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Beauty, Objectification, and Transcendence:

Modernist Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
May 31, 2007

Keywords: aestheticism, Decadence, Symbolism, gaze, Wilde, Nabokov

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of a number of people. I would like to thank my committee members, as well as the other faculty and staff of the university's English Department, for their advice and guidance. The library staff was very helpful in handling my research needs. My family and friends also deserve special recognition. My mother, Betty McLeod, has been a constant source of love and encouragement through this endeavor. I would also like to thank those friends and colleagues who have offered me both support and a forum for exchanging ideas, especially Daniele Pantano, Ann Basso, and Matthew Antonio.

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Beauty, Objectification, and Transcendence:
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ABSTRACT

This study compares the relation between beauty, objectification, and transcendence in two novels: Oscar Wilde's early-modernist *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Vladimir Nabokov's late-modernist *Pale Fire* (1962). Though written over half a century apart, the works feature similar critiques of the aesthete's devotion to beauty. While Wilde's novel offers an insider's view of aristocratic Decadence in late-nineteenth-century London, Nabokov's reflects his early influence from the Russian Symbolists and recalls that tradition in the American suburbs of the mid-twentieth-century. Both novels demonstrate the trust that many modernists held in the ability of beauty to offer transcendence over the limits and suffering of mortal life. Yet they also call attention to the dangers of aesthetic obsession.

My study applies the theories of Plato, Emanuel Swedenborg, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Vladimir Solovyov, Laura Mulvey, and Steven Drukman to the aesthetic sensibilities presented in the novels. To understand how these ideologies inform the works, I have divided the main characters into three categories—artist, spectator, and aesthetic object.

Both Wilde and Nabokov present beauty as a positive force for its ability to provide at least temporary transcendence. The authors also, however, portray the tragic

consequences of aesthetic objectification. By comparing the two works, I conclude that both highlight the dangers of the aesthete's obsession with beauty, but only Nabokov's *Pale Fire* offers a solution: the need for pity toward those who become the objects of the aesthetic gaze.

Introduction

A comparison of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) reveals a startling irony in the portrayals of two central characters: the similar fates of the extraordinarily beautiful Dorian Gray and the exceptionally ugly Hazel Shade. Despite their drastically different appearances, both Dorian and Hazel find their lives governed by their looks, become overwhelmed by despair, and end up killing themselves.[1] Notably, both Wilde and Nabokov highlight their respective character's distinctive trait by introducing it to their readers as the subject of art; we learn about Dorian's beauty through Basil's portrait and about Hazel's unattractiveness through her father's poem. These artistic presentations establish the characters as aesthetic objects first, thereby calling attention to the pair's objectification within each text's diegesis. Recognizing this objectification proves essential to understanding the novels' aesthetic paradigms because both works present beauty as an otherwise positive force. It serves as a powerful means of transcendence for the other main characters—Wilde's Basil Hallward, Sibyl Vane, and Lord Henry Wotton, and Nabokov's John Shade and Charles Kinbote—as they attempt to overcome the limits and pain of mortal existence. Because both beauty and its lack lead to similar tragic consequences for Dorian and Hazel, a comparison of the novels helps to clarify the role of beauty in each. I argue that the two works demonstrate that while beauty is a good and

necessary value, aesthetes must also guard against the tendency to treat others as aesthetic objects.

In this confluence between beauty, objectification, and transcendence, both novels draw on the aesthetic values of Decadence and Symbolism, art movements that reached their pinnacles around the turn of the twentieth century. Wilde's *Dorian Gray* has long been accepted as a principal member of the Decadent canon; the *Daily Chronicle's* review of the initial serialized version (1890) describes the work as "a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*" (342-43), and, recently (2005), Antony Clayton calls it "the most famous English decadent novel" (41). Wilde published *Dorian Gray* in novel form at the height of Decadence (1891), and the work reflects his position as a leading figure of that tradition. The novel not only portrays a Decadent lifestyle (aristocrats drowning in *ennui* and indulging in sensuous pleasures), it also helps define Decadent aesthetics in Wilde's unique terms, allowing him to criticize the harmful aspects while embracing the positive.[2] While Wilde believed that "the aesthetic sense alone [. . .] *can* make people truly good," he also knew that "an immersion in art, or in aesthetic sensibility, can also make people bad" (Brown 56). Thus, in *Dorian Gray* Wilde does not denigrate the love of beauty, but he does illustrate a destructive side to aestheticism; as I show in Chapter One, Basil, Sibyl, and Lord Henry all harm themselves and Dorian by treating him as an aesthetic object. The novel, however, also portrays a benefit to aesthetic experience that *fin de siècle* aesthetes valued: the ability to achieve transcendence. Wilde's main characters each use beauty as a means of transcendence, either as a way to glimpse the metaphysical world or as a relief from the pain they find inherent in human existence. The results of these attempts vary with each character, but,

