

Mary Ross
San Francisco

THE PROFFERED TANGERINE: DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE* AND SALINGER'S *FRANNY AND ZOOEY*

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is replete with literary allusions. One that has not been mentioned is J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Salinger was one of the few contemporary writers of whom Nabokov approved. They each had a story in *The New Yorker's* anthology of the 55 best short stories published from 1940-1950. After Nabokov's death it was discovered that in his personal copy he had graded each of the 55 stories, assigning mostly low grades and only two A+'s: to his own "Colette" and to Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," one of his favorite short stories:

"This is a great story, too famous and fragile to be measured here by a casual conchometrist." (*Strong Opinions* 313)

I am unaware of any personal connections that Nabokov may have had with his fellow *New Yorker* contributor, nor of comments that Nabokov may have made specifically about *Franny and Zooey*. However, given Nabokov's high approbation, Salinger's slim *oeuvre*, and the connection of the two men as frequent writers for the *New Yorker*, it is likely he read the two stories in that book.¹ The popularity of Salinger with the contemporaneous college crowd would suggest that his work must have been well known on the Cornell campus. The themes of the two men had much in common: childhood innocence, intimations of pedophilia (not in *Franny and Zooey*), preparatory schools and colleges, elevated sensitivity and genius, insanity, suicide, and spirituality.

¹ *Franny and Zooey* was originally published as two separate stories in the *New Yorker*: *Franny* (January 29, 1955) and *Zooey* (May 4, 1957). The book containing both stories was published in 1961. All citations in this article are to the 1961 edition.

Published comparisons of the two men are surprisingly few. Richard Locke's *Critical Children* (2011) includes Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Nabokov's *Lolita* as "children caught in violent situations as vehicles of moral and cultural interrogation." "They are icons," writes Locke, "figures that are taken to embody fundamental possibilities and problems, even long after their historical contexts have vanished" (4). Ed Park, the editor of the *Village Voice's* Literary Supplement, wrote an amusing lampoon arguing that the two men were one and the same. Park facetiously claims to have come across the manuscript of a book by "Leif D. Warden" originally titled "Vlad the Impaler" (now "Warden's Nabokov!") from which he "quotes" the surprising idea that Nabokov and Salinger are the same person. (Extending the hoax to those in the know, "Leif D. Warden" is an anagram of Nabokov's disaffected biographer, Andrew Field.) Park's *Humbert: An Introduction* displays a witty yet cogent send-up that covers the similarities of the works of Nabokov and Salinger (particularly *Bananafish* and *Lolita*): "Nabokov's play on *Our Glass/Hourglass* might be applauded—if Salinger hadn't thought of it first. (Of course, he did; of course, he wrote *Lolita*)." Marina Grishakova ironically borrows from Park's title for her "Stranger than Fiction, or Jerome David Salinger, Author of *Lolita*," in which she discusses the seaside innuendo of pedophilia in the two A+ *New Yorker* pieces, *Bananafish* and *Collette*. Her main focus, however, is on the similarities of the two author's intentional appearances and self-referencing in their work: both authors insinuate themselves into their works as a strategy to protect the private self through blurring the distinction between the fictionalized literary persona and autobiography. None of these critics directly compare *Pale Fire* and *Franny and Zooey*.²

² Kordula Rose-Wurle has explored the importance of the tradition of the harlequinade in her discussion of the affinities between many of Salinger's works and Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins*.

The allusion in *Pale Fire* to Salinger appropriates a key image in *Franny and Zooey*: the cluelessly proffered tangerine. Home from college, twenty year old Franny Glass is experiencing a “nervous breakdown” (really, a spiritual crisis) and is being cared for by her obtrusive and dense mother, who keeps pushing chicken soup at her and criticizing her diet. Franny has suffered an existential shock occasioned by the fakeness of her fiancé and the basic emptiness of the world. Her only solace is repeating a Christian *mantra* (“Lord Jesus have pity on me, a sinner.”) from a 19th Century Orthodox Russian guide to spiritual union with Christ, “The Way of a Pilgrim.” Her obtuse parents assume that she is going crazy. Spiritually and psychologically, Mrs. Glass is blind and tone-deaf. Lacking any real empathy but gushing officious concern, she eagerly plays the nurturing mother. Mrs. Glass barges in on her twenty-five year old son, Zooey, while he is taking a bath (!) to complain, ironically, about her husband’s proffer to Franny of a tangerine:

“He has absolutely no conception of anything being really wrong with Franny. But none! Right after the eleven-o’clock news last night, what do you think he asks me? If I think Franny might like a *tangerine*! The child’s laying there by the hour crying her eyes out if you say boo to her, and mumbling heaven knows *what* to herself, and your father wonders if maybe she’d like a tangerine. I could’ve killed him. The next time he –” Mrs. Glass broke off. She glared at the shower curtain. “What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I like the tangerine. All right, who else is being no help to you? [...]” (83)

