The buried life: Mrs. Gardiner in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. A "Golden field of vision" : reading in Pale fire. Pleasure on display : Female homosexuality and the unravelling of Basic instinct

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A "Golden Field of Vision:" Reading in Pale Fire

Pleasure on Display: Female Homosexuality and the Unravelling of Basic Instinct

by

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This paper explores the character of Mrs. Gardiner as a reflection of the difficulties in representing the realities of married life. The paper argues that Austen's text is not necessarily a failure in addressing the oppressive complications to late-Eighteenth/early-Nineteenth century marriages. As Austen represses much of Mrs. Gardiner's life, she elevates her above submission and social constraint into an independent life in her own mind and heart.
...There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us-- to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.

Matthew Arnold, "The Buried Life"

Of the married women in Pride and Prejudice, Mrs. Gardiner is most elusive. She retreats from the text when the next step in unfolding her to readers is a view into her private life, into the existence of a married woman. Jane Austen has been criticized often by feminist readers and scholars for her failure to address the oppressive complications in marrying her Elizabeth Bennets off to nice young Darcys. The radical feminist argument is that

The enslavement of women in marriage is all the more cruel and inhumane by virtue of the fact that it appears to exist with the consent of the enslaved group. . . .

The marriage contract is the only important legal contract in which the terms are not listed. It is in fact a farce created to give women the illusion that they are consenting to a mutually beneficial relationship when in fact they are signing themselves into slavery . . . 2

This point of view envisions the conclusions of Austen's narratives as "cop-outs" which neglect the realities of married life, 3 or as in collusion with the prevalent,
patriarchal, and cultural view of marriage as the pinnacle of women's experience. The presentation of Mrs. Gardiner, however, repudiates any such critique of Austen's fiction based upon the latter charge. And the harsh complications faced by women in her time—the influences of class, reputation, and economics unique to women's position in the institution of matrimony—are not dismissed by Austen at all: one needs only to explore the situations of Charlotte Collins and Mrs. Bennet to discover a bleakness in married life. Austen's avoidance of the daily life of the happily married woman can, in fact, be seen as a repudiation of traditional literary portrayals of women and marriage. Mitzi Myers contends that

[Frances] Burney's Evelina made the woman's plot—the passage from orphanage or isolation to sensibility rewarded that translates women's cultural marginalization and limited options into a satisfying romantic mythology, love canceling victimization, and marriage concluding the Bildungsroman.4

As we shall see in the case of Mrs. Gardiner, marriage need not always be the conclusion of the Bildungsroman, the high point of a woman's development. Mrs. Gardiner and her marriage suggest that Austen's refusal to portray the details of a good marriage is not necessarily a result of "feminist" despair over the impossibility of a fair and equal match. Rather, there can be envisioned a life for a married woman in
which her partnership and motherhood, although important, defer to her self and her singular existence.

Mrs. Gardiner is not shown in her parlor managing her children, household and guests; other women, however, are revealed to the reader in their matronly roles. Mrs. Bennet plans "... the courses that were to do credit to her housekeeping" when she expects Mr. Bingley for dinner; Charlotte Collins is subjected to Lady Catherine's imperial advice on "... the care of her cows and poultry" (163). Granted, many of the daily household duties of Mrs. Bennet are not revealed; nevertheless, her roles as wife and mother define her identity. She lives to secure her daughters' futures in marriage and to retain control of her residence as long as she possibly can (that is, as long as her husband lives). Charlotte, once she has married the odious Collins, is contained within the definitions and expectations of the dutiful wife. And she has her hands full:

When Mr. Collins said anything of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed, which certainly was not unseldom, she [Elizabeth] involuntarily turned her eye on Charlotte. Once or twice she could discern a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear. (156)

Charlotte may be comfortable, but she cannot be happy with Mr. Collins. She has chosen (or rather, she has been forced by circumstance and economics to choose) an intellectually
inferior partner. As Elizabeth prepares to leave her friend's new home she considers

Poor Charlotte! It was melancholy to leave her to such society! but she had chosen it with her eyes open; and though evidently regretting that her visitors were to go, she did not seem to ask for compassion. Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms. (216)

Mrs. Gardiner's relatively shadowy presence in *Pride and Prejudice* counters Charlotte's fate. Elizabeth travels to her aunt's home in London immediately after leaving Mrs. Collins. Strikingly, the following is all that is said of Mrs. Gardiner's home:

Their journey was performed without much conversation, or any alarm; and within four hours of their leaving Hunsford they reached Mrs. Gardiner's house, where they were to remain a few days. (217)

Although on one level Mrs. Gardiner is textually marginalized and limited (a minor character not fully developed) on another she is revealed in ways Charlotte and the other married women are not. Ultimately, what is marginalized in the case of Mrs. Gardiner is the limited existence of a woman as centrally, only, wife and mother.

The limited development of Mrs. Gardiner's life, the minimal glances into her home in which "On the stairs were a troop of little boys and girls... [and] All was joy and
kindness" (152), leaves the reader with a strained sense of taking Austen's word for the happiness of her model wife and mother. We are told about Mrs. Gardiner's life rather than shown it. Where is Mrs. Gardiner's "place" within *Pride and Prejudice*? She can be seen as a mere device for bringing Elizabeth and Darcy together in Derbyshire. She is not a "true" Bennet or Gardiner but an addendum through marriage. In a way, she is a woman defined through her marriage, for nothing is known of her Christian name except the cipher-like initial: "M." Her life in London adds to her marginal position in the novel because she is not centered in her nieces' lives and must connect with them by way of visits and letters. I would argue, however, that Mrs. Gardiner's is a surface marginality that dissipates under further examination. She may be a device but she is vital to the turn of action. She may reside in London, away from the central lives of her nieces, but in London Lydia is to be found after she has run off with Wickham, as well as Darcy when he involves himself in saving Lydia's reputation. We see that Mrs. Gardiner is the one who confronts Lydia; she is the one who relates to Elizabeth the full story of Darcy's act of generosity toward the Bennet family. Mrs. Gardiner's marginality is attributable to a problematic complexity of character which is a result of what is not said of her, a result of her retreat into gaps in her story. Her peculiar situation within the history of the novel written by women—that of a happily
married woman--creates that complexity. But her inner, intellectual, existence remains intact in spite of the difficulty in "writing" her life.

