

Shade and Kinbote: Two Balancing Twos

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Abstract: This essay analyzes Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* through one common strand unifying the narrative of John Shade the poet and Charles Kinbote the commentator: the number two. Tracking how Kinbote evolves from an unskilled balancer of the number two to a successful one – just like the poet – this essay aims to provide backing to the literary theory that the commentator takes over the identity of Shade upon the poet's death.

Keywords: Balance, Twos, Arbitrariness, Commentator-Poet Relationship

1. INTRODUCTION

Numbers and mathematical terminology pervade Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, from Dr. Charles Kinbote's attempt at convincing the readers that "there remained only *one* line of the poem (namely verse 1000)," to his careful attribution of each entry of his commentary to specific, numbered locations in John Shade's poem (Nabokov 15). Specifically, the number two recurs in the poem more straightforwardly as "twenty-second" and "twice," or more obscurely as "halfway" (one-half, or one out of *two*) and "or" (either this or that, presenting *two* different options) (Nabokov 981; 988; 117; 826). Meanwhile, in the commentary, two appears in Kinbote's explanation, or sometimes the lack thereof, of the "recombination of letters taken from two names," "dual solutions," and "double coincidence" (Nabokov 117; 226; 260). At first glance, the number two—and all its variations—present in the poem and commentary appears to be a simple numeric depiction of quantity and balance. In reality, said number tracks Kinbote's progression from a logic-obsessed yet unsuccessful balancer of twos, to an emotionally-driven one, as his attitude towards the number twos in his life gradually comes to mimic the accidentally coherent arbitrariness of Shade after his death. The Zemblan King's acquisition of Shade's instinctive behavior when interacting with the number two edges on the theory that Shade actually turns into Kinbote upon the poet's death, for the ability and inability to balance twos serve as the emblems of the two scholar's distinct identities.

2. ANALYSIS

The difference between Shade and Kinbote's dealing with the number two becomes initially apparent in their discussions about the mysterious Dr. Sutton. First, Shade expresses,

Impenetrable! Halfway up the hill.

I'd pause in the thrall of their delirious trill.

That's Dr. Sutton's light. That's the Great Bear.

A thousand years ago five minutes were

Equal to forty ounces of fine sand.

Outstare the stars. Infinite foretime and

Infinite aftertime: above your head

They close like giant wings, and you are dead. (Nabokov 117-124)

Directly responding to line 119 in his commentary, Kinbote discourses,

This is a recombination of letters taken from two names, one beginning in 'Sut,' the other ending in 'ton.' Two distinguished medical men, long retired from practice, dwelt on our hill. Both were very old friends of the Shades; one had a daughter, president of Sybil's club—and this is the Dr. Sutton I visualize in my notes to lines 181 and 1000. He is also mentioned in Line 986. (Nabokov 117)

Though impossible to measure the exact distance “halfway up [a] hill,” a natural growth, Shade “pause[s]” decisively at his trusted “halfway,” in “thrall” to an impressive power—“Dr. Sutton’s light.” His emotions then inform the production of another point of equilibrium (“equal”) between “five minutes” and “forty ounces of fine sand.” Here, the voice of the intrusive commentator interjects, endeavoring to do the same by bisecting “Sutton” into “Sut” and “ton,” though with an overwhelming artificiality: the six-letter word is split precisely down the middle into the names of “two distinguished medical men,” lacking the invigorating texture achieved as “minutes,” an abstract measurement of time, fantastically equates with the tangible “sand” in an artistic unrelatedness. Kinbote, mentioning how the two men both “dwelt on our hill,” searches for a tangential relationship between his poet’s balance and his own, unbelieving that a perfect half can be constructed upon the uneven slopes. Yet Shade soon proves not only his capability to delineate the “halfway,” but that he can also balance the duality of “foretime” and “aftertime,” as the abstractions “above [his] head... close like giant wings”—an action achieved only if both flaps are identical. Conversely, Kinbote begins to lose footing, for he fails to explain how “both” men are “very old friends of the Shades,” and only recounts that “one had a daughter” without specifying the relationship held by the other. Instead, a dash hinting at a pause or panic owing to a lack of knowledge is put in as the placeholder. By first striving too hard to produce symmetry, Kinbote ends up scrambling for backup: when offering two “notes to line 181 and 100” feels insufficient to a commentator tied down by his mundane use of language, he adds in an asymmetrical third option, “line 986,” destroying his careful construction and rendering his bisection the wrong solution to creating the perfect halves.