overall, the novel demonstrates that while aesthetic obsession can be destructive, beauty itself remains a powerful and transformative force.

The late-modernist *Pale Fire* offers a critique of mid-twentieth-century American aesthetics by recalling Decadence. Nabokov's novel points to this earlier tradition in its brief allusions to three nineteenth-century authors, all of whom were major figures in the movement's development: Edgar Allan Poe (3.632), Charles Baudelaire (167, 291), and Paul Verlaine (170).[3] More significantly for my exploration of the novel's aesthetics, *Pale Fire*, like *Dorian Gray*, illustrates how "the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss can produce cruelty" (Rorty 199). Similar to the way Wilde's characters use Dorian's beauty to their own ends—Basil's "motive in art" (15), Sibyl's "Prince Charming" (56), or Lord Henry's "visible symbol" of new Hedonism (23)—so too do Nabokov's John Shade and Charles Kinbote, because of their aesthetic sensibilities, treat those around them as aesthetic objects. As I discuss in Chapter One, in Shade's poem, the poet positions his wife's beauty in direct contrast to his daughter's ugliness. This aesthetic paradigm reflects the poet's perception of Sybil Shade as a transcendent muse in opposition to Hazel as a reminder of his own mortality. Likewise, Kinbote's desire for transcendent beauty leads him to objectify John Shade. The lonely exile looks to his only friend to transform his Zemblan fantasy into reality. By appropriating Shade's poem, however, Kinbote callously disregards the poet's work, grief, and death. Richard Rorty accuses Kinbote of a "remorseless pursuit" of "ecstasy [. . . that] necessarily excludes attention to other people" (217). I suggest that Shade's aesthetic quest, his desire to find existential meaning through beauty, is equally solipsistic and harmful.

Although *Pale Fire* critiques Decadence in a manner similar to *Dorian Gray*, Nabokov's novel, in terms of its aesthetics, also closely evokes the tradition of Russian Symbolism.[4] Brian Boyd points out that "Nabokov was in sympathy with all three" of the primary emphases of this genre: "first, the individual as prior to society; second, the independent value of art, [. . .] and third, the role of the artist in indicating a higher reality beyond the sensual world" (*Russian* 93). Unlike the earlier Russian Decadents, the second-generation Symbolists were "acutely sensitive" to the frequent charge that they were neglecting their nation's long-held "demand that art should further the highest aims of society" (West 118).[5] The artists of this Silver Age of poetry, such as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok, and Andrei Bely, reconciled their desire for individual expression with an attention to social ideals by claiming that artists served society through their private realization of their own place in the universe.[6] Nabokov instills these dual values in Shade by having the poet find and share his understanding of existential meaning through his poetry: "if my private universe scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine" (4.974-75).[7] Shade's work represents his personal insight, while also pointing to mankind's position in the universe.

Nabokov also realized, however, that a solipsistic aesthetic vision could blind the artist to the needs and suffering of others. As Rorty points out, Nabokov knew "quite well that the pursuit of autonomy is at odds with feelings of solidarity. [. . .] [H]e has to face up to the unpleasant fact that writers can obtain and produce ecstasy while failing to notice suffering, while being incurious about the people whose lives provide their material" (213). Indeed, Nabokov has been charged with being this type of writer. Gleb

Struve claims that Nabokov's coldness toward his characters separates him from Russian tradition:

> What makes Nabokov [. . .] alien to the Russian literary tradition is his lack of sympathy with, if not interest in, human beings as such. [. . .] He has an artist's predilection for the portrayal of morally and physically deformed creatures, but it would be no use to look in his portrayal of them [. . .] for love and pity for these monsters. (162-63)[8]

Whatever Nabokov felt for his characters, I find *Pale Fire's* "deformed creatures," Hazel and Kinbote, particularly empathetic because their loneliness and despair is so palpable. In John Shade, Nabokov resurrects the Russian tradition by having the poet express tenderness toward Hazel—"She was my darling: difficult, morose— / But still my darling" (2.357-58)—yet distances himself from the tradition in Shade's undercurrent of coldness: "Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned / Into a wood duck" (2.318-19). Thus, like Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, *Pale Fire* portrays an artist whose aesthetic vision provides individual ecstasy, while it also works against the love he instinctually feels. Basil fails Dorian, and Shade fails Hazel, by using the person they adore as an aesthetic object.