Austen reveals Mrs. Gardiner as "an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman . . . a great favorite with all her Longbourn nieces" (139), happily married to Mrs. Bennet's brother. They vacation with each other, walk arm in arm. Their togetherness is significant because arguably the most unhappy marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, that of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, is mostly defined by separation, both intellectual and physical. Mr. Bennet retreats to his study when confronted with intimacy. When Mr. Gardiner goes to London to aid in resolving the problems created by Lydia's elopement with Wickham, his wife stays at Longbourn yet eventually she begins "... to wish to be at home" (298). It is most likely that this marriage is secure and "happy" because Mrs. Gardiner is a thinking woman. She and her husband discuss issues equally, and though they reach similar conclusions, it is because they are of a similar mind rather than because of coercion of his side or idiocy on hers. When Mrs. Gardiner announces the "tour of pleasure" (154) to Elizabeth, she remarks that "We [emphasis mine] have not quite determined how far it shall carry us (154). And in considering the degree of danger in Wickham's actions she says to Elizabeth: "I begin to be of your uncle's opinion. It is really too great a violation of decency, honor, and interest, for Wickham to be guilty of [not marrying Lydia]" (282).
Readers do not see much of this intellectual closeness, however. Austen chooses to omit the details of Mrs. Gardiner's private life with her husband. In fact, their relationship is shown only in the presence of others. When the Gardiners walk away from Elizabeth, they walk away from Austen's readers as well.

In addition to her compatibility with her mate, Mrs. Gardiner is an affectionate mother concerned in her children's lives, a "good" mother. Upon the Gardiner's and Elizabeth's return from their travels in Derbyshire:

The little Gardiners attracted by the sight of a chaise, were standing on the steps of the house, as they entered the paddock; and when the carriage drove up to the door, the joyful surprise that lighted up their faces, and displayed itself over their whole bodies, in a variety of capers and frisks, was the first pleasing earnest of their welcome. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were engaged with their children. . . . (286-87)

One could imagine the Bennet children a bit less filled with delight at the arrival of their own mother. But Mrs. Gardiner is more than a foil for her sister-in-law, more than a symbol of the good wife in a good marriage. Part of her identity is her marriage, but only part. Her husband has facilitated her entry into the Bennet world, but she has made her own figure there.

We are allowed to see that Mrs. Gardiner plays an
advisory role, based upon friendship and trust rather than authority, for Elizabeth. Mrs. Gardiner is shown as a companion of equal standing with her niece. She advises Elizabeth on the impropriety of a match with Wickham yet she does not do so condescendingly. And she is swayed by Elizabeth's opinions about Darcy; she trusts the judgment of her niece with little initial question.

On being made acquainted [through Elizabeth] with the present Mr. Darcy's treatment of [Wickham], she tried to remember something of that gentleman's reputed disposition when quite a lad, which might agree with it, and was confident at last, that she recollected having heard Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy formerly spoken of as a very proud, ill-natured boy. (143)

Mrs. Gardiner attempts to accommodate the idea of a pleasant young Wickham ill-used by Darcy presented to her by her prejudiced niece. But, in the face of conflicting evidence, she does not accept her companion's opinion blindly. After she meets Darcy she questions Elizabeth's perception:

To be sure Lizzy . . . he is not so handsome as Wickham; or rather he has not Wickham's countenance, for his features are perfectly good. But how came you to tell us that he was so disagreeable? (257)

Of Mrs. Gardiner we know that she sees Darcy is in love with Elizabeth; in fact, she "knows" of a connection before Darcy and Elizabeth have brought themselves to make one. She
writes to Elizabeth:

I thought [Darcy] very sly;—he hardly ever mentioned your name. But slyness seems the fashion. Pray forgive me, if I have been very presuming, or at least do not punish me so far as to exclude me from P[emberley]. I shall never be quite happy till I have been all round the park. A low phaeton, with a nice little pair of ponies, would be the very thing. But I must write no more. The children have been wanting me this half hour. . . . (325)

Austen shows Mrs. Gardiner's powers of observation and her playfulness. Her family relations, however, are not for the reader to know. Mrs. Gardiner moves off-stage into the lives of her children. Austen presents her as a person, rather than as someone defined by her marriage and motherhood. What is revealed is Mrs. Gardiner's sense of humor, one based in affection and perception. Most of all, her responses to Darcy and Wickham as shaped by her link with Elizabeth demonstrate her humanity, her complexity. Mixed with kindness is a willingness to condemn, based upon the opinion of a trusted friend; mixed with intelligence is humor very unlike the wit of a Mr. Bennet (which is often mean and ignorant of self). She is not so easily dismissed as a secondary, fixed, comic, character like Caroline Bingley or even Lady Catherine. Perhaps this is because she engages in humor, rather than is defined by it.

We are allowed to see that Mrs. Gardiner lives by a moral
code; she has a framework of right and wrong created out of a sense of family duty and self-respect. Admittedly, other "secondary" members of the Bennet clan exhibit moral codes as well. But Mr. Collins's code is based in decorum and social rank rather than in self-reflection (which Mrs. Gardiner demands not only of Lydia, but of Elizabeth as well). Of Lydia and Wickham, Collins writes to Mr. Bennet: "'You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing'" (364). Mrs. Bennet is too silly to see the repercussions of her youngest daughter's actions. Mr. Bennet throughout has been too busy ridiculing his family and separating himself from their daily lives to be an ethical model of any force.

