

Vladimir Nabokov and the Reader's Game

by

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To Véra

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's affinity for games has been well established in his interviews and in the criticism about him, and as a writer he constantly blurs the line between literature and games. By comparing Nabokov's oeuvre with Huizinga's 1938 meditation on games, *Homo Ludens*, one can see how Nabokov's work bears many clear resemblances to Huizinga's characteristics of games. The understanding of games as an “invented reality” offers a framework with which literature is often understood and introduces the idea of how both function *opposed to* reality. The consequence of this is that reality threatens to compete with and break the illusion of invented world. Here, Huizinga brings in the necessity of what he calls “tension,” or the difficulty of the game which engrosses its player. Nabokov's work implements tension as one of its foregrounding qualities, with unrestrained intricacy and unique narrative structures, which present a level of difficulty that requires multiple readings. Much of Nabokov's literature, such as *Bend Sinister*, acknowledges this “invented reality” to both challenge and affirm its game-like structure.

A clear bridge in the author's life between games and literature can be found in chess, which is perhaps the game that he played most. As a specific game, it features frequently within his texts, but it offers a closer approximation of Nabokov's game-form than Huizinga's general theory does. Nabokov did not only play chess, but constructed chess problems, or difficult scenarios with only one solution, and as puzzles that one solitarily labors over and attempts to solve many times, they more closely represent the experience of playing a literary game than normal, competitive chess games would. The form, pieces, strategies and objective of chess all contribute to the game being quite literary in itself, and taking a chess problem from Nabokov's book *Poems and Problems* introduces the notion that a chess scenario can be interpreted for meaning as a text would. Nabokov illustrates how the literature-game form is pliable enough from both ends: if literature can be a game; a game can be literature.

Though he has made innovations on it, the written game is not unique to Nabokov. Varying degrees of making the reader play can be found in literature. Detective fiction is a whole genre that operates on the premise of an engaging game-like experience. Its conventions of clues, suspects and a final identification all exist to ensure that a fair and winnable game exists for the reader. With the murder in *Lolita*, Nabokov borrows some of the conventions to create an inverted detective game where the reader knows the murderer but must guess the victim. This overt homage to crime fiction is perhaps the most obvious and the most easily winnable game, but it is only one of the many facets of how his readers can play his game, as Nabokov's work is littered with subtle anagrams, obscured allusions, cross-textual references. Though it is impossible to identify every involved plant in his novels, this open-endedness is a defining feature of his game, and a feature that can spur on huge amounts of reader participation. In his essay, “Lolita's Class List,” Gavriel Shapiro examines the list of Lolita's 40 classmates. On a hint from Nabokov's afterword, Shapiro delves into the list, identifying countless allusions to literary figures, historical events and Nabokov's personal life. The remarkable lengths to which the essay goes to find meaning are not to be scrutinized for the authenticity of their conclusions but to show Nabokov's dedicated reader, and just how engrossed in his game the reader can become.

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Cover Photo: Vladimir and Véra Nabokov playing chess in Switzerland, 1966, photo by Philippe Halsman

Figure 1: Chess problem 4 from *Poems and Problems*, page 23

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov holds a unique place in literature. He is at once famous for the overnight success of the best-selling *Lolita*, yet he is also particular to an esoteric, highly educated crowd. His own legacy seems as perplexing as the experience that those readers have who pick up one of his novels. He can send them to a dictionary nearly every page, he demands an understanding of multiple languages and an in-depth knowledge of the canon, and he involves them in an intense meta-literary fabric that has been identified as a hallmark of postmodernity. As a controversial and extremely challenging writer, Nabokov invites a theoretical framework that demystifies his writing style, while also illuminating what is unique and effective about the reading experience that he creates.

Nabokov's life involved a unique mix of extreme privilege and a certain knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Born in 1899 into the Russian aristocracy, his childhood granted him a remarkable education, with governesses and tutors who helped him master English, Russian and French by his teenage years. But his family would eventually lose their home and their wealth to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Though he spent a couple of safe years studying romance languages at Cambridge, he eventually had to join his family in their resulting flight to Berlin. Life there spawned the beginning of Nabokov's writing career as an *émigré* writer under the name, Vladimir Sirin, but after fifteen years, this

too was eclipsed by political upheaval, as Nabokov and his new, Jewish wife, Véra, fled the rising Nazi regime. For three years his family stayed in Paris, until they escaped the advancing German army on the SS Champlain on her last successful trip before she was sunk by the German military.

His ensuing time in America proved to be his most stable and successful period of his life. These fruitful years could be imagined in a number of ways. One might think of him standing behind his lectern at Cornell, drawing on the blackboard the exact layout of the Bloom household from *Ulysses* or the species of beetle into which he was certain Kafka's Gregor Samsa turned. Or perhaps he could be remembered marching through the American West with a butterfly net in hand, hopeful to bring back some specimens to throw under his microscope. He might be visualized on the Ithaca public bus, eavesdropping on young girls to study their speech and mannerisms in dedicated research for *Lolita*. The author's multifaceted relationship with America proved symbiotic enough that he claimed, "I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers" (Nabokov 98, *Strong Opinions*).

One iconic characteristic of Nabokov is his outspokenness about his own texts and how they ought to be read. He wrote forewords and afterwords for a great deal of his novels, and he has a wealth of documented interviews. In fact, his interviews might be considered an extension of himself as a literary figure, since he always requested the questions in advance and wrote out his particularly prosy responses. He gives detailed information regarding the context and writing of his novels, and he is specific about the correct and incorrect ways to engage his texts. His interviews are so emphatic and literary that they have been published as their own, aptly named entity, *Strong Opinions*. In fact, he is perhaps too outspoken about his

texts and risks infringing upon and alienating his readers. Given the widespread refutation of authorial intent, it seems on one hand that readers can safely dismiss the writer's extra-textual discussions as unnecessary in understanding his work, but at the same time, when engrossed within his elaborate constructions, there is a clear temptation to turn to the author for some extra guidance.

While finding a balance between Nabokov's writings and commentary is at times helpful, the sheer complexity of always testing one part of his word against another can prove too laborious. A better avenue for understanding can be found in how exactly his work fashions the reader's experience. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: The Play-Element of Culture* establishes a context which can figure Nabokov's work into what Huizinga defines as a game. Huizinga's book identifies a set of implicit rules that dictate the state of a game, advances the idea that these constructions exist for their seemingly arbitrary amount of difficulty, and expands this form to include a number of activities outside of what might be normally considered games. By tying it to concepts as broad as language, poetry, civilization and war, Huizinga asserts his claim that "culture itself bears the character of play." When pairing Huizinga's theoretical framework with such works as *Lolita*, *Speak*, *Memory*, and *Bend Sinister*, a reader can observe how the play-world that Huizinga defines is not only true of Nabokov, but especially so, and that Nabokov's awareness of this state dictates how he manipulates it and fashions a reading experience.

With Huizinga's game as a category by which Nabokov's work at large can be considered, the focus can be narrowed to the depictions of games within his text that create his writing game from the inside-out. There is a whole gamut of games to be found in his novels, from Scrabble to tennis, though one can be isolated as the predominant example:

chess. As a game, it is applicable to Nabokov's work for a number of reasons, beginning with the fact that chess is the most commonly found game in his novels. It also forms the primary inspiration for his Russian novel, *The Defense*, which follows Luzhin, a prolific chess player whose own genius and obsession with chess permeates his entire world in a descent of madness—and Luzhin is a bit of a mirror of Nabokov's own obsessive love of chess. Since being taught the game during his aristocratic childhood, it became one of his largest interests outside of literature, which manifested in the construction of chess problems. These problems operate on a specific layout of the chess board which involve a singular, perfectly calculated solution. As puzzles they are deeply involved not only in their solution but even more in their creation—so much so in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov laments the exorbitant amount of time that he dedicated to them—and, most importantly, they embody the particular game form that many of his works reflect.

