

English 220
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Help with *Pale Fire* (the poem)

To make sense of *Pale Fire* (the book), you have to make sense of *Pale Fire* (the poem). The poem is wonderful and difficult. You will have trouble with a lot of it, but every line you take the trouble to figure out will entrance you. It will help you a lot if you read this sheet carefully before you start.

The speaker of the poem is John Shade, a poet-in-residence at an eastern college. He lives in the house he grew up in as a child. He is married to Sybil Shade, a woman with whom, after 40 years of marriage, he is still wholly in love. He knew her in high school, when she was pretty and popular and he was a clumsy young man. She saw his genius. When he grew up he became a poet—the real thing: an important minor American poet—and a professor at the college in their home town. As a professor he wrote literary criticism, including a book on the 18th-century poet Alexander Pope.

John and Sybil Shade had a daughter. They adored her. She was pudgy, and physically unattractive, and near-sighted. As she was growing up, knowing that “success” as a girl in American adolescent society depends on being popular with boys, they hoped she would turn out pretty, or at least cute. She didn’t. She was “intellectual,” and lonely, and angry at the isolation in which her unpopularity with boys put her. She graduated from college and she had never had a date, but she “nursed a small mad hope” that someday her Prince Charming would come and rescue her (i.e., that an attractive boy would turn out to like her).

Shade’s secretary at the college fixed her up with a blind date, the secretary’s cousin. The boy took one look at the Shade’s daughter and pretended to have “urgent business” elsewhere. She took the bus home, but she didn’t stay on the bus until she reached her home town. She got off one stop early, and drowned herself in the lake. (It was winter, and there was some ice still on the lake, so people could pretend that she’d tried to cross the ice and fallen in by accident.)

Since his daughter’s death, John Shade’s life has consisted of (1) wondering urgently if there is *any* sense to the hope of life beyond the grave, and (2) turning this wondering into poetry. As a boy, he had certain “mystical” experiences that seemed to suggest that there was a pattern behind the random events of life that could only be explained if there was another order of existence beyond this one. As a grownup poet, he once had, after giving a lecture, an “out of body” experience when he fainted and his heart stopped and he had a vision of a reality beyond life. In everyday life, the insistent sense of “deeper patterns” keeps suggesting to him that there is a hidden pattern beyond it all. Sometimes he feels like a chess piece on the board in a game in which Mysterious and Cosmic Figures are pushing the pieces around, forming patterns that *they* understand, but that he cannot because he is just a piece on the board.

In Canto IV, John Shade is in the bathtub, shaving. The whole Canto is about the unconscious process through which a poem comes to birth in the mind of a poet while he is doing

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ordinary things (dressing, shaving, going to the store). You have to read this as a “triple voicing”: Shade is shaving, but also thinking about himself being in the bathtub shaving, and also thinking about himself writing a poem *about* being in the bathtub, shaving, while thinking about a poem he is going to write. (It is very brilliant. Try to understand it, every word.)

Who knows, maybe *our* life is a poem, being written by a Poet whose existence we cannot imagine. Do your best. Good luck.

Help with *Pale Fire* (the novel)

Pale Fire is a “decomposed” story. That is, a series of literal events gets taken apart and reassembled in the mind of Kinbote, the mad or insane commentator on the poem. To understand the novel, you have to understand the “real” events beneath Kinbote’s fantasy.

This is hard. I am going to give you a brief account from memory. You should read it before you start the novel. Elements in the summary may be inexact—*Pale Fire* is immensely difficult, and I haven’t read it since last year—but it will give you an idea. Then we can correct the details of this handout together so I can use an improved version in future 220 classes. Here we go:

1) Somewhere in the eastern United States is a university town named New Wye. At the local university (Wordsmith University) teaches a well-known poet named John Shade. He lives with his wife Sybil on a rural road at the outskirts of town, by a lake. His most recent poem has been a long (4 canto) work in rhymed couplets about the suicide of his daughter, Hazel Shade, and his own thoughts about death and immortality.

2) Next to the Shades lives Judge Goldsworth, who is both a law professor at the university and a Criminal Court judge. In his career as a magistrate, he has condemned to death or life imprisonment a number of criminals, including a lunatic sent by him to a local institution for the Criminally Insane.

3) This last year, Judge Goldsworth has gone with his family to England on sabbatical. While they are gone, the house is rented to Charles Botkin, a visiting Russian scholar teaching at Wordsmith. Botkin is insane. He is also enthusiastically homosexual.

4) In his own mad fantasy, Botkin is the king of an imaginary kingdom named Zembla. During the year, Botkin becomes friends with Shade, whom he imagines to be writing a poem about his (Botkin’s) romantic past as an exile from his homeland. Botkin has told Shade the story of his kingship and then his escape from Zembla when there is a revolution there, and now Shade is taking this (Botkin thinks) material for a truly great poem.

5) At the end of the academic year, Shade finishes *Pale Fire* and is going to Botkin’s

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house for a celebratory glass of wine. While Botkin is unlocking the door, an escaped madman, seeking revenge against Judge Goldsworth for sending him to prison, mistakes Shade for the Judge and shoots him, wounding him fatally. (We are told at various places that Shade somewhat resembles Judge Goldsworth, so this is a plausible mistake.)

6) In the confusion that follows, Botkin takes from the dying Shade the draft of *Pale Fire*—it is written on a series of index cards—that the old poet has been carrying with him. In the weeks and months that follow, Shade's wife and everyone connected with Shade (friends, scholars, publishers) try to get the manuscript away from Botkin, but he is too canny for them and escapes.

7) As the novel opens, Botkin has hidden himself away in a rustic cabin somewhere in the mountains in the western United States. He is convinced that he is the only person who can do an authoritative edition of *Pale Fire* because *he is the only person alive who knows that the romantic "story of Zembla" is really its secret theme.*

8) So he begins his commentary. (This is where we come into the story: Botkin in his mountain cabin, beginning the introduction to his "edition" of *Pale Fire*.) Renaming himself "Kinbote" so that he can retell the story of his relationship with Shade on his own chosen terms, he sits down to write a scholarly introduction to the poem.

9) "Kinbote" begins, as is usual with older-fashioned scholarly introductions of this sort, with an account of the poem's composition: "*Pale Fire*, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade," (etc).

One of the great literary and intellectual ventures of your life has just begun. Read on!