Mrs. Gardiner is the only member of Lydia's family to attempt to discuss with her the consequences of running off with Wickham. She writes:

Lydia came to us. . . . I would not tell you how little I was satisfied with her behavior while she staid with us, if I had not perceived, by Jane's letter last Wednesday, that her conduct on coming home was exactly of a piece with it, and therefore what I now tell you, can give you no fresh pain. I talked to her repeatedly in the most serious manner, representing to her all the wickedness of what she had done, and all the unhappiness she had brought on her family. If she heard me, it was
by good luck. . . . I was sometimes quite provoked, but then I recollected my dear Elizabeth and Jane, and for their sakes had patience with her. (325)

Elizabeth and her father seem to find discussing her dangerous actions with Lydia quite useless. Lydia is a lost cause for them. But Mrs. Gardiner takes time to make known her disapproval and disappointment.

We are allowed to perceive Mrs. Gardiner's ideas about marriage. She is suspiciously like Charlotte Collins in the practicality of her views and in her willingness to take into consideration money and comfort. Her warning to Elizabeth of the financial dangers of a match with Wickham can seem jarring in a person Elizabeth so admires. After all, Elizabeth condemns Charlotte for such ideas. The difference is that, blended with Mrs. Gardiner's practicality, her censure of "... an affection which the want of fortune would make so very imprudent" (144), is an idealism. She has not married a Collins after all. Austen has Mrs. Gardiner escape Charlotte's nihilistic choice. She can be seen as a positive hopeful model, a woman lucky enough not to be limited in choice by herself or by society. Mrs. Gardiner has linked herself with the amiable Mr. Gardiner and forged for herself a life of comfort and affection. Her practicality as compared with Elizabeth's idealism can smack of the mercenary. Yet her censure of Wickham's pursuit of Miss King (a young woman just recently bequeathed a substantial fortune) is perhaps not so
misguided and contradictory as Elizabeth thinks. "'Well,' cried Elizabeth, 'have it as you choose. He shall be mercenary and she shall be foolish'" (153). But the world of marriage is not so simple as Elizabeth would have it. The fact is that Wickham has the right of pursuit and with that right must come a responsibility toward the woman who is his object. Mrs. Gardiner recognizes women as a dependent underclass, forced to consider pragmatically the consequences of their mates' fortunes and class, even as her own situation seems to escape all of these consequences. Mrs. Gardiner's own fortune and class are not made clear. We know that Mrs. Gardiner knows Darcy, and that she had lived near Pemberley at one time; Darcy's reaction upon meeting her makes it clear she was never a part of his set; we know not whether she has "lowered" herself to be with Mr. Gardiner or moved up into the merchant class, although she sounds as "educated" and refined as any woman in Pride and Prejudice. Once again, Austen evades the issue of woman defined through the rules of marriage, class, and culture.

By expressing her practical concerns and at the same time engaging herself in an emotionally and intellectually suitable match, Mrs. Gardiner really does seem to believe that with love can come prudence. And without love, practicality may prove to be not only empty but dangerous as well. For Wickham has acted "practically" in his pursuit of Miss King, and yet Mrs. Gardiner condemns his act as empty of any affection: 

13
He paid her not the smallest attention till her grandfather's death made her the mistress of this fortune. . . . Her not objecting does not justify him" (153).

Austen allows us to perceive a sense of justice associated with Mrs. Gardiner. When visiting Miss Darcy at Pemberley, neither Mrs. Gardiner nor Elizabeth condemns her for pride; they both recognize her shyness and "... did her justice, and pitied her" (267). Mrs. Gardiner combines with her moral code the ability to perceive clearly. She is presented as gentle and intelligent, a woman who functions in her world confidently and comfortably without sacrificing her ideas of right and wrong or her own thoughts and opinions.

As I have noted earlier, what is marginal and withdrawn from Austen's reader is Mrs. Gardiner's life in her home, among the members of her own household. She is a happily married woman whose married life is secondary to her other roles in the text: advisor, "moralist," companion. Mrs. Gardiner is not presented as a role model for aspiring matrons; Elizabeth Bennet is not only denied a positive model of married life through the textual dominance of negative models (the Bennet and Collins marriages) but also through the omission, suppression even, of the most obviously positive model: the marriage of Mrs. Gardiner. Why? Perhaps the harsh social realities of gender and marriage in Austen's time (the entailed estate, the legal standing of wives and daughters as property, the lopsided importance of a woman's social-sexual
reputation) made impossible the presentation of Mrs. Gardiner's happily-married life. Because of these realities of her time and of her time's fiction, Austen could not reconcile what she revealed about Mrs. Gardiner with what she did not show--Mrs. Gardiner choosing her meats, educating her children, submitting to the will of her husband. Or maybe Austen wished to suggest that in a happy marriage a woman is more than a household figurehead; that the happily married woman is not defined by her marital existence; that if a woman is happily married her marriage itself is secondary to her independent existence.

