

# Doubles and Reflections:

## Sentiment Analysis and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

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### Introduction

In his novel, *Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov uses a non-linear narrative composed in three parts: Foreword, Poem, and Commentary, apparently written by two distinct authors, John Shade and Charles Kinbote. Storylines appear to be separate at surface level yet work in interconnected ways at a deeper level. The novel deals with life after death, the story arc of a disguised, exiled king, and provides meta commentary on the art of commentary.

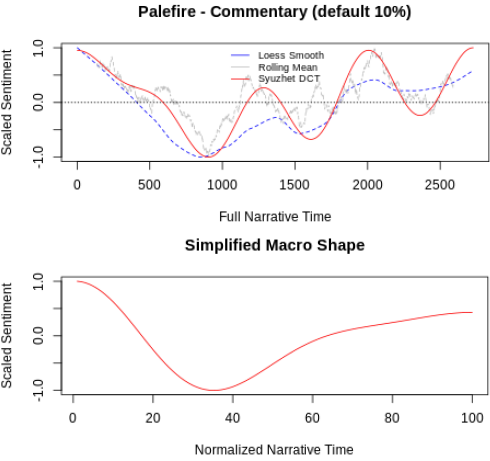
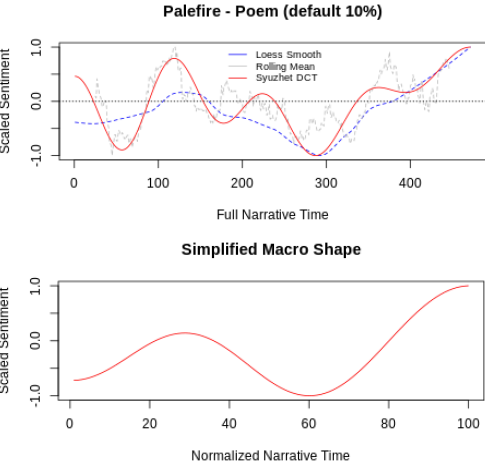
The text was tricky to analyze without sentiment analysis principally because of its seemingly disjointed structure. Thus, there's a bit of irony in that we found a repeated structure to the text despite the preconceived notions that the text is "plotless" overall.

Both the simplified macro structure to the Poem and to the Foreword and Commentary show the "Man in a Hole" narrative model, which illustrates a mirroring or doubling in structure as well. This is strengthened by the larger structures of Foreword and Commentary and Poem being mirrors of one another as well; when compared, the two are reflections of one another in terms of structure. This was not apparent prior to sentiment analysis and is important, as it mirrors the reflective nature of the text.

### Methodology

After cleaning the text, we used the Syuzhet and Sentiment.R packages in R to plot the emotional valence of *Pale Fire* over narrative time. We plotted the narrative arc using a DCT with a low pass of 10, a Loess smoothing model, and a rolling mean of 0.1.

Syuzhet and Sentimentir sentiment analysis were used to map the narrative arc of *Pale Fire*. We first ran the full text through Syuzhet and Sentimentir, then isolated the poem from the commentary and foreword and ran those sections through Sentimentir as well. We did this to see if the narrative arc matched an already established narrative arc and to explore high and low emotional valences. We then merged more traditional literary analysis with these new tools; we looked at the emotional peaks and valleys and used literary analysis to uncover possible connections between the Foreword, Commentary, and Poem.



### Nabokov Scholarship

We first looked to relevant secondary reading and scholarly articles on Nabokov and *Pale Fire*. Much of the literary scholarship on *Pale Fire* concerns the novel's authorship, which was not relevant to this project, but some of the articles proved vital resources.

In *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, author Brian Boyd establishes his belief that there are connections to be made between the commentary and foreword; that winding paths in the narrative that ask the reader to jump back and forth can, while appearing to be nothing, actually lead to discovery and understanding. Readers should, therefore, trust in their curiosity to "follow the trail." As for the poem, Boyd writes some commentary and analysis, though focuses on authorship in the novel. In "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*," Boyd argues that the echoes and patterns of *Pale Fire* do indeed interlock into a Nabokovian "key" that will, when found and used, unlock the answers to the novel's riddles. He again, however, focuses on authorship instead of delving deeper into these "keys."

In "Bolt from the Blue," Mary McCarthy attempts to untangle the tricks and riddles within *Pale Fire* by picking apart the text and finding keys to understanding connections. In this way, she goes beyond Boyd in her analysis of the poem, her identification of such Nabokovian "keys," and analysis of the connections between the three sections to the novel. She argues that there are multiple levels to the novel, "planes in fictive space," and likens the novel to a chess game, a "mirror-game." She believes that the "real, real" story underneath can be accessed by the attentive reader and that the novel deals with echoes, with mirrors, and with doubles.