Chess proves apt for a writer like Nabokov, because it has an intrinsic literary quality that offers rich, metaphorical value from which to draw. In the history of the game, the winning objective, the relationship between pieces and the common strategies involved, there lies a story-telling mode within the game itself that Nabokov taps into. His unique body of work grants the opportunity to examine the chess metaphor in two types of constructions. The constant presence of chess in most of his novels invites readings of them as reflective and emulative of the game's traits, but also his chess problems present themselves as interpretive texts deserving of a close reading that one might do for any piece of literature.

Yet, given Nabokov's creation of a literary game, this relationship ought to be evaluated by looking at the other side of the equation: the reader. One can see the reader-as-player present among other types of literature, particularly in a popular genre like mystery

fiction, and garner a sense of the involvement that the literary game demands. And when thinking of Nabokov's own particular game, a critic, such as Gavriel Shapiro, whose piece, "Lolita' Class List," chases down references and meaning for each of the names in the novel's inconspicuous school roster, constitutes a prime example of a reader at play in Nabokov's world. By evaluating his trust in Nabokov's extra-textual word and his strategies for reading into one of the novel's smallest moments, one can navigate Shapiro not for his interpretive content, but for the lengths to which Nabokov might send his reader. Shapiro's occupation as a professor who studies Nabokov makes him something of a lifelong participant in the game, and by assessing his in-depth knowledge of Nabokov's life, literature and the canon from which he draws—all in pursuit of understanding the list of 40 names—Shapiro provides a tangible sense of scope and a real example of how a reader might play.

Drawing from these varying resources—Huizinga's definition of games, the form of chess and Shapiro's critical play—as well as the span of Nabokov's oeuvre, the following pages will reach a cohesive understanding of the consequences of the literary game. They will explore the questions of why literature would even be construed as a game and what the form affords Nabokov. And above all else, they will identify the distinctive qualities that make Nabokov's game his own.

Part I

"Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!" – Vladimir Nabokov, Look at the Harlequins!

At first, stepping on the field to play football and cracking open a Nabokov novel appear quite unlike each other; antithetical, even. But one might closely consider the ways in which a player treats his sport and a reader his book, and it becomes clearer that literature and games share an essentially similar form in which the activities can resemble each other to varying degrees. Indeed, literature does not demand the athleticism required in sports, but the states of reading and sporting are inspired and dictated by many of the same principles. A closer approximation can be found in word games, like hangman and Scrabble, which demonstrate how language can be at the heart of the playing dynamic. If literature and games can inhabit the same medium, then it is worth identifying other ways in which they can resemble each other. Many authors hone in on this inherently similar form, and Vladimir Nabokov is the stand-out example of the writer who draws heavily on these shared characteristics to showcase the game-like atmosphere possible in literature.

In understanding the nature of playing and the specific qualities that comprise a game, one might not do better than to look at Johan Huizinga's 1938 text, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Huizinga offers an intriguing definition of games as a “certain 'imagination' of reality” (Huizinga 4). The description itself seems as if it could have been written in discussion of literature. It's no surprise then, that the comparison between literature

and games is one that Huizinga himself extensively draws, beginning with his argument that games are the moment when “man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature” (4). His term, “poetic,” implicates an intrinsic artfulness within games, and this conflation is one of the primary facets of his overall conceptualization of games, and featured in such chapters as “The Play-Concept as Expressed in Language” and “Play and Poetry.” Huizinga's acknowledgement of the similarities between games and art in culture has made him a favorite among Nabokov scholars, and there is a tradition of critics looking to Huizinga to understand the gamesmanship that readers encounter in Nabokov. Some examples include Carl Eichelberg, who says *Homo Ludens* “pervades every thread of *Pale Fire's* fictional fabric” (Roth 176), and Jürgen Bodenstein, who claims “Nabokov's fiction is an example of the vitality and relevance of [Huizinga's] game element in literary creation” (Bodenstein 374). Huizinga is a favorite choice because he draws clear parameters around what the game-experience entails and identifies the key characteristics that indicate the form.

His defining feature of play is that it stands opposed to reality; it is “a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 8). Nothing could be truer of Nabokov's fiction (and non-fiction), particularly when the author stresses that his work is in no way didactic. Take for example, the fictional John Ray's introduction to *Lolita*, which claims that in Humbert's text “there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. “*Lolita*” should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (Nabokov 6). Such a straightforward moral may seem plausible to the first-time reader, but by the end

of the novel, Humbert's amoral, playful treatment of these figures makes laughable the idea that his work could be considered a cautionary tale. And if there were any doubt, Nabokov dedicates himself in the afterword to debunk the purported moral quite plainly: "There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow" (Nabokov 314-5). Nabokov does not represent Humbert as a typical pedophile nor does he use the pointed subject matter to engage in any social commentary; he only includes pedophilia insofar as it fashions the texture of the narrative. In fact, the controversial story and the complicated relationship between the reader and Humbert can only fulfill their artistic function on the premise that *Lolita* is distinct from the actual world.

This dedication to a separation from reality is equally true of all his other works. The dystopia in *Bend Sinister* is something which Nabokov explicitly attempts to distinguish from a political message like George Orwell's *1984* in its introduction (Nabokov xii). He uses Paduk's despotic regime more for its value as a background setting, and any political seriousness that a reader might attempt to ascribe to is lessened by the absurd personal history of Adam Krug having humorously bullied Paduk in gradeschool (Nabokov 62). It is fair to say that all works of literature involve a separate, temporary sphere, but Nabokov goes to greater lengths than most to ensure that his sphere does not attempt to comment on or bleed into "real" life and instead remain stoically separate. Even *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* undermines any autobiographical authority that it might seem to have by taking great liberties with the fallibility of memory and by including clearly fictive elements. And as an account of his life, *Speak, Memory* largely ignores the important

historical events—such as the Bolshevik Revolution and World War 2—that determined the course of his life. Some critics, such as Dabney Stuart, go so far to classify the work as fiction. Even when supposedly portraying reality, Nabokov reminds his readers that writing hinges upon invention.

Having established the “invented reality” of games, Huizinga names another characteristic, one which serves the purpose of seducing the player into this reality and preserving the experience, which he calls “tension” (Huizinga 11). Tension is the arbitrary difficulty of the game that makes it fulfilling to succeed: “To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension—these are the essence of the play spirit. Tension adds to the importance of the game and, as it increases, enables the player to forget that he is only playing” (Huizinga 51). Tension can be identified as a requirement that governs the rules created for every game. A sport such as basketball seems to only exist because the net is a small enough size and at a tall enough height that it takes some skill to get the ball through it. Nobody would play basketball if the net were only two feet off of the ground, because games easily won lack any luster or appeal. The same must be understood of Nabokov, as tension should be considered fundamental in his creative process. Consider that some readers may protest the perplexing extravagance in Nabokov's work and prefer traits of more straightforward writing, such as eloquence and communicability. But Nabokov's inclusion of complicated structure, a wide, multi-lingual lexicon and a littering of interpretive traps all serve tension, because Nabokov's work anticipates that his readers should enjoy, rather than dislike, the difficulty. The experience of intellectual overwhelmingness and confusion should spur his reader to focus only more ardently on the texts. And it is certainly significant then, that both Huizinga and Nabokov distill the purpose of writing to the same verb: enchant.