Mrs. Gardiner is admirable; she is intelligent and gives thoughtful advice. She deserves a marriage which rises above social constraint and submission of the wife. Perhaps for Austen the social realities of marriage in her time contradicted an important aspect of *Pride and Prejudice*: intellectual growth and intellectual independence for women. A degree of happiness can be found in marriage, but because of her society's influence, much is lost for the woman expected to love, honor, and obey. The choice to limit the view into the daily life of Mrs. Gardiner, to eliminate it from readers' experience of her, is the choice to show her most as herself--thinking, joking, caring, living. As Austen repressed much of Mrs. Gardiner's life, she elevated her above submission and social constraint into an independent life in her own mind and heart. Significantly, the novel ends on thoughts about the
Gardiners, "the persons who . . . had been the means of uniting [Elizabeth and Darcy]" (388). Perhaps, then, *Pride and Prejudice*, remains hopeful to the end: one good marriage of independent minds leads to another.
Notes

1. My argument for a re-visioning of marriage in Austen through an exploration of Mrs. Gardiner is very much influenced by Karen Newman's 1983 article, "Can This Marriage Be Saved: Jane Austen Makes Sense of an Ending" (ELH, 50:4, Winter 1983, 693-710). Newman questions the feminist dismissal of Austen's fictional marriages: "Marriage, almost inevitably the narrative event that constitutes a happy ending, represents in their [feminists'] view submission to a masculine narrative imperative that has traditionally allotted women love and men the world. Ironically, perhaps, such readers have preferred novels that show the destructive effects of patriarchal oppression. . ." (693).


3. Certainly Cronan and other radical feminists are reacting to the realities of modern-day, contemporary marriages; equally certain, however, is the greater intensity of such realities in the eighteenth-century experience of the married state.


6. Myers notes that "Rachel Blau DePlessis suggests that not until modernists began to write 'beyond the ending' could women evade the 'scripts of heterosexual romance, romantic thralldom, and a telos in marriage' that muffle female character and repress fully feminocentric narrative." According to Myers, "romance emplotment intrinsically denies female option and power" (in "The Dilemmas of Gender," 69).
A "Golden Field of Vision": Reading in Pale Fire

A discussion of Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire, this paper focuses in Charles Kinbote as reader and his "mad" misreading of the poem, "Pale Fire." The relationship between Kinbote's willful illiteracy and Iser's Reader Response Theory is explored. Nabokov problematizes Iser's approach to reading: the novel quite simply asks what becomes of relying on the reader as creator of text when the text falls into the hands of a lunatic.
1.

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* consists of a long poem by the fictional John Shade and an introduction and commentary by his equally fictional colleague and neighbor, Charles Kinbote. Almost immediately, the novel's readers become aware that something is terribly wrong, that the solid footing of meaning detected in even the most complex novels of the modern era is nowhere in sight. For Charles Kinbote's sense of meaning clashes with ours as he appropriates Shade's poem for the marker of his own mad sense of himself and his life. Not only does Kinbote commit the New Critical sin of reading biography into text, but the life he envisions in the poem "Pale Fire" is not exclusively that of the writer but his own as well. The characterization of Kinbote challenges readers' uncanny ability to believe unquestioningly what narrators and critics give to them. The novel's readers perceive his character much in the way he experiences of poem: assumptions about "the way things should work" lead only to confusion and frustration. Narrators are not supposed to mutilate the meaning of a text.

This house of cards calls itself a novel; in reality, *Pale Fire* is a playful rendering of the author/critic relationship that forces its readers to explore the dark side of their theory-inspired freedoms. With the loosening of Classical and New Critical constraints has come a Pandora's box-full of problems in limits and interpretation. For
Kinbote makes his critical way into the territory of a text's creation. He states boldly that "Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings...a reality that only my notes can provide" (Pale Fire, 29). Kinbote takes his reader response to an impossible extreme: reading somehow can and should come prior to the text's existence as text. He longs for a move backward in time and space, the ultimate power over the uncooperative piece of writing.

Kinbote's manifesto of the reader/editor eerily echoes Reader Response claims about a narrative's reality in relation to its readers. Wolfgang Iser writes in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" that "the work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized" (Tompkins, 50). Kinbote uses the rhetoric of the scholarly editor and critic yet pushes legitimate ideas about meaning and interpretation to their illogical, absurd extremes. As Mariana Torgovnick has indicated in her article "Nabokov and His Successors: Pale Fire as a Fable for Critics in the Seventies and Eighties," Nabokov seems to have anticipated recent critical stances toward literature and to amplify their fundamentals and complications through the madness of his critic-reader, Charles Kinbote. Pale Fire functions as a
caveat against codifying the literary text, whether through a belief in the principles of indeterminacy and reader-specific meaning or through a belief in art and literature as structured, as containing truths to be uncovered, and as living in a contained context, for its own sake. Nabokov’s "novel" is a cautionary game, a fable for critics and readers alike.

II.

Reader Response Theory, as expressed by Iser, is a concept of interpretation formulated in response to Classical and New Critical norms. Iser writes in The Act of Reading: "...Art as the representation of the whole truth has become a thing of the past" (12); outdated too is the belief in art’s existence in a vacuum and its possession of incorruptible elements. In the absence of a primacy of the literary work justified through the presence of particular structural and topical elements, we are thus confronted by the curious situation in which an interpretation originally subservient to art now uses its claims to universal validity to take up a superior position to art itself. (The Act of Reading, 13)

Iser tries to account for this reversal of primacy--interpreter taking precedence over text--by creating an aesthetic in which the reader (critical and otherwise) becomes fundamental as a co-creator of a piece of writing even as he
is accountable for his particular reading. According to Iser, "The reader...is placed in a position from which he can take a fresh look at the forces which guide and orient him, and which he may hitherto have accepted without question (The Act of Reading, 74). Stanley Fish concludes that "...as the reader puts the work together, he is himself put together..." ("Why No One's Afraid of Iser," 74). Readers enter into a kind of contract with the literary work: their perceptions, readings, are completely valid (even though responses are expected to be different, contradictory even) as long as they keep their minds open to what the writing offers to them. Readers give life to a text but they do so within a context presented by that text.