As Shade becomes more skillful in his depiction of twos, Kinbote remains untrusting of their utility and balancing potentials. Upon discovering the misprint, Shade reaches a revelation:

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.
It did not matter who they were. No sound,
No furtive light came from their involute
Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute,
Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;
Kindling a long life here, extinguishing
A short one there; killing a Balkan king;
Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-
Flying airplane to plummet from the sky
And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,
Glasses or pipe. (Nabokov 808-28)

Impressively, even Shade's self-corrections follow a symmetrical pattern of first rejecting his former hypothesis ("not text"), then replacing it with his conclusion ("but texture"). Despite the uncertainty as he embarks on a new journey to reach "some kind of" redefined goal, he explores this "could"-be achievement with enthusiasm ("Yes!"). With an exemplary attitude, he indeed "find[s]" a "correlated"—that is, a relationship of one object to another—"pattern," which paints an imagery of repeating chunks of *two* entities bound together due to their association by a "link-and-bobolink." (In one of his many witty attempts to highlight his ornithological knowledge, Shade incorporates the "bobolink," though, technically speaking, the former "link" is the only necessary and viable tool to bind the "correlated pattern" together.) Indeed, the coupled "pattern" becomes the fundamental units of a "plexed artistry," like a knitted sweater or plaited basket, both deriving their unique textures from repetition. Furthermore, said "artistry" is present "in the game," in which the unknown identities of the players ("It did not matter who they were") works against the specificity established by the definite article assigned to "the" game. Perhaps the absence of a "furtive light"—like the "Dr. Sutton's light"—renders the players not "enthral[ing]" to identify, thus incognito. If so, could Kinbote and Shade have finally exhibited a shared trait, for Kinbote also refrains from mentioning the full names of the "medical men" that together allegedly form "Sutton"? Unfortunately, though Shade and Kinbote both allude to rather than spell out the identities of their twosomes, the poet reveals the information in a significantly more game-like and engaging manner, with "promoting pawns," the pieces of a chess game, narrowing the plurality of "they" into solely twopeople, specifically chess players. Whereas Kinbote stubbornly stops after stating the men's general professions and addresses, Shade prolongs the sentiments of his ingenious game and the "correlated pattern" in his sentence structures for *three* times (more on this number later). First, he alternates between two possibilities, "kindling a long life *here*," and "extinguishing a short one *there*"; he then combines two verbs, "plummet...and strike... dead"; finally, he interchanges between two objects, "glasses *or* pipe." What might appear as an outlier, "killing a Balkan King," in truth continues the action (through "king") of the two-player chess game informing the verse's structure, while the "Balkan" mountains enlarges the imagery of the "halfway" hill—the beginning of Shade's unintended precision—representing his growing strength as a balancer of twos.

Though not directly responding to the previous lines, Kinbote, similarly discussing chess, denies the significance of the number two in a moment of distress:

Poor Kinbote's ghost, poor Shade's shade, may have been blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somewhere - oh, from sheer absent-mindedness, or simply through ignorance of a trivial rule in the preposterous game of nature - if there be any rules.

SHADE: There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance.

KINBOTE: I had in mind diabolical rules, likely to be broken by the other party as soon as we come to understand them... The demons in their prismatic malice betray the agreement between us and them, and we are again in the chaos of chance...we still have to reckon with the individual mishap, the thousand and second highway accident of those scheduled for Independence Day in Hades. (Nabokov 226)

Kinbote's opposition to "absent-mindedness" could suggest simple inattentiveness, or be accusatory of an active mind only pre-occupied by the *wrong* task. Considering that the following parallel (indicated through "or") of "ignorance" also suggests not the incapacity to acquire but rather the voluntary lack of knowledge, I am inclined to believe in the latter definition, in which case Kinbote hypocritically assumes the role of a judge evaluating the correct direction towards which one should focus one's attention, a "rule" he makes himself despite doubting their existence ("[I]f there be any rules"). Regulations continue to plague him, as he takes offense against Shade's assertion that chess prohibits "dual solutions," for "diabolical rules" shatter the game's supposedly unambiguous ending. Though Shade intelligently uses the number two as a counterexample to define a prohibited outcome of chess, Kinbote wrestles between his subconscious desire for such clear-cut rules and his insistence stemming from his religious beliefs that "demons" will always "betray... us" by creating countless solutions. These "part[ies]" haunt him in their inability to, again, achieve equilibrium, for he has "to

reckon with the individual mishap,” or the idea that the uncertain number of “party” members on each side will unbalance the scales, resulting in “the thousand and *second* highway accident.” Frustratingly, Kinbote refuses Shade’s proposed theory regarding the number two, which could have been the answer to his view of a suffocating imbalance.