Zooney is amused because his solipsistic mother has made an accurate observation about his clueless father, but she does not see that *he, Mr. Glass*, has taken his cue from *her!* Mr. Glass's usual style is avoidant denial and going along with whatever his obstreperous wife says. It is clear that he humbly proffers the tangerine according to *her* dietary diagnosis. It is also clear that these unattuned parents are a source of Franny's breakdown and spiritual crisis

After his mother's diatribe on diet, Zooney sarcastically retorts:

“You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right. It's staggering how you jump straight the hell into the **heart of a matter**. I'm goosebumps all over...By God, you inspire me. You inflame me, Bessie. You know what you've done? Do you realize what you've done? You've given this whole goddam issue a fresh new, *Biblical slant*. I wrote four papers in college on the Crucifixion – five, really – and every one of them worried me half crazy because I thought something was missing. Now I know what it was. Now it's clear to me. I see Christ in an *entirely different light*. His unhealthy fanaticism. His rudeness to those nice, sane, conservative, tax-paying Pharisees. Oh, this is exciting! In your simple, straightforward, bigoted way, Bessie, you've sounded the missing **keynote** of the whole New Testament. *Improper diet*. Christ lived on cheeseburgers and Cokes. For all we know, he probably fed the mult–”

[...] “It just so happens, young man, that I don't consider your little sister in exactly the same light that I do the *Lord* [...] I don't happen to see any comparison whatsoever between the Lord and a run-down, overwrought little

college girl that's been reading too many religious books and all that!" (85) [My emphasis]

The proffered tangerine is Salinger's "keynote" at the "heart of the matter." It serves as a symbol for the parental disconnection from their daughter's spiritual crisis. The irony is that whereas Mrs. Glass sees no connection between her daughter and Christ, eventually Franny sees Christ in her mother. *Franny and Zooey*, like *Pale Fire*, is, among other things, primarily a novel about spiritual seeking. *Franny and Zooey* is more overtly, and resolutely Christian. Zooey attempts to help (or even minister to) his sister:

"All right, Franny. C'mon now. You said you'd hear me out. I've said the worst, I think. I'm just trying to tell you – I'm not *trying*, I'm telling you – that this is not fair to Bess and Les [Mrs. And Mr. Glass]. It's *terrible* for them – and you know it. Did you know, God damn it, that Les was all for bringing a *tangerine* in to you last night before he went to bed? My God. Even Bessie can't stand stories with tangerines in them. And God knows *I* can't. If you're going to go on with this breakdown business, I wish to hell you'd go back to college to have it. Where you're not the baby of the family. And where, God knows, nobody'll have any urges to bring you any tangerines..." (159)

Aesthetically speaking, the story perhaps should end here, but it loses all ironic subtlety as it continues to a didactic resolution. Later Zooey says:

“I’ll tell you one thing, Franny. One thing I *know*. And don’t get upset. It isn’t anything bad. But if it’s the religious life you want, you ought to know right now that you’re missing out of every single goddam religious action that’s going on around this house. You don’t even have sense enough to *drink* when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup – which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings to anybody around this mad house...” (161)

Zoey thus leads Franny to an epiphany about the necessity of being impeccably true to oneself and seeing Christ within everyone, including their ridiculous mother. The story ends with Franny lying in her parents’ bed beatifically smiling at the ceiling. In other words, she realizes that the message of the pilgrim’s mantra; “Lord Jesus have pity on me, a sinner” is that she, Franny, needs to forgive herself for her condemnations of others. Forgiving oneself and others and trusting in a higher power are basic tenets of Christianity.

Nabokov, who disparaged both Dostoevsky and the later Tolstoy for their blatant religiosity and disdained organized religion, didacticism and pat resolutions, may have been disappointed by Salinger’s transparent ending; it lacks the ineffable “fragility” of Salinger’s famous *Bananafish* (as well as the equally excellent and subtle “Franny” story which comes earlier in the book). But Nabokov himself had a spiritual, metaphysical bent, as attested by Vera Nabokov’s comment that his principle theme was “the other world” or “the Beyond” (*potustoronnost*). Nabokov’s declared that he liked to imagine “other and better ways” of expressing an author’s work (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 105); in borrowing Salinger’s tangerine as an indicia of familial dysfunction. Nabokov may have seen himself as appropriating with a twist an image from a kindred text.

One might wonder, why a tangerine? Why not, say, an apple, the usual fruit that seduces one away from union with the divine? Salinger may have been attracted by the sound of the word, not by the object itself. Salinger, like Nabokov, had a remarkable ear for dialogue, and we understand Mrs. Glass's imperious personality when her speech is accented – “tangerine.” We find *Pale Fire*'s allusion to the proffered tangerine in Shade's poem, line 371:

And I would hear both voices now and then:

‘Mother, what's *grimpen*?’ What is what?