Of course, the text is a "structured prefigurement," but that which is given has to be received, and the way in which it is received depends as much on the reader as on the text. Reading is not a direct "internalization," because it is not a one-way process, and our concern will be to find means of describing the reading process as a dynamic interaction between text and reader. (The Act of Reading, 107)

Fish ultimately argues that Iser's aesthetic is flawed because of the intrinsic importance it places upon individual readers. Iser believes that if a reader is somehow responsible enough, open-minded enough, a valid or "good" reading of a text will occur. There does seem to be some kind
of value judgment (muted as it is) in Iser's formulation of Reader-Response theory; that is, as the dust of varied interpretation settles, particular readings are stronger, more truthful to the framework of meaning that a text presents to its reader. Even as he concludes that "...if there is not one specific meaning of a literary text, this 'apparent deficiency' is, in fact, the productive matrix which enables the text to be meaningful in a variety of different contexts" (The Act of Reading, 231), Iser immediately precedes this comment with the idea that "For the most part, it is the reader's own competence that will enable the various possibilities to be narrowed down..." (230). Who is to judge reader competence is not easily determined, and although Iser does not seem to be circling back to a classical or New Critical idea of truth, his theory can be manipulated for just such purposes, especially when the alternative is viewed as a chaos of interpretations. Intensifying the possibilities and problems inherent in Iser's approach, Nabokov's anachronistic (Pale Fire was first published in 1962; The Act of Reading first appeared in 1976) question demands consideration: what then becomes of all this theory if the text falls into the hands of a lunatic?

III.

Readers search literary works for connections, for a literary or biographical history, for lines of inheritance.
Writing, fiction, literature somehow have to "mean" something. But that meaning in *Pale Fire* comes as much from the readers and observers as from the read and observed. Shade uses his writing as a way to examine the unhappiness of his daughter, the hapless Hazel, who finally becomes "A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank/Into a crackling, gulping swamp..." (51, ll. 499-500). More willing to mold what he sees and reads, Kinbote forces his internal world, wants, and beliefs upon Shade and his poetry; he creates rather than receives connections:

Today, when the "feigned remoteness" has indeed performed its dreadful duty, and the poem we have is the only "shadow" that remains, we cannot help reading into these lines something more than mirrormap and mirage shimmer. We feel doom, in the image of Gradus [the assassin], eating away the miles and miles of "feigned remoteness" between him and poor Shade. (135)

Kinbote's sense of doom is not only afterthought but it is also shaped by what he "knows," that is, what others are too sane to believe. Kinbote manipulates the time and action of a text. He as reader has assumed the creative freedom considered the domain of the writer. *Pale Fire* challenges its readers to act as Kinbote does, to create a fiction outside authorial intentions. John Haegert's contention that for Kinbote and Shade "objective text has become personal pretext..." ("Text and Pretext in *Pale Fire,*" 416) can be
expanded to include Pale Fire's readers.

Nabokov lures readers into a "construction of meaning" (The Act of Reading, 158) through the use of allusion. Very little can be trusted in this book; like Gradus "vainly progressing through a labyrinth of stacks" (281) readers of Pale Fire progress through a labyrinth of allusion at the risk of greater confusion, lesser understanding.¹

Ironically, it is Kinbote who exhorts readers of his edited text to search for the meaningful even as he dismisses the non-Zemblan [Zembla is the homeland of King Charles, Kinbote's "true" identity] focus of "Pale Fire"²:

Paraphrased, this ["Help me, Will. Pale Fire." ("Pale Fire," l. 962)] evidently means: Let me look in Shakespeare for something I might use for a title. And the find is "pale fire." But in which of the Bard's works did our poet cull it? My readers must make their own research. (285)

Nabokov, by using Kinbote as the reader's guide and model in the use of allusion to illuminate a text, seems to be undermining the significance of the allusive qualities readers find in the literary work. Ultimately, and especially in a game such as Nabokov's, no reader is to be trusted. Shade says:³

"...there are certain trifles I do not forgive."

Kinbote: "For instance?" "Not having read the required book. Having read it like an idiot. Looking in it for
symbols; example: 'The author uses the striking image
green leaves because green is the symbol of happiness and
frustration.'" (156)⁴

No writer is to be trusted either. Because Shade looks for
connections, for abstract methods for defining and
understanding. He allows for comparisons of himself with
others: "'I have been said to resemble at least four people:
Samuel Johnson; the lovingly reconstructed ancestor of man in
the Exton Museum; and two local characters...'" (267). He
refers to other writers and works of literature in "Pale Fire"
(the title of which is itself an allusion to Timon of
Athens⁵):

Fra Karamazov, mumbling his inept
All is allowed, into some classes crept;
And to fulfill the fish wish of the womb,
A school of Freudians headed for the tomb. (57, ll. 641-44)

and:

You went on
Translating into French Marvell and Donne.
It was a year of Tempests: Hurricane
Lolita swept from Florida to Maine. (58, ll. 677-81)

and:

(But this transparent thingum does require
Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! Pale Fire.) (68, ll.
961-62)
He employs metaphorical language:

And, from the outside, bits of colored light
Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past
Offering gems; and death is coming fast. (56, 11.612-14)

It would seem that all are implicated in the allusion game in *Pale Fire*: critics, readers, writers.