Enchantment appears to be the purpose of tension, engrossing the player and keeping him focused on the invented reality, but this is only achievable to a certain extent, because the game itself relies upon a very delicate state:

The play-mood is *labile* in its very nature. At any moment “ordinary life” may reassert its rights either by an impact from without, which interrupts the game, or by an offence against the rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment. (Huizinga 21)

Huizinga emphasizes the cost of games competing with reality: reality can win. This simple fact highlights why rules are an important feature of the game; they must be absolute so that the game can be as contained as possible from the outside world. Rules bear important implications for the player, and Huizinga dedicates particular attention to those who undermine this foundation of the game's enchantment:

It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. ... [T]he spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). ... The spoil sport breaks the magic world.” (Huizinga 11)

Huizinga's spoil-sport speaks directly to a player in the game who withdraws from the illusion of the play-field, but the notion of the spoil-sport deserves to be tested against Nabokov as a game creator. Generally, one could consider the illusion of literature's game to be perfectly preserved between its covers; only spoiled when the reader chooses to set the book itself down, but Nabokov introduces challenges to this consideration. A reader of *Bend*

Sinister will experience the relatively pristine and straightforward construction of a story about Adam Krug, the prolific professor coerced by the new totalitarian dictator, Paduk, through attacks on those closest to Adam, including his young son, to force him to take a professorship position in his regime. Yet, in its final chapter, Nabokov chooses to complicate this traditional mode of storytelling: “It was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate” (Nabokov 210).

The “I” that enters this passage is sure to startle the reader, since there has been no first-person narration until this point, and even more startling is the authorial capability this “I” asserts by tampering with the course of the story. In this moment, Nabokov suddenly inserts himself as author into his own text to enact an overt manipulation of Adam Krug's emotions, who should instead be reasonably distraught given the death of his boy due to a farcical mix-up by the regime. The moment of insertion forces the reader to acknowledge the novel's construction and undermines the idea of a carefully wrought story that operates within the limits of the literary world that it initially laid out. A kindly reader might dismiss this passage as a brief instance of Huizinga's more acceptable cheating, and the game—though now rigged through its author forcibly restating its terms—can continue in its altered, but essentially similar, form. That could be the case, if not for Nabokov taking his control still further:

Krug ran towards him, and just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, he shouted again: You, you—and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire

netting of my window. (Nabokov 216)

The illusion of the literary play-field is now completely shattered. The wall that vanishes seems also to be the fourth wall, and the twang is indeed a moth that the author finds more interesting than his own creation—which is rather apt given Nabokov's life-long passion for lepidopterology. But at this point, no matter how willing the reader is to continue with the invented reality, the story of Krug ends here, and Nabokov never returns to it. The first temptation for the reader may be to decry Nabokov as a spoil-sport; to question his abandonment of the story that he spent the prior 150 pages creating, and to find some mockery in his cutting short just before his protagonist and antagonist clash, since he seems to be saying, “Now that I know you are invested in my story, I refuse to tell you how it ends.”

Yet, Nabokov cannot be considered a complete spoil-sport. Yes, he forces awareness of the fragile illusion of literary play, but he does not “[withdraw] from the game” as Huizinga's spoil-sport does, because the game is still going; the reader is still reading. Rather, until this point he withheld from the reader just the type of game that they have been playing. It may be tempting to view this scene as stepping into “real” life, as a genuine portrait of Nabokov writing fiction, but the setting is just as fictive; there is not just one simple play-field, as in sports and boardgames, but multiple layers of them, and as soon as Nabokov chooses to discard one for another, the reader must follow. In one moment, the field is a genius professor's protection of his son through a totalitarian dystopia and the next it is “a good night for nothing” (Nabokov 217). This is not an exiting of the game but exercising one of its elements: the dramatic reorientation of his reader. It is up to the reader himself to evaluate the narrative world that he is in and its relation to those where he once was.

Nabokov also seems to atone for his authorial offense by including the novel's

recurring puddle in the post-story: “I could also distinguish the glint of a special puddle (the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life)” (Nabokov 217). The puddle is the only stable icon of the novel, and once encountered in the opening paragraph—and in many subsequent reincarnations—it remains the same for both Krug and the manipulative narrator, serving as the discernible bridge between the two. The reader is invited to understand the different games as essentially indistinct, or perhaps never-ending; that no matter which play-field or game is exchanged for another, the puddle is the thread that runs through the disorienting aspects of the game.

Nabokov's shifting between play-fields is important as a game aspect, because despite the fundamental similarities between games and literature, the erratic changes can only be afforded by the literary game. In the invented realm of most games, the physical field, whether it be a court or a deck of cards, is a binding reality. Nabokov grounds his style in the fact that games and literature are close kin, but he also recognizes that they are still separate family members, and part of his task as a game-writer is to capitalize on the space where the two do not neatly overlap. Raising the tension through multiple languages and shuffled play-fields and raising the stakes with subjects like murder and pedophilia, Nabokov goes to great lengths to demonstrate the advantages of literature as a game form. He shows his reader that insofar as games are imaginations, literature is even more imagined.

Part II

“[Chess] is a foolish expedient for making idle people believe they are doing something very clever, when they are only wasting their time.” – George Bernard Shaw, *The Irrational Knot*

If a reader better understands the dynamics of reading Nabokov by conflating the characteristics of Huizinga's game with Nabokov's writing style, then identifying a less theoretical and more particular game to equate with the author's texts should demystify some of Nabokov's literary tactics. The search for such a game would guide a reader to the other creative occupation to which Nabokov dedicated large amounts of time: chess. Chess was among Nabokov's favorite subjects, and it features heavily in his work, most centrally in *The Defense*, though it is a common metaphor throughout his oeuvre. Nabokov and his critics have perpetuated the idea that this is one of the primary metaphors through which a reader can understand how to engage his texts. The first implication of accepting this metaphor is that in reading there must then be an objective. What is certainly unclear to the reader is what this objective might be. In fact, actually identifying an objective seems to be the first objective for Nabokov's player. Whatever it is, the reader can be sure that in attempting to reach it there will be an almost adversarial force acting against them. On the topic of how chess defines Nabokov's objective or whether his reader can “win,” the University of Ottawa professor, David Rampton, suggests:

The analogy between author and chess player at first seems inexact: Against whom does he play? His 'doomed' protagonist? The realistic novel whose conventions he

exploits and extends? The reader? ... [I]f the reader is someone to be defeated, then the author begins with such an advantage that whatever victory he wins must be a rather hollow one. (Rampton 38)

Rampton is right to suggest that in a direct Nabokov-vs-reader battle, our author will win every time, but Rampton's chess analogy is slightly misguided. Instead, a reader should consider that Nabokov's primary engagement with chess was not as a player but as a composer of chess problems. Here is how Nabokov defines these constructions: "A certain position is elaborated on the board, and the problem to be solved is how to mate Black in a given number of moves, generally two or three" (Nabokov 288, *Speak, Memory*). Chess problems require a laborious amount of thought on the part of the composer, who must arrange the pieces on the board so that every possible move is accounted for and only one solution exists. What this means for the reader is that they are not playing directly against Nabokov but against his puzzle which he has meticulously planned:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver ... so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries"—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. (Nabokov 290, *Speak, Memory*)

The analogy is fully fleshed out for his reader: reading his work can be understood as a similar, solitary exercise in permutation, or "tries." A reader cannot then "lose" against Nabokov; only give up.