‘Grim Pen.’

Pause, and your guarded scholium. Then again:

‘Mother, what's *chtonic*?’ That, too, you'd explain,

Appending: ‘Would you like a tangerine?’

‘No. Yes. And what does *sempiternal* mean?’ (Lines 368-372)

The first time I read this passage I confess I thought “tangerine” was a rather weak reach for a rhyme. I also assumed it was meant to demonstrate the cozy triptych of the Shade family. That rhyme, however, serves to reinforce the link with the troubled parent-daughter relationship in Salinger's story. I began to see that all was not as it should be *chez* Shades (de Vries, Petrie, and Roth are some of the critics who also see behind Shade's idealized triptych), and that there is a significant subtlety within the proffered tangerine. These five lines gesture at the daughter's spiritual questing and the parents' deafness. Hazel's parents' concern for their spiritually sensitive daughter is misplaced; they worry about her looks and social life, whereas her internal life remains unacknowledged, glossed over, or deflected. They are sympathetic but not *empathetic*. Sybil's

proffering of a tangerine should be understood as her avoidance of having to explain spiritual terminology for which she has only her “guarded scholium”– and perhaps even distaste (for mysticism as well as T.S. Eliot)? Hazel’s “No. Yes.” reveals her irritation at her mother’s gratuitous disruption. Sibyl’s typical concern for her daughter is to offer banal bromidic advice such as “less starch, more fruit” (Line 303); Hazel, on the other hand, criticizes her parents “ferociously” and sees Sybil as a “didactic katydid” – that is, voluble and preachy. (The epithet demonstrates Hazel’s special genius for “word twisting.”) This all may seem a small point, but it is amplified immensely by the connection with the earlier proffer of a tangerine in Salinger’s dysfunctional Glass family.³

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s *mis en abime* play in the barn, with the inane mother, the passive father, and the disaffected daughter, mirrors the family drama subtending Franny’s crisis. Hazel likewise is on a spiritual search, as her occult and her poetic interests attest. I should note here another similarity: Franny’s “mumbling” the mantra is like Hazel’s “murmuring dreadful words in monotone.” (Line 356) Hazel may have merely been chanting mantras as part of *her* spiritual search, to the perplexity of her parents.

³ A reference to the family dysfunction of the Glass family and its relevance for the Shades may hide behind Kinbote’s quip to Shade, “people who live in glass houses should not write poems” (67). The potential link of this line to Salinger was first suggested by “Jasper Fidget” in a post copied from the Pynchon list-serv by Donald Barton Johnson, <http://thenabokovian.org/node/26504>.

Is Nabokov referring to the Glass family dysfunction in Franny and Zooey as the germ of Shade’s poem, when he has Kinbote write: ‘None can say how long John Shade planned his poem to be, but it is not improbable that what he left represents only a small fraction of the composition he saw in a glass, darkly’ (F, 10). Does it not also suggest Franny and Zooey’s Christian redemption theme by quoting from the Bible? “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

If the proffered tangerine in *Pale Fire* alludes to Salinger's key symbol of parental disconnect, the analogy is not perfect. Franny is beautiful and popular, her boyfriend is a catch (although, unlike on Hazel's date with Pete Dean, it is *she* who rejects him), and at least someone in her family -- her brother -- understands her and helps her to a transcendent epiphany. Hazel is homely, no one understands her, and her misery ends in suicide. There seems to be no discernable resolution at *Pale Fire*'s end. It seems a case of *failed* transcendence. Every main character dies, except Sybil. What are we to make of that?

The fine line between insanity and spiritual epiphany is a frequent Nabokovian theme and one that pervades *Pale Fire*. Do Cincinnatus and Krug die in a state of insanity or do they transcend illusive "reality" with a spiritual epiphany? Nabokov's works are full of characters whom society would deem insane but who are sensitive, gifted souls given to spiritual or artistic transcendence that frequently ends in death -- potentially another form of transcendence. The ambiguous question being asked is whether they are doomed or liberated in the end.

According to John Shade, "There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance" (174). Perhaps this is a hint that *Pale Fire* *has* such a solution? Is John Shade's poem complete upon his death, or not? Does Hazel die hopelessly and needlessly, or does she transcend to a beneficent and beautiful lepidopteron in the afterlife? Does John Shade die needlessly and ironically, or does he, like Hazel, survive as a helpful shade? Does Gradus bungle his job, or is *fate* ineluctable and therefore always successful.⁴ Is Kinbote's Hero's Journey a transcendent path

⁴ Gradus is linked directly with "Fate" six times; e.g. "The force propelling him is the magic action of Shade's poem itself, the very mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor. Never before has the inexorable advance of fate received such a sensuous form (for other images of that transcendental tramp's approach see note to line 17)" (106, Also see 58, 178, 208, 210, 224)

or a dead end? Is Sybil a loving wife, mother, and muse as Shade wishes to project, or a pitiful shrew like Fanny Glass' mother? Or was it Nabokov's intent to suggest on the level of *hors texte* that the Shade family drama might have a happier ending than initially appears?