Kinbote's megalomania undercuts his allusive powers and the acceptability (logically and literarily) of his connections. He is the reader who most wants to be read and he is the reader who wants to claim omniscience. Kinbote wants the life of a character (as noble king, Shade's friend and confidant, scholar), the control and knowledge of a narrator, and the reality of an outside reader:

God will help me, I trust, to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work [Shade and Gradus]. I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. (300)

His various roles in the context of *Pale Fire* conflict with one another and make Kinbote's madness and inadequacy as reader all too clear. Ultimately, Kinbote loses control of his narrative and of the fiction he is ostensibly reading. His "golden field of vision" (*Pale Fire*, 23) becomes more and more constricted, and, though he tells his students "I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable" (289), his text grows unreadable for him:
...I saw Pale Fire, which meant to me nothing...Gradually I regained my usual composure. I reread "Pale Fire" more carefully. I liked it better when expecting less. And what was that? What was that dim music, those vestiges of color in the air? Here and there I discovered in it and especially, especially in the invaluable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory. I now felt a new, pitiful tenderness toward the poem....The spot still hurts, it must hurt, but with strange gratitude, we kiss those heavy wet eyelids and caress that polluted flesh....My commentary to this poem...represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me. (296-97)

Kinbote transforms Shade's poem into a flawed, "pitiful," and unconscious ode to his royal life; he cannot read "Pale Fire" outside of his own needs and psychological constructs. In this way, Kinbote becomes at once both the instigator of "...the curious situation in which interpretation originally subservient to art now uses its claims to universal validity to take up a superior position to art itself" (The Act of Reading, 13) and the reader who, like the one imagined by Georges Poulet in "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," gives life to the unopened text. Nabokov reveals the complexity (often self-contradicting) of the
reader's position; *Pale Fire* both critiques the meaning-making reader (Shade's "literary adviser, editor, and commentator" [*Pale Fire*, 308] is mad after all) and demands exactly a meaning-making response.⁶

*Pale Fire* does more than show Kinbote's inadequacy as a reader; it is more than a backhanded slap at reader-centered theory. Nabokov addresses through Kinbote the complex state of the reader, and not only does Kinbote constitute the problems inherent in focusing on the readers of texts but he also exhibits qualities critiqued by Reader Response scholars. Kinbote is a strange mixture of theoretical stances. Typically, Nabokov seems to be repudiating everything and nothing. His anti-hero in one moment embraces and disparages aspects of Shade's poem. Although he looks for symmetry and sense in literary works, Kinbote makes none of it himself in his Zemblan narrative. In Kinbote one finds the conflicting faces of the New Critic, the Deconstructionist, the Classicist, the Post-Structuralist. What seems to be Nabokov's point is that these approaches to literature are not mutually exclusive in the least; in fact, they form an organic whole, interdependent and giving rise to each others' meaning. Through Kinbote he laughs at the idea of newness, as if these theories arose in an intellectual vacuum: exciting in their own right, dependent on no traditions. Reader Response criticism seems to be a less likely target than other methodologies in its willingness to admit its history, mainly
through its claim of encompassing its predecessors-- for example, a classical stance arises out of needs in the minds of readers. Its weakness lies, then, in the "grey matter" of the reader, in the instability of the human imagination. Kinbote strikes *Pale Fire*'s reader as the embattled hero of the deluded, trying desperately to plug the holes in the dike, that is, to fill in gaps in significance. Yet Kinbote's very instability is the grandest game in Nabokov's maze of allusion and word-play. For though the "insane" (*Pale Fire*, 25) editor "proceeds without theory and with little of the practical in his criticism (Torgovnick, 26), he struggles with meaning and structure as do the "sanest" of minds. And even as Nabokov undermines literary theory he too "...caress[es] that polluted flesh" (*Pale Fire*, 297).
Notes

1. Nabokov on reality: "You can get nearer and nearer, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite successions of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable (Strong Opinions, 11).

2. Kinbote, too, fails to respond to meaning revealed in his response to Shade's authorial choices. He questions Shade's "forking" of time ("Pale Fire," l. 404): "The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce" (196). Yet he does not see his own predisposition for "synchronization": "The poem was begun at the dead center of the year, a few minutes after midnight July 1, while I played chess with a young Iranian enrolled in our summer school; and I do not doubt that our poet would have understood his annotator's temptation to synchronize a certain fateful fact, the departure from Zembla of the would-be regicide Gradus, with that date. Actually, Gradus left Onhava on the Copenhagen plane on July 5" (74). Note that as Kinbote critiques Shade's reconstruction of simultaneous events he has no difficulties in creating (or at least attempting to create) simultaneities of his own.

3. Well, according to Kinbote he says . . .

4. " . . . some of my more responsible characters are given some of my own ideas. There is John Shade in Pale Fire, the poet. He does borrow some of my opinions" (Strong Opinions, 18).

5. "The source of 'pale fire' is Timon of Athens, Act IV, Scene 3, Timon speaking to the thieves:
   '
   '...I'll example you with thievery:
   The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
   Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
   And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
   The sea's a thief...'

   " (McCarthy, 82)

   Kinbote too is "an arrant thief" snatching his literary credibility from his dear Shade; he tempers the brightness of "Pale Fire" with the milky luminescence of Zembla and fantasy. Seeing through his lens, do readers see the poem as it should be?

is Wye. The mazelike Index, in which a whole new fiction might be created through making connections. Mary McCarthy traces many of the cross-lingual and transliterary examples in "Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire." See also Stewart, Corn.
Pleasure on Display: Female Homosexuality and the Unravelling of Basic Instinct

This paper argues that *Basic Instinct*’s portrayal of "lesbian" women is more complex than a simple excursion into homophobia and misogyny and has an impact not only on the meaning viewers take from the film but also on the structure and tensions within the action. *Basic Instinct* is representative of a misunderstanding of lesbianism and female sexuality. This misunderstanding is centered in the images of lesbians as objects of the heterosexual, male gaze.
Paul Verhoeven's recent film, Basic Instinct, has received a lot of criticism for its portrayal of women and of gay women in particular. When it was first released last year, gay and lesbian groups boycotted the film and threatened to reveal the ending to future moviegoers. The argument against the film has been that lesbians are stereotyped in their sexual behavior and portrayed as murderous (i.e. man-killing) psychotics. Truly, in this film all women are viewed as murderous psychotics, ravaging their families and male lovers with butcher knives, straight razors, and hand guns.¹ Although there are clear reasons for such a widespread protest of Basic Instinct, I would argue that the movie's portrayal of these "lesbian" women is more complex than a simple excursion into homophobia and misogyny and has an impact not only on the meaning viewers take from the film but also on the structure and tensions within the action. Basic Instinct is representative of a misunderstanding of lesbianism and female sexuality. That misunderstanding is not centered in the signs of lesbians as murderous deviants but in those of lesbians as objects of the heterosexual male gaze. If anything, this film ultimately fails to realize that lesbians do not engage in sex