McCarthy's impressive attempt comes closest to an understanding of how the novel works at a deeper level instead of focusing on scholarship. Her article, however, came out in June 1962, far before Boyd's articles. Thus, this kind of analysis of *Pale Fire* has remained unanswered since; there is much that remains to be answered.

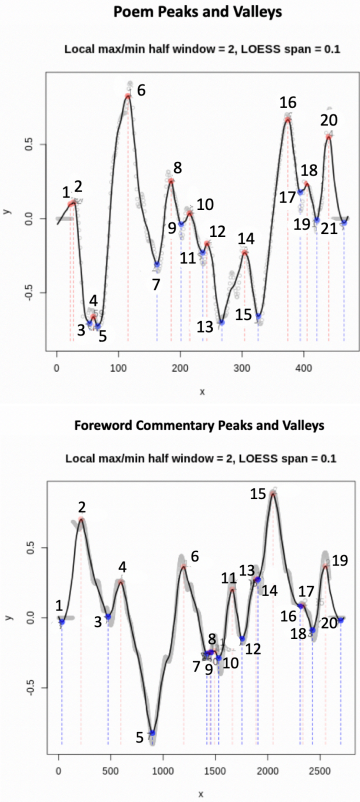
### Results

Separating the Commentary and Foreword from the and Poem rendered important low and high emotional valences, many of which overlapped, not in terms of DCT or Loess modelling, but in that the crux points were very close together in terms of orientation in time. All three models aren't always in agreement, which creates noise, probably in part because the novel has a fragmented disjointed narrative. Where the models come into agreement, however, are places on which we focused.

There can be a lot of interpretation with the results. The computer is locating moments of emotional inflection and it's our job to ascertain if they're credible by looking at close reading, considering noise, and then considering the plot points as a whole with an underlying structure. And, the emotional valence was determined by humans, as the dictionary being used was created by humans.

Not all the crux points are talked about here, as some are too noisy for clear analysis and others are on or around the neutral line.

The crux points of the commentary/foreword and poem overlap in a few places, whether it be with the same scene shared in both graphs or high and low emotional valence points for a single event.



The crux points 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the Commentary occur very close together and illustrate that the scene has both a high and a low emotional valence. This is when Hazel goes to the haunted barn and sees the spectral "pale light" that she can't quite reach.

The crux points 13 and 14 of the Commentary also "overlap," indicating both high and low emotional valences for the scene in which Hazel commits suicide. This is surprising, as one would think a suicide scene would render only low emotional valence. These are doubled moments — they're not exactly the same, rather they are mirror images of one another, high and low reflections.

There is also doubling occurring within the connection between the Commentary and Poem. The crux point 5 of the Commentary reflects the scene in which Charles, the King of Zembla, is looking into a lake and seeing his doubled reflection. Yet, this reflection is in a different location and turned a different way. As such, this isn't his genuine reflection and illustrates a sense of separation from self.

"In its limpid tintarron he saw his scarlet reflection but, oddly enough... this reflection was not as his feet but much further... his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile."

This point is linked to crux points 3, 4, 5, and 15 of the Poem, as both occur as the lowest valleys, when Shade experiences his seizures:

"And then black night. / That blackness was sublime. / I felt distributed through space and time."

"And then it happened—the attack, the trance, or one of my old fits ... / I can't tell you how I knew—but I did know that I had crossed / The border"

The seizures cause Shade to experience a separation of self as well and link him and the King together / link their experiences together.

These points of doubling are further linked to crux point 19 of the Commentary, when Shade experiences a doubling of self in a sleep state — him seeing himself outside of his body, seeing himself waken:

"I once overheard / Myself awakening while half of me / Still slept in bed. I tore my spirit free, / And caught up with myself—upon the lawn / Where clover leaves / Cupped the topaz of dawn. / And where Shade stood... / And then I realized that this half too / Was fast asleep"

There's a sense of disembodiment with these linked scenes.

### Conclusion

This proves to be a good proof of concept for this kind of approach; it makes the case for this kind of analysis. One would normally not expect *Pale Fire* to exhibit a narrative structure, yet it does. So, then the question remains: what does this mean? Is *Pale Fire* not hypertext, but reflections of the same story? This would be a very different notion of hypertext, as the paths are not totally different, but mirrored reflections of one another, as seen in the Results section.

Then begs a larger meta question: is there a shared experience in reading? Or are our reading processes totally different from other's reading experiences? Kinbote's reading experience is different from ours, yet his experience mirrors Shade's story through the poem.

As Mary McCarthy stated, *Pale Fire* exists in a mirror world, a world of reflections. Thus, on a meta level, we all read our own story, but our stories are connected. Our stories are all "pale fires" of one another; they're not perfect, nor identical — they're just reflections.

### Acknowledgements

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