Yet, after multiple failures, Kinbote eventually succeeds in balancing twos, while Shade’s skill begins to fade away. In the scene of the poet’s murder, he expresses,

And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line.
I’m reasonably sure that we survive
And that my darling somewhere is alive,
As I am reasonably sure that I
Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July
The twenty-second, nineteen fifty-nine...
But it’s not bedtime yet. The sun attains
Old Dr. Sutton’s last two windowpanes.
The man must be - what? Eighty? Eighty-two?
Was twice my age the year I married you. (Nabokov 974-988)

Interestingly, Shade mimics Kinbote’s unimaginative bisection of “Sut” and “ton” when he attributes the “galaxies divine” to “an iambic line”: though creating through “iambic” the duality of an unstressed and stressed syllable, the very construction of his poem in heroic couplets, or pairs of rhyming iambic pentameters, brings about unwanted hyperawareness of the *written* quality of his revelation that detracts from its potentially emotive vulnerability. Furthermore, Shade fails to incorporate the number two within his sentence structures like he does before, for the twice-repeated “I’m reasonably sure” connotes both certainty and uncertainty—despite saying that he is “sure,” the moderateness of “reasonably” implies the existence of doubt. In effect, July “twenty-second” mocks his failure both at predicting his own death and at balancing two true and emotionally-derived statements. Sutton’s “last two windowpanes,” possessing his initial “light” of success, is also “attain[ed],” or darkened, by the “sun.” Finally, the difference of two between “Eighty” and “Eighty-two” makes the claim that Sutton “was” exactly “twice” Shade’s age an intricate and overly bold assumption. In fact, the margin of error results in graver inaccuracies regarding Shade’s age—forty versus forty-four, a difference of four. Risks and mistakes leave Shade’s legacy with the number two a dissatisfactory one.

Surprisingly, it is Kinbote who restores the familiar balance associated with two. Analyzing Shade’s verses on the misprint, the commentator’s characteristic lack of skill changes:

However! There exists to my knowledge one absolutely extraordinary, unbelievably elegant case, where not only two, but three words are involved... The artistic correlation between the crown-crow-cow series and the Russian korona-vorona-korova series is something that would have, I am sure, enraptured my poet. I have seen nothing like it on lexical playfields and the odds against the double coincidence defy computation. (Nabokov 260)

Kinbote recounts the “extraordinary, unbelievably elegant case” with an unprecedented awe, similar to Shade being in “thrall” to Sutton’s light. Interestingly, if Shade were to apply his former technique of splitting “Sutton” down the middle to “crow” and “vorona,” the middle of the three words, the links could have been perfectly divided into two portions. Yet in confidently embracing “three,” the commentator exhibits an auspicious awareness of the larger picture: while there are three words in total, “only *two*”dashes, the crucial punctuations that make such a connection visible and understandable, exist between them (note how this two-three relationship echoes Shade’s triplet of

sentences with the coupled “pattern”). In effect, Kinbote creates his first balance of twos by letting loose and openly expressing his fondness for a phenomenon, just as Shade does, with each of the two dashes symmetrically holding up the linguistic variations on either side. Furthermore, Kinbote’s acceptance of a story he hears second-hand (“There exists to my knowledge”) about the translations demonstrates his relinquishing of the unproductive “rules” in his self-contradictory rebuttal against Shade’s philosophy on chess, and growing faith in others’ assertions. As the “coincidence def[ies] computation,” he learns to share his poet’s “enraptured” feeling but also rests assured, without seeking intentional balance, that even in the face of chance, the number two within “double coincidence” remains to establish order.

3. CONCLUSION

While the symmetry of the number two appears to be utilized by Kinbote and Shade as a uniform way to quantify and assign balance to objects within their worlds, the scholars in truth start off on opposite ends of the scale in terms of being successful balancers of twos. Relying on his instincts, Shade naturally creates symmetry with said number, while Kinbote remains an ineffective user of twos up until the poet’s death. In noting how Shade’s characteristic skillfulness as a balancer of twos curiously transfers to Kinbote upon the poet’s death, the theory that Shade becomes Kinbote after the murder becomes increasingly plausible.

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