own script onto the text [1; 3]. He brazenly attempts to overwrite the actual circumstances of Shade's tragic death with an elaborate tale of political assassination and revolutionary shadows [3].

However, reducing Kinbote to a standard "mad commentator" oversimplifies his function within V. Nabokov's playful poetics. Kinbote is a complex "game construct" who simultaneously acts as a reader, editor, translator, and critic. His obsessive editorial intrusions, manipulation of variant lines, and desperate desire for "human reality" serve a dual purpose: they showcase a distinct literary erudition while operating as a brilliant vehicle for Nabokov's own self-parody [1; 4]. Through Kinbote's manic scholarly habits, Nabokov subtly parodies his own decade-long monumental effort translating and commenting on Alexander Pushkin's Eugene Onegin [5; 7], as well as his own artistic preoccupation with tracing chronological and topographical "patterns" across history.

This article examines the phenomenon of the unreliable narrator in "Pale Fire" by analyzing the specific textual markers of Kinbote's narrative distortion. Rather than viewing his unreliability as a flaw or an isolated psychological delusion, this study argues that the polyvariant and unstable nature of Kinbote's commentary is a deliberate postmodern strategy [15]. By keeping the narrative structure in a state of perpetual ambiguity, V. Nabokov highlights the central metaliterary problem of the novel: that the reception, critical assimilation, and cultural translation of art can never have a single, absolute solution [14].

**Literature Review** The publication of Vladimir Nabokov's "Pale Fire" in 1962 triggered a sharp critical debate over its structural and generic boundaries [10]. Early reception fluctuated between Mary McCarthy's enthusiastic investigation of the novel's intricate literary allusions and outright incomprehension from critics like Dwight Macdonald [10]. However, D. Macdonald perceptively identified the book's core

mechanism as a “parody of the academic research method”—a concept later refined by D.B. Johnson, who viewed the novel as a parody of scholarly editions, modeled specifically after V. Nabokov’s own commentated translation of Alexander Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin” [9].

Scholarly approaches to the text’s thematic and metaphysical layers generally fall into three categories. The first is P. Stegner views the novel as a sharpening of Vladimir Nabokov’s signature motifs, specifically the epistemological struggle to overcome physical reality and the search for aesthetic “patterns” in human destiny [17]. The second is Brian Boyd and Vladimir Alexandrov explore the author’s play with the “otherworld,” tracing interconnected metaphysical symbols like the Vanessa Atalanta butterfly and images of reflecting glass [8; 14]. The third is P. Meyer argues that the narrative is organized around V. Nabokov’s personal trauma as an émigré and the 1922 assassination of his father, encoded through a complex dialectical spiral of Anglo-Saxon and Norse literary traditions [11].

A parallel debate centers on the identity of the “mock author” responsible for the text, which P. Tammi categorizes into three dominant narrative theories [18]:

1. The Kinbote/Botkin Primacy: Initiated by P. Stegner and expanded by D.B. Johnson, this view argues that the mad commentator (or his expatriate alter-ego, Botkin) invented both the poem and its author, John Shade [9; 17].
2. The Shade Primacy: Advanced by Andrew Field and later adapted metaphysically by Brian Boyd, this theory posits that Shade is the true creator, manipulating Kinbote from the otherworldly realm to complete the text [14; 16].
3. Postmodern Polyvariant Ambiguity: Scholars like Maurice Couturier and Vladimir Alexandrov reject an absolute narrative solution, viewing the structural instability as a deliberate manifestation of postmodern aesthetics [8; 15].

Aligning with Couturier and Alexandrov, contemporary research views this narrative open-endedness as central to V. Nabokov’s design [8; 15]. The polyvariant structure directly serves the novel’s broader metaliterary theme that is the reception, critical assimilation, and translation of art can never be restricted to a single, monolithic answer.

**Analysis.** While Charles Kinbote is clearly an unreliable narrator, his untrustworthiness is built into the text through specific structural clues [1]. The primary tool V. Nabokov uses to show this is what literary critics call *paralepsis*, which happens when a narrator lets information slip that they logically shouldn’t know yet [12]. A clear example of this slip happens in Kinbote’s notes to line 802 of the poem, where he describes a walk he took with John Shade on July 21 and suddenly notes that this walk “was to be exceedingly brief” [1; 3]. Kinbote is looking back from the future, knowing that Shade was about to be murdered that night, and he lets that future knowledge ruin the linear timeline of his academic notes [3].

Kinbote also uses his commentary to completely rewrite real-world facts [3]. In the actual town of New Wye, an escaped madman named Jack Grey accidentally shot John Shade, mistaking him for a local judge [1]. Because Kinbote suffers from a severe split personality and believes he is the hunted, exiled king of a fake country called Zembla, he renames the killer “Gradus” and claims that Gradus is a political assassin sent specifically to murder him, not Shade [3]. His obsession with his own fantasy completely breaks the rules of an academic commentary, which is supposed to explain a poem line-by-line, not serve as a personal diary [1].