¹All these weapons, in my opinion, are stereotypically phallic. And I do think it is important to note that these murderous women don't poison their victims or hire someone else to do their dirty work. Also interesting is that all the murderous women are Catherine's friends and (ex-)lovers: not one woman in the film exists outside the loop of her relationships.
for male pleasure.²

I decided to explore Verhoeven's movie after I had seen it and decided that I did not hate or fear Catherine Trammell (the ice-pick-wielding bisexual writer and main suspect in a sex murder case) but admired her. Was I supposed to feel sorry for the people she possibly killed? I did not. Was I supposed to abhor her aggressive sexuality? I did not. Was she a role model for me? Of course not.³ But she is a powerful person; even when the movie chooses to subvert her power by having her fall in "love" with Nick Curran, the detective who wants to "nail" her for the murder (sexual pun definitely intended), I find her the most provocative, engaging, and, yes, likable character in Basic Instinct.

The movie begins with an erotic bedroom scene as the camera gazes at a female body on display and then erupts violently as the woman (we are never completely sure it is Catherine) murders, punctures over and over with an ice pick, her partner as he climaxes. It is quickly revealed that

²Every lesbian sex scene in Basic Instinct plays like the typical pornographic movie portrayal of women together. And, truly, in Basic Instinct the usual, pornographic, result occurs: a man either joins these women or usurps one of them in order to fulfill his own pleasure.

³I was fascinated by my response to Catherine because I began watching the film ready to condemn her and hate her as the "evil" force in the movie. I must admit (although I do not like to) that in other films rightly accused by feminists as female-hating--films like Fatal Attraction and The Hand That Rocks the Cradle--I did despise the aggressive, sexual, fierce women villains. I wanted to know why Catherine was different; even though others had responded to her in similar, condemnatory ways, I had not.
Catherine was the dead man's lover for the past one-and-one-half years, that she was with him the night he died, that she has, curiously, written a novel in which a washed-up rock star is murdered by his girlfriend, with an ice pick. She becomes a suspect.

The police detectives quickly reveal themselves to be sexist buffoons as they joke at the murder scene about the impossibility of the dead man's maid, a large "240 lb. woman", killing him because there were "no bruises" on the body. Their behavior is the most stereotypical of all behaviors in this film: they comment about what a way it was for him to go and admire the volume of his final ejaculation. These men constantly refer to women as girls but they are no match for Catherine. It is when they decide to call her in for questioning that not only is Nick's infatuation with her solidified as the center of the action but her power over and control of the detectives are most intensely explored.

One of the first questions they ask her (she has arrived without a lawyer; she claims she has nothing to fear) is "how long had you been having sex with him [the dead man]?" This

[This use of Catherine's fiction as evidence and alibi (she could not be so stupid as to re-enact her own story could she?) is fascinating to me. Did she write the Basic Instinct story? Is she somehow placed outside of the fictional frame of the movie? The film audience is constantly reminded of the plot of her next novel. A detective "falls for the wrong woman" and she murders him. So then, because it is based so minutely on her experience with her detective/lover, is her book really a fiction? The circularity of this theme of writing and reality and story is more complex than one might expect from a big-money, American thriller film. 36]
interrogation is highly sexualized but it is Catherine who ultimately controls the conversation. She was with the man not because she loved him but because he gave her pleasure. No she was not devastated by his murder. She slinks in her chair, spreads her legs for an instant (she wears no underwear), and clasps the back of the chair in cat-like motions as she replies clearly, logically, and calmly to their questions. The detectives gape at her with desire. Catherine manipulates their desire and does not fear it at all. She also pinpoints their other weaknesses when she asks Nick, "have you ever fucked on cocaine," for she, a writer, has done research on him and knows he was addicted to the drug at one time. And although the police try to impose a ridiculous, hypocritical morality on her (one detective asks incredulously: "You fucked him even though you didn't love him?"), call her "cold" and call her a girl, the film's viewers know they are afraid of her. The detectives harp on her wealth-- she has "enough money to burn the department"-- because money is a sign of power and she has it and she knows she has it and they don't like it. Catherine controls her

5Notably, Catherine is placed in the center of the room, a large one at that, in a solitary chair and she faces the five? six? policemen who all sit or stand behind tables. I cannot remember a cinematic police interrogation in which the suspect is not seated at a table and in which there are more than two detectives questioning him/her. Catherine is on display.
sexuality and the responses she receives; she is dangerous.\(^6\)