The reader will surely be curious, what constitutes a "try" for Nabokov? Nabokov helps answer this in his piece, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in which he lays out his

clear-cut method about what reading ought to entail: “A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader” (Nabokov 2). By this understanding, each reading should be considered a “try” at Nabokov. He goes on in this piece to explain that only after an initial reading can a reader look upon a text like a painting, in which every detail is at play in the mind's eye at once. Like a chess player who must simultaneously consider all 64 squares, Nabokov's reader must have experience with the text as a whole before any individual part can bear its full meaning. For example, in *Lolita*, the text is self-referential both forwards, such as the book that catalogs Clare Quilty long before he properly enters as a character, and backwards, e.g. Quilty's play, *The Hunted Enchanters*, an allusion to *The Enchanted Hunter* hotel at which Humbert and Lolita previously stayed.

Yet this traditional left-to-right sequence of turning pages, however self-referential, is perhaps the simplest layout for which Nabokov's reader can hope, considering the complicated forms that Nabokov includes in other books, which guarantee that the reader must “try” it different ways for different interpretive results. This is most embodied by *Pale Fire*, which can be read from beginning to end, following Kinbote's notes as they read traditionally and in the same sequence of the lines of poem that they analyze, but the reader can also follow his frequent cross-referencing of his own notes, which makes the novel read like a choose-your-own-adventure story and forces the reader to constantly flip back and forth between the different parts of the text. Given the two-pronged form, it is actually impossible to gain a full understanding of the scope of *Pale Fire* in one reading, a fact which the scholar, Brian Boyd, exemplifies in his book, *Nabokov's “Pale Fire”*: *The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, which categorizes its sections by the titles: reading, rereading and re-rereading. There is also a similar form in *Speak, Memory*, in which the introduction ends with the

cryptic poem: “Through the window of that index / Climbs a rose / And sometimes a gentle wind *ex / Ponto* blows” (Nabokov 16), suggesting that the book's index is the best avenue for interpretation.

These structures are latent with multiple avenues of readership that help clarify the deception strewn throughout his works. While his red herrings and other “false scents” may first seem disingenuous in their temptation for certain misguided readings, they advance his effort to consciously compound within his work multiple “tries.” These false readings are not just obstacles to make reaching the “theme” of the work more difficult—though they certainly do that—but parallel readings, whose very opposition to a “proper” reading is what makes them interpretively valuable:

The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, “thetic” solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White's King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to “plant” (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this “antithetic” inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. (290 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*)

Nabokov demands his reader take a route that weighs various interpretations simultaneously, and that they themselves self-consciously contemplate their role as a player with many options. One of the primary “anti-thetic” readings exists in the Freudian vein. Despite his

outspoken dismissal of psychoanalysis—see “Viennese quack” (Nabokov 47, *Strong Opinions*)—Nabokov frequently incorporates it into his work and in *Lolita* to a particularly ironic effect. The John Ray introduction, for example, seems to risk actually guiding the reader into a psychiatric evaluation of the text by virtue of being the first voice the reader encounters. But shortly into Humbert's text, this venue of interpretation is heavily subverted:

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-exortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake “primal scenes”; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. By bribing a nurse I won access to some files and discovered with glee, cards calling me “potentially homosexual” and “totally impotent.” (Nabokov 34)

Nabokov makes his reader deliberately wary of adopting the role of the psychoanalyst, who is so easily fooled by Humbert. Some critics, such as Joanna Trzeciak, have identified the Freudian inclusion as prophylactic; that Nabokov anticipated the psychoanalytic readings due to Humbert Humbert and, inevitably, himself, and strived to shut them out by directly calling such interpretations out and showing how Humbert subverts their very process. It is true that it is partly an interpretive defense, but psychoanalysis also contributes to the novel by crafting a multi-dimensional experience of reader interaction. Even as an “incorrect” way of reading, Nabokov fully develops the Freudian line throughout the text in a way that invites his readers to analyze Humbert; just as he often invites them to judge him—“ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (Nabokov 9). This is particularly clear when Humbert conspicuously describes his dreams:

Sometimes I attempt to kill in my dreams. But do you know what happens? For instance I hold a gun. For instance I aim at a bland, quietly interested enemy. Oh, I press the trigger all right, but one bullet after another feebly drops on the floor from the sheepish muzzle. In those dreams, my only thought is to conceal the fiasco from my foe, who is slowly growing annoyed. (47 Nabokov)

The “sheepish muzzle” and desire to “conceal the fiasco” establish a blatantly loaded metaphor, with which the reader can make a psychoanalytic diagnosis: impotence. The dream is so overt in its artifice that it parodies the notion of dreams as interpretive texts, and, given Humbert's joy for the earlier misdiagnosis of impotence, no reader should earnestly trust the dream's content. The interpretive ploy initially seems to be just another one of Nabokov's tactics in his well-established resistance of psychoanalysis, but the construction of the dream does more than that. Rather than dismissing and debunking psychoanalysis and striving to completely separate it from the text, Nabokov asks his reader to take part and *play as* the psychoanalyst; to put the ingredients together and come to the conclusion that a psychoanalyst would. William Rowe, in his *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, identifies the process, “negation,” in which Nabokov presents in elaborate detail an action which is *not* occurring. Negation appears to be fundamental in these “anti-thetic” aspects of *Lolita*, as it appears not only in the form of Freudian thought but also in Humbert's described but unrealized murders (87, 280 Nabokov). Rowe notes the purpose of negation is “a superimposition of one “reality” upon another” (Rowe 17), which makes sense in the context of chess, as it forces the reader to consider other courses of action—even wrong ones—like a chess player who must simultaneously consider the possible lines that could be played across the board.

Nabokov's predilection for chess is fitting when one considers its already literary nature. The form of the game, in its neatly confined space, winning objective and relationship of pieces, makes it fully capable of exhibiting meaningful messages. One might resist this notion by pointing to its mathematical construction. It is true that the strategy of the game is completely programmable, and that a computer can defeat even the greatest human players (as seen in the classic 1997 series between world champion Gary Kasparov and IBM's Deep Blue), but through examining its origins and the structure of the game, one can see why even its mathematical properties are determined by its symbolic content. Nabokov describes the game as “poetico-mathematical” (Nabokov 288, *Speak, Memory*).

The foundation of chess has always been its representation of war, as the objective of capturing the king is a clear mirror of the goal of battling leaders. Unlike the point system employed in many other games, which mediates symbolic significance of the objective, chess defines victory through toppling the figure of control. The traditionalist scholar, Titus Burckhardt explains in his essay, “The Symbolism of Chess,” that “the expression “check-mate” (German: *Schachmatt*) is derived from the Persian *shah*: “king” and the Arabic *mat*: “he is dead”” (Burckhardt). The name of the game itself, at least in German (*Schach*), is rooted entirely in the game's objective and the king figure.

Much of the game's literary essence lies in the hierarchy of pieces that embodies a system of military rank. Each piece has its unique function and falls somewhere on the spectrum of invaluable to disposable. The most valuable pieces are the king, who is ultimately indispensable, and the queen, the strongest of all pieces, who possesses the movement patterns of both the bishop and the rook. The minor pieces offer significance in their movement patterns as well. Knights derive their function from the nature of horses, not

just in their physical resemblance but in their unique ability to leap over other pieces.

Bishops, owing to the religious implication of their name, are the pieces in the starting position closest to the king and queen. They are agile; able to squeeze through the diagonals between pawns, but the fact that they are tied to a certain square-color means that they will never influence half of the board. Rooks are particular in their directness and are able to threaten a whole rank or file at a time, but they are also rather sluggish, since the pawn network does not allow many open files. The original Persian name, *rokh*, meaning chariot, helps envision a machine construction that falls in line with its powerful yet cumbersome nature.