I believe, as Brian Boyd has argued (Boyd, *passim*), that Nabokov is purposely ambiguous so that the reader has to provide her own solution based on clues at the antithetic level, such as Boyd's conclusion that as a transmigrated butterfly, Hazel does ultimately reach transcendence. She becomes beautiful, forgiving and helpful to others, experiencing something approaching the beatific epiphany that Salinger leaves Franny with at the conclusion of *Franny and Zooey*.

However, Nabokov's ambiguity allows for other interpretations. *Pale Fire* is a tricky game of deception and dual solutions, and it rejects pat conclusions. In the intertextual mirror, everything might be backwards. Might the tangerine in *Pale Fire* mark a failed transcendence? Is Sybil the Vanessa muse Shade seems to describe, or the virago presented by Kinbote? What if Kinbote is actually a "reliable" narrator, subverting pat critic-speak? Might Nabokov's borrowing of Salinger's transcendent symbol be undermined by Hazel's homeliness and hopelessness? Kinbote's play concludes:

Life is hopeless, afterlife heartless. Hazel is heard quietly weeping in the dark. John Shade lights a lantern. Sybil lights a cigarette. Meeting adjourned. (148)

Given the ambiguity of transcendence in *Pale Fire*, it is hard to say whether Nabokov liked *Franny and Zooey*. Is the allusion a tribute or a parody? It clearly fits with the "borrowing" theme (like the moon's pale fire stolen from the sun), and many of the intertextual references in *Pale Fire* are certainly parodic. Nabokov told his students at Cornell: "If you hate a book, you still may derive artistic delight from imagining other and better ways of looking at this, or, what is the same, expressing things, than the author you hate does." (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 105) It is

doubtful that Nabokov “hated” *Franny and Zooey*, given his honest admiration for Salinger’s *Bananafish*, but he may well have recoiled at the former’s heavy-handed, didactic Christianity. Might the story’s transcendence have been better implied by Zooey, rather than hammered out so explicitly? Perhaps *Franny and Zooey* tries too hard to leap into “the highest region of serious emotion” with some things (Christianity/salvation) that had “once been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread” (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 91). In *Pale Fire*, as well as much else in his *oeuvre*, Nabokov is far, far more subtle in hiding the spiritual meaning of transcendence in fresh, new and, indeed, ambiguous ways, making it more vibrant for the readers who discover it.

REFERENCES:

- Boyd, Brian. *Nabokov's Pale Fire, The Magic of Artistic Discovery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- De Vries, Gerard. "Hazel Shade's 'Pale Spectres' and 'Purple Fires,'" *Nabokov Online Journal* Vol. XII, 2018.
- Frazier, Ian. "Marginal," *The New Yorker*. June 28, 2010, p.20.
- Grishakova, Marina. "Stranger than Fiction, or, Jerome David Salinger, Author of *Lolita*: Real, Implied and Fictive Authorship," in *Narrative Interrupted: The Plotless, the Disturbing, and the Typical in Literature*. Eds. Markku Lehtimäki, Laura Karttunen, and Maria Mäkelä. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, pp.238-253.
- Johnson, Donald Barton. "Fw: Pynchon-1-digest V2#3501 Pale Fire Canto 4," Nabokv-l post, August 24, 2003, archived at *The Nabokovian*, <http://thenabokovian.org/node/26504>.
- Locke, Richard. *Critical Children*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*, New York: Vintage, 1992.
- _____. *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- _____. *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Fredson Bowers, ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: Fredson Bowers, ed. 1980.
- _____. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, New York: Vintage International, 1992.
- Park, Ed. "Humbert: An Introduction (Jerome David Salinger, Author of *Lolita*)," *The Village Voice*. Nov. 1, 2005. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/11/01/humbert-an-introduction/>.

Petrie, Eric S. "Moonrise Over the Moor: Hazel's Death in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal* Vol. VII, 2013.

Rose-Wurle, Kordula. *Harlekinade: Genealogie und Metapmorphose, Struktur und Deutung des Motivs bei J.D. Salinger und V. Nabokov. (Trierer Studien zur Literatur)*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1980.

Roth, Mathew. "A Small Mad Hope: *Pale Fire*, Hazel Shade and the Oedipal Disaster," in *Nabokov's Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads*. Ed. Elena Rakhimova-Sommers, ed. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017, pp. 37-56.

Salinger, J. D., *Franny and Zooey*. New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1961.