Two characters in *Basic Instinct* are linked with Catherine in ways that I would argue enhance her power and control. One is Nick, who undergoes a police interrogation strikingly similar to Catherine's. Even dialogue is repeated; Nick asks, just as Catherine did, "what are you going to do, charge me with smoking?" when he lights a cigarette. He too is protected by evidence which is also an alibi because he threatened the murder victim in full view of other cops (again: would he be that stupid?). But Nick cannot stay in control of his situation, he reacts with chaotic violence (yelling, slamming things, throwing accusations back at those who question him) and he is woefully weak when paralleled with Catherine. His sex life and references to it are riddled with insinuations about his own inadequacy.\(^7\) Catherine asks him:

\[^6\]The detectives-- all except Nick-- dismiss Catherine as the murderer but in that dismissal is a hint of their discomfiture with her, with a woman who acts the way she does. They argue-- since Nick has pointed out to them that people close to Catherine always seem to die: her parents in a boating accident, her college advisor a murder victim, her boxer lover killed in the ring-- that she couldn't have done it; did she become big and black, "grow an Afro," jump in the ring to kill her lover? That is, did she become a man? Catherine is "manly" to them because she is aggressive and in control and she does not break down during interrogation. But that "manliness" is not possible for the sex object (as possible as her boxing with her lover), ergo she is innocent. And even if the possibility of her guilt is acknowledged, it is eroticized.

\[^7\]In contrast, Nick says of Catherine: "She was the fuck of the century." She's not so sure about returning the compliment...
"What's a shooter\(^8\) without a gun?" He rapes his lover/psychologist Beth, violates her from behind, to prove his manhood after a particularly exasperating verbal run-in with Catherine; Beth, we find out later, is unable to have an orgasm when she is with Nick. Catherine, remember, likes men who give her pleasure. She also enjoys women and is not afraid to get what she wants out of sex.

The other character who mirrors Catherine is Beth. She has had an affair with Catherine and yet is ashamed of that "one time" she was with a woman. Catherine and Beth went to college together and part of the mystery of Basic Instinct are the dynamics of their relationship: actions and motives are confused; they each claim the other acted in a particular way; either (or both) could have committed the movie's murders.\(^9\) But Beth clings to Nick, she "loves" him, and is really a wimp, sacrificing her credibility as a psychologist by sleeping with him and attempting to manipulate his records to show he should remain on the police force. Beth is Catherine repressed. The possibility of her "sharing" (not necessarily consciously) the murders with Catherine makes sense in a way:

\(^8\)She calls him shooter because, whacked out on drugs, he accidentally killed two tourists during a police bust.

\(^9\)Beth and Catherine each accuse the other of dressing up like her and obsessing over her. That idea of cross-dressing is particularly significant toward the end of the film when Beth is deemed guilty (she is killed by Nick before she can be arrested) for a murder because a blond wig and a police cape are found at the scene. But was Catherine trying to frame Beth even as people assume Beth was trying to frame Catherine with the wig? We are never completely sure.
Beth is a killer because she cannot accept her needs and claim power for herself.

The first half of *Basic Instinct*, then, portrays Catherine as a powerful, self-controlled, and fully sexual person: a strong character. Through the other characters' behavior, her appeal is made even stronger. The film breaks down—Catherine as an alternative, powerful center to the film breaks down—in a pivotal sequence of scenes which portrays the conflict between the male heterosexual gaze of desire and lesbian sexuality. Nick has been watching Catherine; she has been playing with his watchfulness all along, fully aware of his surveillance. She tells him she will be at a dance club: it is an open invitation for him. When he gets there he finds Catherine with her lover, Roxanne. At first, they tease him and shut him out (Catherine literally slams a bathroom door on him) but the relationship of the two women becomes increasingly "pornographic" as they put on a sexual show for Nick. Here *Basic Instinct* makes a decision to abandon the overt notion of woman as self-contained, sexual power. The male gaze of desire is no longer that of the buffoonish cops; rather it controls its object. Catherine goes to Nick; Roxanne is left behind and jealous; the show is over; it is time for his pleasure. The camera has caressed the two women's bodies and now Nick's resulting climax is imminent. But *Basic Instinct* remains ambivalent because Nick
climaxes out of fear. He however, and I would argue that the focus of the film at this point becomes completely his focus, believes that he has won his prize and he childishly toys with Roxanne: "Man to man...I think she's the fuck of the century....You like watching, don't you?" In fact, the film's audience knows who has been spending most of his time watching.

From this point, Catherine's place in the movie has changed and her actions are often contradictory. She alternately tells Nick he's "...in over his head" and begs him to make love to her-- "why do all the people I love die?" she whines pathetically to him as she asks for sex. She has become Nick's fantasy and we see her through his eyes. She is still dangerous, but controllable-- so he thinks. Catherine (in a scene I love) tells Nick she has finished her book and therefore finished with him: "I finished my book....Your character's dead....What do you want, flowers?" Nevertheless,

10 Catherine has tied him up just as the original murder victim was tied. She also uses ice picks in Nick's presence whenever she can.

11 Of course all real lesbians are "manly." Catherine just needed to be with the right guy to satisfy her...she's not gay...

12 I believe this is the first time Catherine uses "make love" instead of her usual "fuck." Is she talking more like a "woman" now?

13 The conflict between Nick and Roxanne ends, significantly, in her death. Notably, Catherine cries for her dead lover; she misses her in a way she never missed her dead male lover.
she does return to Nick and we are led to believe that she needs him just as he needs her.

Although Basic Instinct sets in motion unique and intriguing ideas about female sexuality and power, it retreats into the vision of Nick. The movie cannot deal with the complexity of lesbianism and unravels because it cannot or will not defamiliarize its audience's common ideas about lesbianism. That is, it cannot defamiliarize its audience from the dominant cultural framework of male fear and misunderstanding through which we view gay women. Catherine wimps out when she relinquishes her chance to kill Nick. Unfortunately, we get the feeling that she no longer "likes girls." The crime is not that the lesbian murders; it is that she dares to be lesbian. The most compelling "basic instinct" here is not sex, not survival, not death, but fear.

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Nick's final words to Beth as he kills her are: "Still like girls?" We see, because of his desire, that Catherine is somehow changed, rehabilitated sexually. Nick's homophobia is displaced in the case of Catherine because he wants to possess her. And the movie lets him have her.
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