The pawn, though the least valued piece, is perhaps the biggest symbolic takeaway from chess. It is iconic in its dispensability, which is its most offensive attribute. Its little value means it can bear greater risks and do some of the most dangerous work in the game, and since pawns are a living barrier between the more tactical pieces, if the game is to progress at all (except for a few rare circumstances), pawns must die. The figure of the pawn has become synonymous with an insignificant piece who is part of larger picture. On the board they also provide what tends to be the terrain of the game, and the network they create strongly determines which squares are (not) accessible to the more powerful pieces. Pawns are notable for being the only pieces which have the possibility of promotion, suggesting some fluidity in the hierarchy.

Pawns also function as the increment of measurement by which other pieces have their standard values weighed. As a system that is universally recognized in the chess community, weighting helps players keep an overall tally of their material and gauge how they are performing. A knight is considered to weigh three pawns, a bishop is also three, a

rook is worth five, the queen nine, and the king is worth an infinite number of pawns. With that being said, the true value of pieces is entirely dependent upon the overall position of the board. For example, a bishop which can only access two squares would be considered to have less value than a bishop with access to ten. Likewise, a pawn close to promotion is worth much more than a pawn in its starting position. So even though there exists a tangible system of mathematical evaluation, the outcome of the game and the value of the pieces will always be determined by the unique layout of the game at hand.

These unique positions are constructed by the relationships between pieces that are themselves symbolically meaningful scenarios. There are a number of tactics that chess players—or chess problem solvers—use and encounter, and each bear different implications. One common tactic is known as pinning. In a pin, a piece of lesser value, such as a knight or a pawn, is the only blocker between an attacker and a piece of higher value, such as the king or queen. These are hierarchical moments in which the relative value between pieces is demonstrated in full force. The pinned piece is immobilized in its duty to protect something more important than itself and generally cannot move until the piece it is defending moves out of the path of attack or if the attacker moves or is captured. There are two types of pins: absolute and relative. An absolute pin involves a piece is protecting its king, and it cannot move in any way that would expose the king to a direct attack. In a relative pin, the pinned piece is allowed to move if it needs to do something more important than protect the more valued piece behind it (which is not the king.) Another common tactic is the fork, in which a piece attacks two enemy pieces simultaneously. For the player on the receiving end of a fork, it is a moment inherent with decision. Knowing that he cannot save both pieces, the player must weigh the value of his pieces and choose which to save—or else somehow finagle his

way out of the threat. One of the tactics most wrought with martial metaphor is the sacrifice. A piece is exchanged for some positional advantage, and sometimes even many high valued pieces—such as the queen and both rooks in the immortal Anderssen v. Kieseritzky 1851 game—are sacrificed to coerce an inevitable mate. Sacrifices must be enacted with a degree of certainty, since they risk becoming irredeemable blunders if miscalculated. These different positions are latent with various meanings on the chessboard, and Nabokov is keen to translate them to the page, whether it be the “forelaying, withdrawing, pinning [and] unpinning” (Nabokov 289) mentioned in *Speak, Memory* or the “sui-mate” (Nabokov 8) (Luzhin's suicide) of *The Defense*.

Chess is so pregnant with literary quality that its players also recognize a certain artfulness in their playing styles; even in the case of professional chess players, such as Mikhail Tal. The once World Chess Champion recalls in his autobiography, *The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*, a certain game against Ioganess Veltmander at age 19: “He gave a last, dying check. I could have moved my king to b2, after which mate in three was inevitable, but from an aesthetic point of view this for some reason appeared unattractive to me. I allowed him some play, and with difficulty gained a draw” (Tal 29). The sentiment of this game seems to exemplify Tal, whose famous playing style consisted of rash sacrifices and all-in attacks that chiefly served to heighten the complexity of the game rather than straightforwardly winning. As a player, he seemed at times more invested in the game's artistic quality than its competitive nature.

And this literary element of chess is so accessible that it has been used in a multitude of artistic works outside of Nabokov, and even in artistic mediums other than literature. One example can be found in the 2002 HBO television show, *The Wire*, which strives to paint an

accurate picture of Baltimore and its interacting institutions—chiefly the police force and the inner-city drug trade. The naturalism of *The Wire* is far removed from Nabokov's style, but the show represents chess with similar interpretive methods. Its first season involves a scene in which two young, inner-city drug dealers are taught chess after their superior, D'Angelo, finds them playing checkers with a chess set. As he explains the value of the pieces, the metaphor of their position in a similar hierarchy develops. One of the boys, Wallace, still thinking in terms of checkers, asks, “How do you get to be the king,” and D'Angelo replies, “It ain't like that. See, the king stay the king,” emphasizing the immutability of power in their system. D'Angelo also explains that “In the game, pawns get capped quick,” to which the other, young gangster, Bodie, asks, “But what if he's a smart ass pawn?” In his video essay, *Style in The Wire*, Erlend Lavik points out that Bodie “identifies with the pawn, recognizing that within this analogy he is this least valuable piece on the board” (Lavik), embracing the unlikely fate that he will achieve promotion.

This scene in particular highlights the lesson-like nature of playing a game. Chess has historically been a required part of the aristocratic education—as it certainly was for Nabokov—and *The Wire* shows how its clearly wrought hierarchy can be used by even the lowest class to develop a sense of scope and structure in the world. It is fitting that those in the show who are in the drug trade make sense of it by ubiquitously referring to it as “the game,” suggesting that, opposed to the system of law, their lifestyle is regulated by a different set of rules. Lavik points out that “chess pieces, of course, are not the masters of their own moves,” to reinforce his reading of *The Wire* as determinism, in which chess mirrors how controlling institutions and outside forces dictate the fate of people.

The critic, Jürgen Bodenstein—in his book, *The Excitement of Verbal Adventure: A*

Study of Vladimir Nabokov's English Prose—figures that such a game-like governance of reality ties directly into how the characters of Nabokov's fiction consider games; that games are the form by which characters can make sense of the world:

The view of life as a game contains the relative comfort that existence is not entirely senseless and accidental: the game is governed by more or less familiar and accepted rules, is spatially and temporally limited, and tends toward some kind of solution.

Underlying the uncertainty, deception, and surprise of the game is some sense of logic and order. (Bodenstein 395)

Bodenstein's reassuring order of the game exists in many instances of Nabokov's fiction, but it is not representative of the role games play for all of Nabokov's characters. In fact, games often stand opposed to anything reassuring by inciting the conflict through their very form. In *The Defense*, Luzhin's madness comes from the “order” of chess being imposing itself upon the world and such things as the “regular light and dark squares” (Nabokov 59) appearing everywhere he looks. Rather than assisting a sense of the world, the game disrupts Luzhin's by dangerously blurring Huizinga's line between “invented reality” and reality. Nabokov complicates his reader's evaluation of chess iconography, using it in some texts to parallel and teach about reality and in others to paint its potential for engrossing obsession. His treatment of chess is ambivalent, and in his usual anti-didactic mode, he does not judge it as particularly good or bad, but simply demonstrates that he can bend its form to whatever literary purpose he desires.