To explore the novels' aesthetics, I have divided this thesis into two sections: the first chapter examines what beauty means to the main characters and how their aesthetic sensibilities lead them to treat others as objects; the second focuses on transcendence. Here I consider the ways these characters use beauty either as a means of insight into the metaphysical world or as an escape from the misery of their material existence. As an introduction to these discussions, I shall use this section to introduce some of the theories

about beauty and transcendence that led to the Decadent and Symbolist aesthetics reflected in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire.*

From Beauty to Objectification

Decadence and Symbolism arose, in part, as a result of changes to aesthetic theory developed in the late eighteenth century. Prior to this time, beauty was generally held to be related to truth and goodness and to be a quality of the object being viewed.[9] Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) led to a reevaluation of these tenets, declaring that the judgment of beauty is subjective and disinterested; that is, the judgment of beauty arises from the free play of the viewer's imagination, must be independent of any quality in the object being perceived, and lacks any relation to a concept of the object's purpose.[10] While Kant's views were in one sense liberating—allowing beauty to be appreciated for its own merit and not "subject to moral and conceptual adjudication" (Donoghue 67)—Kant's disinterestedness also laid the grounds for aesthetic experience to be separated from any concern with, or empathy toward, other human beings.

Kant's theory of universality in aesthetic judgment could provide a bridge to empathizing with others, but he fails to offer such a link. Kant argues that while we each develop our own judgment about what is beautiful, we expect that others will agree with us because we all share the same cognitive faculties.[11] Just because we have the same cognitive ability to judge beauty, however, does not mean that we use that ability to relate to others. As Israel Knox points out, "[b]eauty is felt and art is shared far more fully and authentically than Kant seems to discern. [. . .] Art and beauty communicate; they do more: they unite" (42).[12] Knox makes a valid criticism of Kant's theory, but he should have said only that art and beauty *can* unite. When the love of beauty leads to the

individual pursuit of pleasure at the cost of concern for others, art and beauty can also divide.

Following Kant, Friedrich von Schiller insisted that an appreciation for beauty could lead toward social improvement. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Schiller argues that "if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom" (574). According to Schiller, only through aesthetic education, with an idealized Greece as the model, can man realize his ideal self, the union of his spirit and nature and of the individual and society.[13] As Karin Schutjer points out, however, "Schiller fails to consider the limits to his analogy between the fundamental opposition of faculties or drives in a person and the structure of relations between persons" (114). Indeed, the appreciation of beauty has not proved historically to instill social harmony.[14]

In contrast to his goals, Schiller helped instigate the antisocial "art for art's sake" mentality that spread throughout Europe in the nineteenth-century.[15] In *The Stage as a Moral Institution* (1784), Schiller comments, "Human nature cannot bear to be always on the rack of business [. . .]. Man, oppressed by appetites, weary of long exertion, thirsts for refined pleasure, or rushes into dissipations that hasten his fall and ruin, and disturb social order" (qtd. in Knox 180n99). Such inspiration led many European artists to see aesthetic appreciation as a means of escaping life's problems.[16] Art became valued for its ability to give pleasure, for form over content, without relation to the more fundamental concerns of Victorian society. As Théophile Gautier claims in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835): "What is the good of music? of painting? [. . .] There is nothing truly

beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever" (xxx). The "art for art's sake" sentiment could be heard throughout the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. For example, American author Edgar Allan Poe argues in "The Poetic Principle" (1850) that a poem is written "solely for the poem's sake" (1436), and British artist Aubrey Beardsley claims that his overtly erotic illustrations for the text of Wilde's scandalous *Salome* (1893) are "simply beautiful and quite irrelevant" (qtd. in Colvin 49).[17] As *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* demonstrate, however, art and beauty are relevant to life; they can be both a means of transcendence and corruption.