Kinbote’s character is deeply contradictory because, despite his madness, he actually has great literary taste and correctly points out how Shade uses a style of synchronization to show two parallel scenes happening at the exact same time [1; 3]. He even traces this advanced technique back to famous writers like Gustave Flaubert and James Joyce [13]. However, the moment a line in the poem doesn’t fit his delusion, he either gets lazy or commits outright fraud [3]. For instance, when Shade writes a clever parody of the poet T.S. Eliot, Kinbote refuses to research it, lazily complaining that he is living in a “bookless mountain cave” [3]. Worse, he actively fakes evidence by writing a fake couplet that hints at a king in his notes to line 12, claiming he just found it in Shade’s messy drafts [3]. He later confesses in line 550 that he stood “on the brink of falsification” because he was desperately disappointed that Shade’s poem wasn’t actually about him [1; 3].

Ultimately, Kinbote’s absurd behavior is a giant, humorous self-parody by Nabokov himself [1; 4]. Kinbote’s famous claim in the Preface that Shade’s poem “has no human reality at all” without his notes perfectly mocks V. Nabokov’s own intense real-life habits as a literary scholar [3]. In real life, Nabokov spent a decade writing an incredibly long, meticulous commentary for Alexander Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, filling thousands of index cards and obsessively trying to find real-life patterns connecting his own childhood to Pushkin’s life [5; 7]. By turning those thousands of index cards into the frantic, paranoid, window-peeping notes of Charles Kinbote, V. Nabokov is laughing at his own scholarly obsession. Through Kinbote, Nabokov playfully reminds the reader that a critic can never perfectly capture or fully control the true soul of another artist's work.

**Discussion.** The findings highlighted in the analysis of “Pale Fire” provoke a broader critical discussion regarding V. Nabokov’s philosophy of literature and the unstable relationship between an author, a text, and a commentator. By structuring the novel around a deeply unreliable narrator who utilizes paraleiptic insertions to rewrite a tragic murder into a royal assassination plot, V. Nabokov does more than just craft an entertaining puzzle. He actively challenges the traditional, authoritative weight usually granted to academic critics and editors. When Kinbote brazenly states that John Shade’s poem completely lacks “human reality” without his accompanying notes, the text exposes the ultimate vulnerability of any piece of art once it leaves the creator’s hands [3]. Nabokov

illustrates how easily a text can be hijacked, manipulated, or outright forged by an interpreter driven by personal obsession or a specific ideological agenda.

This structural instability places the reader in an entirely unique hermeneutic position, forcing a shift from passive consumption to active co-creation. Because the narrative is split between a linear poem and a chaotic, non-linear commentary, the reader cannot simply read the book from front to back. Instead, one must constantly weigh Kinbote's obvious delusions against his genuine moments of brilliant literary insight—such as his accurate tracing of structural synchronization back to Flaubert and Joyce [13]. This constant tension between critical competence and textual fraud prevents any singular, monolithic reading of the novel from taking hold. It perfectly aligns “Pale Fire” with a postmodern aesthetic where absolute truth is discarded in favor of a polyvariant, open-ended structure [15]. The novel ultimately suggests that the reception and translation of art are inherently unstable processes that can never yield a single, definitive answer [14].

Finally, the deep-seated auto-parody running through Kinbote's editorial misconduct elevates the novel from a mere satire of academia into a profound act of literary self-reflection. It is impossible to separate Kinbote's frantic, index-card-fueled monomania from V. Nabokov's own decade-long real-life obsession with translating and dissecting Pushkin's “Eugene Onegin” [5; 7]. By mocking his own scholarly habits, his tendency to trace obsessive biographical patterns, and his absolute defense of non-utilitarian aestheticism, V. Nabokov displays an acute awareness of his own professional vulnerabilities [4; 6]. Through the comic distortion of Charles Kinbote, Nabokov playfully but directly confronts the limitations of the critic's lens, offering a cautionary yet brilliant reminder that even the most meticulous scholar can never fully possess or entirely control the true soul of another artist's creation.

**Conclusion.** Vladimir Nabokov's “Pale Fire” stands as a definitive exploration of the unstable boundaries between creative art and critical interpretation. Through the meticulous coding of Charles Kinbote's narrative unreliability—exposed through instances of structural parepsis and overt textual forgery—the novel shifts from a traditional story into a polyvariant, non-linear reading experience [12]. Kinbote's dual nature as a highly perceptive literary scholar who is simultaneously a delusional, self-serving editor forces the reader to abandon a passive role and actively participate in the construction of the text's reality [1]. By keeping the narrative framework in a state of perpetual ambiguity, V. Nabokov brilliantly demonstrates that the reception, critical assimilation, and cultural translation of literature can never be confined to a single, monolithic solution [14; 15].

Ultimately, the layer of profound auto-parody embedded within the text elevates the novel beyond a simple satire of the academic world. By transforming his own massive, real-world scholarly obsessions, index-card methodology, and intense search for historical patterns into the frantic, window-peeping commentary of Kinbote, V. Nabokov offers a deeply self-reflexive critique of his own professional life and hermeneutic practices [4; 5].

“Pale Fire” serves as a powerful, playful reminder of the limits of literary criticism, illustrating that while an interpreter may attempt to aggressively overwrite an author’s creation, the true soul of a masterpiece will always elude total scholarly containment.

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