If Nabokov's writing can resemble the form of chess problems, and chess is itself ripe with literary quality, then there are all the necessary ingredients to study a chess problem as a literary text. Nabokov believed the connection was so clear that in 1969 he published *Poems*

and Problems. The book is a collection of 39 Russian poems, 14 English poems and 18 chess problems, all composed at various times throughout his life. His pairing of poetry with chess stresses the essential similarity between the two and suggests that an interpretation of a chess problem should be heavily metaphorical. To grasp what Nabokov called the “poetry of chess” (Nabokov 15) we will just have to look at one of these problems:

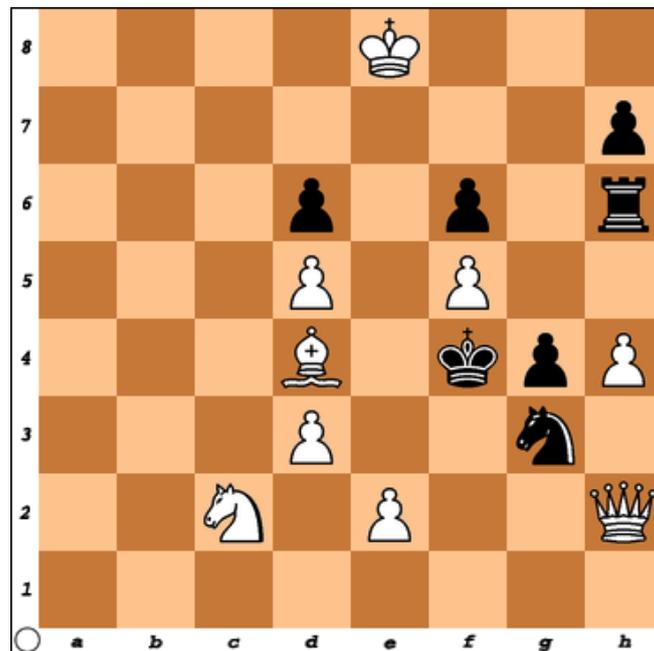


Figure 1. Chess problem 4 from *Poems and Problems*.

This mate-in-three includes the hint:

The point of this problem (Montreux, April 10, 1965; published in *The Sunday Times*, London, December 29, 1968) consists in that Black's R clears the way for White's mating piece by capturing an intervening whitey, so that when it (Black's R) returns to its initial square, it can be captured with mate. This is the so-called “Nabokov Theme.” (Nabokov 185)

The hint itself is quite literary and, as a “hint,” its nebulous description makes it rather

unhelpful. The “R” fits with standard chess notation, meaning the rook, though the piece named “intervening whitey” is definitely unclear, and the sequence in the hint is still only one of the many of black's reactions that should be accounted for. Though the caption, which he includes for all of the chess problems in *Poems and Problems*, is not an especially practical tool in navigating these “ivory-and-ebony riddles” (Nabokov 15), it helps greatly in deciphering meaning after arriving at the mating solution. This hint, for example, begs some context for the grand claim that it is the “Nabokov Theme.”

The “key” to discovering why the problem represents his theme is tied to the “key” of the problem, or the initial correct move from which mate is possible in all subsequent scenarios. The key to this problem is Kf7. As a solution, it is inconspicuous for many reasons. First, it defers checking the black king, the most traditional and tempting method to force a position of the opponent that will reach checkmate. It also overlooks the notable “anti-thetic” solution: the cleverly planted, straightforward, one-move mate, Qf2. Nabokov offers this frustratingly easy possibility, but the object of the problem is indeed the three-move mate, and the solver receives the first inkling of the “Nabokov Theme;” a sharp reminder that difficulty is the point of the game. The solver can sleep tight, though, knowing that in three moves mate is still guaranteed. Rather, the solution is the exact opposite of immediately using the powerful queen, because instead of going for one of the direct attacks on the black king (also e3 and Be3), the solution to the problem is through advancing the player's own king, the least offensive of all pieces.

Through considering the symbolic qualities of the king, a solver can arrive at an understanding of why this solution was named the “Nabokov theme.” The answer lies in the implicit association in chess of the player as the king. While every other piece does its work

on the battlefield, sacrificing itself if necessary, the king resting in the back ranks is most certainly imagined as the agent of thought in the game; the piece who is responsible for all of the classic mental work of the player—mental work in this problem which can be attributed to Nabokov. If Nabokov is the problem's king, then a literary quality can be divined from this intervention on the board: the author interjecting himself within his own creation as Nabokov so often does: the Nabokov theme.

Nabokov manages to pack a pretty dense reading into his chess problem, but the chess problem affords its readerly construction insofar as it can alter the rules. The positioning on the board would be highly improbable in any competitive game and the objective is often modified—such as Lewis Carroll's chess problem (Carroll 5) at the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the goal is the protection and promotion of a pawn (Alice). The way in which chess problems manipulate or rewrite of a set of rules is an apt mirror of the potential of literature to expand on existing games forms. Take for example, the new objective when Humbert plays chess, as Bodenstein describes it:

The chess game in the novel is ultimately between Humbert and McFate, one of whose agents in Quilty. This aim is not so much to mate the king, but to capture the queen (Lolita). ... When Gaston swoops down upon “that juicy queen”, his action is a metaphorical expression of Quilty's theft of Lolita. (Bodenstein 391)

Humbert's queen surpasses the king in value as the chess form morphs to fit the motives of the characters. The set-up that allows for this metaphorically-wrought match is just as contrived as the meticulously planned chess problem, and Nabokov brings artifice to the forefront in his literature. Unlike authors who try to present their story as authentically as possible and prevent their style from getting between the reader and the story, Nabokov

writes a conspicuous texture that glistens with a reminder of borrowed elements, twisted rules and the overall game-like atmosphere.

Yet, despite the overt presence of chess in Nabokov's writing, the topic seems to need some defending, as at least one of his critics, Thomas Karshan, finds this line of thought to be particularly trite and overwrought:

[Most other criticism on Nabokov and games] comments on Nabokov's ideas about play but rarely on his actual depictions of games. It clings to the model of chess and structured games, and tends to impose a rigid theoretical framework, often drawn from Huizinga, which ignores the range and ambiguity of play in Nabokov's work. It rarely asks where Nabokov got his interest in play or enquires into his allusions to other writers on play, nor does it consider evolution of Nabokov's treatment of play.

(Karshan 17)

On some level, Karshan seems to have very well described this thesis, but there are a number of reasons why the singling out of chess is productive. First, the range of games in Nabokov is perhaps too vast to productively cover. Other than chess, he includes games of tennis, cards, ice hockey, scrabble and many others. While there might be some value in examining all of them, the greatest depth in understanding the implications of the function of the game form can be understood by focusing on one, and chess is likely Nabokov's foremost preoccupation when it comes to games. It is also perhaps the game that most closely approaches the mental effort required of reading.

And in place of the chess-reading Karshan suggests “a study of Nabokov's intellectual and aesthetic intentions” (Karshan 20), which is a rather lofty task when studying an author. Even with Nabokov being ever-present in his work—and so outspoken outside of it—a

knowledge of his specific intentions seems far-fetched. But Karshan claims access to such an understanding through his own critical system:

The first chapter of the book discusses the philosophical idea of play and its place in the aesthetic theories in Kant, Schiller, and Nietzsche. It traces the routes through which Nabokov received these ideas: through Dostoevsky and other nineteenth-century Russian writers deeply influenced by Schiller; through British aestheticism; through Nabokov's reading of Nietzsche; through the Symbolist writer Maximilian Voloshin; through Bely's *Petersburg* (1916;1922); and, finally, through Iulii Aikhenvald and other émigré thinkers with whom Nabokov was associated in Berlin in the early 1920s. (Karshan 20)

It seems that Karshan has exchanged a “rigid theoretical framework” for a rigid biographical one. He attempts to understand play through a tidy biographical trail, as if Nabokov's written depictions of games mirror whomever he was reading or whomever he was talking to about games at the time. Though chess itself operates upon a static framework, it need not be rigidly applied to Nabokov, and it can still account for “the range and ambiguity of play” that Karshan is correct to address. Instead, a reader must view chess not as an overarching set of rules that governs everything that Nabokov creates but as a form which he willingly approximates and incorporates within his texts. It is part of the assistance that Nabokov offers his player; that instead of explicitly stating the rules of his game—a gesture he would detest—he borrows from an existing game to create a more familiar form. So neither chess, nor any individual game, provides the full picture of how Nabokov constructs his work, but it showcase the benefits and texture of incorporated forms and the imitative abilities of which Nabokov is master.

Part III

“Das Spiel mit der Wahrheit ist auch immer ein Spiel mit dem Leben.” – Franz Kafka

As much as can be established about the literary game by examining its form and other existing games that its creator incorporates, a well-rounded understanding needs to involve an attentive study of the reader's role in the arrangement. After all, despite every element of construction, the shape of the game is equally dictated by those who play it. Discussing the reader, however, immediately involves a number of questions about what reading actually entails: Is there a way to read correctly? If the reader is engaging in a game, are there “rules” involved? Would such rules be the same among all literature, or do individual texts dictate their own play-form? This array of questions may not all have clear answers, but a strong starting point involves a comparison of Nabokov's work to other pieces of literature.

Though the literary game is distinctive of Nabokov, it is not unique to him; other authors have been known to create elaborate experiences of play-reading. The widespread existence of the literary game can be seen in entire, popular genres that are defined by the format; most notably mystery fiction. While perhaps not as highly wrought as Nabokov's fiction, the genre operates on a set of decidedly game-like conventions. In his manual, *Hillary Waugh's Guide to Mysteries and Mystery Writing*, the accomplished mystery novelist lays down the tenets of his genre, which he calls the rules of “Fair Play.” The name itself is loaded

with connections to the game form, not the first of which is the acknowledgement that the mystery readers are playing. “Fair” introduces a striking consideration of the reader's interaction with the text and the idea that the novel must be constructed in a way which honors this relationship. Mystery novels function on the premise that the reader should attentively follow the detective's path and hopefully “win,” by beating the detective to the solution. And Waugh's “Fair Play” guarantees that this “win” is possible, while also revealing just what the nature of the mystery reader's experience entails:

The first and most obvious rule of Fair Play was the requirement that *every clue discovered by the detective had to be made available to the reader*. The author could try to discount it as a clue, misconstrue its meaning, or hide it amid a lot of inconsequential garbage – but he had to show it. It had to be there so at the end of the book, when the detective revealed its true nature, the reader would be able to say, “You beat me that time,” but he could not say, “You left out a piece of the puzzle.” (Waugh 160)

The rule seems straightforward enough. If the mystery novel is a competition between the reader and the detective, they should draw from the same pool of information, so that the reader has an equal chance to solve the crime. But even with this clear-cut rule, Waugh's suggests an obfuscation of the clues, showing that mystery novelists, too, share Nabokov's desire to heighten tension. Waugh continues with another important guideline: “Rule two: *Early introduction of the murderer*” (Waugh 160). By necessitating that the game is initiated as soon as possible, Waugh reinforces the idea that play is the foundation of the mystery reader's experience, since the reader is unable to partake in the guessing game until the culprit has entered the text, and Waugh wants the game experience to fill as much of the novel as

possible. And just as important as beginning the game is the promise that it will end as expected: “Rule four: *There must be detection*” (Waugh 160). With an unerring conclusion to the investigation, the mystery novel provides closure. The mystery is not so mysterious; it will be solved, and closure produces a blatant win-lose dichotomy: the reader either solves the crime before the reveal or doesn't. These novels offer both a clear objective and an identifiable condition of completion—their game is visibly contained.

If the mystery genre adheres to this clear set of conventions, then one could look at conventions on a similar scale by examining recurring elements in Nabokov's oeuvre. To start, many of the mystery conventions can be tested against Nabokov, particularly because he even includes some, particularly in *Lolita*. One of the earliest lines of the novel, “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (Nabokov 9), falls right in line with Waugh's early introduction of the murderer. Except in this case, the reader knows the murderer already, so rather than a whodunnit, it's more of a who'd-it-happen-to, and the victim, Clare Quilty, is first mentioned on page 31, also receiving an early introduction. Nabokov inverts the objective but still leaves the mystery for the reader, which is the first of many modifications he makes to the classic detective game. Nabokov treats mystery fiction in the same way he does chess; he evaluates its construction and then borrows and customizes its pieces as he sees fit.

However, Nabokov's oeuvre also includes conventions particularly distinct to his style, and as a series of recurring markers, they continually remind the reader that they are playing his game. One of Nabokov's classic examples is a small word-game that readers may not even notice: the anagram. It is a unique literary device because there is not a clearly apparent quality that causes readers to recognize an anagram, and, in any case, it is a rather

obscure task to always be on the lookout for them. So unlike the mystery game, there is no clear indication that the anagram-game is in effect. One of the easier anagrams lies in the forward to *Lolita*: “Vivian Darkbloom' has written a biography, 'My Cue,' to be published shortly, and critics who have perused the manuscript call it her best book” (Nabokov 4). Here, Nabokov generously offers “My Cue,” or his cue to the reader that there might be something to review, and “Vivian Darkbloom” is indeed an anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov.” His anagrams spur on a moment of active participation for the reader in the literal act of rearranging letters.

Another one of his game's conventions is not so much hidden within his texts but stretched between them and readers who engage more of his works will eventually encounter the level of intertextual play. *Pale Fire* offers references to *Lolita* in both John Shade's poem (Nabokov 33) and Kinbote's subsequent interpretation, which produces a rather humorous irony when he questions why anyone would choose the name Lolita (Nabokov 163). And *Ada*, in turn, references *Pale Fire*, as Ada takes it upon herself to translate Shade's poetry into Russian and French (Nabokov 577, 613-614, 622-623). These cross-textual references require less cerebral analysis in a specific moment regarding a certain name or theme, but they are small connections accessible only to those who have gone through the effort of gaining a broad knowledge of Nabokov's oeuvre. Unlike the clues contained entirely within mystery novels, Nabokov's references involve outside information in their solving. The network of his game extends throughout all of his work, and then even further, with many references to texts from other writers, such as “the monumental decision rendered December 6, 1933 by Hon. John M. Woolsey” (Nabokov 4) referenced in *Lolita's* foreword, which alludes to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But anagrams, intertextual references and allusions only scratch the surface

of Nabokov's whole host of easter eggs laid throughout his work. Identifying all of them would surely prove impossible, but Bodenstein has done well indexing the most common types of Nabokovian conventions in *The Excitement of Verbal Adventure*. Among the pertinent ones are palindromes, spoonerisms, agnomination, homonymy and polysemy, etymological, multilingual and onomastic word play, and neological/neoclassical compounds. By including so many miniature linguistic games, Nabokov's game emphasizes that rather than some central condition of completion, such as identifying a single culprit, there are varying possibilities for play. The result is that the clean closure of Fair Play is far removed from the world that Nabokov creates, and the multitude of often disparate conventions dictates that his game is open-ended. By bereaving his reader of a discernible solution—or clear indications that a game is even in progress—Nabokov adds even more to the mounting tension of his work. At a certain point, the level of tension almost seems problematic. Every word becomes suspect for some condensed game or underlying reference, and there is no clear way to divine success—there is no checkmate.

Given the difficulty and unspoken nature of the game, a reader giving a Nabokov novel a quick read-through may not participate in much play at all, but a truly dedicated player offers the best outline of the scope and limits of the game. Perhaps the best example of a reader wholeheartedly involved in this game is the 1996 critical essay by Gavriel Shapiro, “'Lolita' Class List.” The Cornell professor accepts Nabokov's promise that the list of Lolita's classmates is one of “the nerves of the novel” (Nabokov 316), and goes through each name, attempting to pin down the references. One need not be too interested in the “accuracy” of Shapiro's analysis—if such a thing exists—but rather in the lines of thought and associations that his task causes him to make. Shapiro does the service of not just being an established

critic on Nabokov but of earnestly embracing Nabokov's game and exerting his mental power to the very limits. Even though the class list has received much attention from different critics, Shapiro investigates it to an extent that even someone such as Alfred Appel—author of *The Annotated Lolita* and therefore another one of Nabokov's devoted players—does not attempt.

One base of knowledge that Shapiro heavily leans on is Nabokov's reading history. He enters the allusion hunt by making connections with an incredibly detailed knowledge of the texts that are known to have been read by Nabokov himself. He finds many references to texts that Nabokov taught during his stay at Cornell, which have been published in his *Lectures on Literature*, from the course, *Masters of European Fiction*. The lectures help him figure Floyd Austin to be related to Jane Austen (Shapiro 317), whose *Mansfield Park* Nabokov taught, and Daniel Buck conjures a connection to *Ulysses'* Buck Mulligan (Shapiro 318). But Shapiro also makes sure to consider the Russian texts that Nabokov knew as well. He finds many references to Alexander Pushkin (Shapiro 320, 326), whose *Eugene Onegin* Nabokov translated into English, and Dostoevski (Shapiro 322). His search brings him to some pretty obscure texts, too. Jack and Mary Beale cause Shapiro to think of Francis Beale, for his translation of the Middle English *Royall game of chesse play* that is briefly mentioned in the OED that Nabokov was known to use (Shapiro 318). Shapiro suspects that Alice Campell alludes to Lewis Carroll—for *Alice in Wonderland*, which Nabokov translated into Russian—whose nympholeptic qualities caused “Nabokov [to dub] him 'the first Humbert Humbert'” (Shapiro 319). These literary references take Shapiro all over the canon, from Dante to Shakespeare to Edgar Allen Poe—who also serves Nabokov's purpose as a renowned author-pedophile.

Shapiro even takes to the dictionary to flesh out the implications of certain names: “Gla(i)ve denotes such weapons of that epoch as spear, lance, halberd, or broadsword; glave is also an obsolete word for prize 'from the custom of setting up a lance as the winning post and prize in a race' (Webster's 2nd: 1062). Therefore, mabel glave > ma belle glave > my beautiful prize, may point to what *Lolita* means to Humbert, and, perhaps, what *Lolita* means to its creator” (Shapiro 323). The jump from dictionary definition to all-important interpretations of the whole novel seems to be a daring leap by Shapiro, but he goes further still by tracking down meaning to Nabokov's personal relationships! For him, the last name, Cowan, “evokes Jerome Milton Cowan (1907-1993), Cornell professor of linguistics and Nabokov's tennis partner, the initials of whose first and middle names are suspiciously identical to those of John and Marion, the Cowan twins on the class list” (Shapiro 321). Whether Nabokov planted the name, Cowan, in the hope that some reader would make an association after pouring over the menial details of his biography is hard to know, but in any case, it is telling that Shapiro goes to this surprising place, because he apparently finds no detail too obscure to be overlooked.

Though Shapiro's article offers plenty more of these hundreds of associations that the 40 names elicit from him, just scratching the surface of his journey draws a clear enough picture of the effort that he thinks is required to play Nabokov's game. Effort which involves no less than a strong familiarity with the author's lifetime of literary research, numerous trips to the dictionary and detailed biographical information. The sentiment seems to echo Joyce's statement, “The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole Life to reading my works” (qtd in. Ellman 703).

The picture gained from Shapiro as player is a useful guide, but a reader of *Lolita*

might find an uncanny parallel in Humbert himself. Through the creation of Clare Quilty, as an antagonist with seemingly endless similarities to Humbert, Nabokov provides not only a meaningful doppelgänger, but an instructive stage where his readers gain an understanding of the stylistics of Humbert's own game. After stealing away Lolita, the elaborate, ensuing trail of literary references that Quilty concocts for Humbert is strikingly indistinct from the tricks commonly found in the novel's writing style. The doubling of Humberts in the texts pits Humbert against himself, and his position visibly mirrors the one which the reader has been facing. This can be considered one of the high points of meta-textuality in *Lolita*, and an astute reader should be able to glean a strong awareness when seeing Humbert as a player in “his demoniacal game”:

His main trait was his passion for tantalization. Goodness, what a tease the poor fellow was! He challenged my scholarship. I am sufficiently proud of my knowing something to be modest about my not knowing all; and I daresay I missed some elements in the cryptogrammic paper chase. What a shiver of triumph and loathing shook my frail frame when, among the plain, innocent names in the hotel recorder, his fiendish conundrum would ejaculate in my face! (249-50 Nabokov)

Where Shapiro's pursuit takes him to an intense study of the class list, Humbert enters an equally intense study of the hotel roster—which he takes so far as hiring a private investigator for two years (253 Nabokov)—and the details that he uncovers are conspicuously reminiscent of the elements that comprise the overall literary game:

Horribly cruel, forsooth, was “Will Brown, Dolores, Colo.” The gruesome “Harold Haze, Tombstone, Arizona” (which at another time would have appealed to my sense of humor) implied a familiarity with the girl's past. . . . But the most penetrating bodkin

was the anagramtailed entry in the register of Chestnut Lodge “Ted Hunter, Cane, NH.”
(251 Nabokov)

The anagram is, in fact, yet another reference to *The Hunted Enchanter*—for which Quilty has already demonstrated a fondest in toying—and as another step in the absurd trail that he plants for Humbert to follow, the picture of Quilty teasingly leading Humbert around should at some point become suspect. If Humbert's chase is a parallel to that of *Lolita's* reader, the reader might become reasonably wary of his role as a player, because the more one looks at Humbert, or Shapiro, the more questions arise about the merit of player involvement in a manipulatively constructed labyrinth. Does dedication such as Shapiro's achieve Nabokov's ideal, successful player? Should readers aspire to scrutinize Nabokov's texts so closely that every word deserves playful examination? Or does someone like Shapiro represent an unhealthy extreme: the Nabokovian fool, who, like Luzhin, lets an unimportant game take over his world?

These are valid questions, but there is a looming reason why they are ultimately irrelevant: dwelling too much on methods of success and dedication risks overlooking the initial nature of games, because the goal of playing is not winning. After all, an amateur chess player and a grandmaster are drawn to the game for the same reason. Playing at any rate constitutes successful play, because the enjoyment one derives from the act of play is reason enough for why games exist. Shapiro might spend an exorbitant amount of time in Nabokov's game, but that is simply his own avenue into play. Such a sentiment explains why Nabokov's texts are open to a wide range of players. *Lolita* as a best-seller demonstrates a generally accessible quality to his game, while the extreme tension cultivated by Nabokov guarantees that his work will remain fruitful for those who desire deeper levels of engagement. And if

Gavriel Shapiro is any indication, there is much research left to be done. Close examinations of games other than chess are still waiting to be conducted, and there are certainly juicy anagrams that have gone uncovered. Hopefully, more critics will follow this further investigation into the nature of Nabokov's game and add to the growing body of scholarship, if not only because Nabokov has left plenty of room to play.

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