The "art for art's sake" pose soon became only one rejoinder in a century-long debate on the relation between individual aesthetics and social ethics.[18] While many European critics and artists heralded the individual's pursuit of aesthetic freedom, they also felt a need to promote social reform. Disdaining the materialism, alienation, and corruption of the modern industrialized world, they turned to art, to the expression of the beautiful, as a means of improving society. For some, the path toward reform led, as Schiller had urged, directly through the aesthetic education of the individual. For example, as Donoghue notes, John Ruskin "practiced the sense of beauty as a civic value" (139). Similarly, in 1864 Matthew Arnold calls for social improvement through the study of "the best that is known and thought in the world" (815). Such sentiments point to beauty's ability to uplift the observer, while still maintaining a separation between the pre-Kantian notion of beauty as inherently related to goodness and truth.

For others, the path to individual enlightenment, and therefore societal reform, included indulging in alcohol, drugs, sex, or any type of sensuous experience in order to heighten the senses. As Arthur Rimbaud declares in 1871, "The Poet makes himself a

seer by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement* of *all the senses"* (377), while always remembering that "My duty is to Society" (371). Walter Pater offers a similar prescription for uniting the individual with the communal. He argues in his preface to *The Renaissance* (1873)[19] that the individual pursuits of art, philosophy, and religion can "draw nearer together," promoting "a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate" (xxiv). In the book's conclusion, Pater calls for, if not the same derangement that Rimbaud had suggested, a nevertheless fervent quest for heightened sensibility: "[to] be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite their purest energy, [. . .] [t]o burn always with this hard, gem-like flame" (188-89). These attitudes place an emphasis on the artist's special ability, and duty, to use art not only for personal gain but also as a means of communicating one's insights to the public.

Concerns with art's proper role, as private expression or communal redemption, continued into the *fin de siècle* period of Decadence and Symbolism. In general, scholars tend to apply the term Decadence to a group of pessimistic, world-weary rebels, who focused on the individual pursuits of sensuous indulgence, including alcohol and drug use, perversion, crime, and violence. Included in this circle are authors and artists such as Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Symons, Beardsley, and W. B. Yeats.[20] Russian Decadents, such as Fyodor Sologub, Zinaida Gippius, and Konstantín Bal'mónt, either developed a nihilistic sense of "indifference and apathy" (Poggioli 84) or exalted "pathos and the senses, [. . .] the triumph of passion." As opposed to Decadents, critics usually view Symbolists as idealists, both in a material, Utopian sense, and in the belief that metaphysical insight can be attained through art. As Russian Symbolist Valérij Brjúsov

describes, “art itself is [. . .] the revelation through which mankind may some day reach the ultimate truth” (qtd. in Poggioli 59). However, a number of the same artists, such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Beardsley, appear in studies of both schools. Moreover, some “Decadents,” such as René Ghil, Anatole Baju, and Verlaine, considered themselves progressive (McGuinness 6), and some “Symbolists,” such as Mallarmé, Gustave Kahn, and Paul Bourget, expressed a sense of detachment and resignation from political and social life (Forth 99).

As Decadence and Symbolism progressed, the individualist and pessimistic mood that characterized some elements of the movements evolved into a more communal and optimistic one. For example, Christopher Forth credits Friedrich Nietzsche’s anti-decadent “rhetoric of regeneration” (98) with producing a gradual shift between 1890 and 1912, primarily in France, from “decadence and individualism to vitalism and collective regeneration” (98).[21] James West describes a similar evolution in Russian Symbolism during this same period. He notes that the majority of Russian Symbolists always held social and political ideals, but that the second generation of writers had “a more religious and philosophical bent” than the first (2).

Like their western European counterparts, the Russian Symbolists, of both generations, were rebelling against the social, economic, and political changes of their time. Russia, like the West, had undergone an industrial revolution, becoming more materialistic and less spiritual. In addition to the sense of depersonalization and alienation that they shared with the West, the Russians lived under an oppressive political regime that affected almost every aspect of an individual’s life. Symbolism in Russia, then, as Oleg Maslenikov describes, “was a protest against the forces that seemed to debase and

degrade an individual in his own eyes" (3). It was an attempt to reassert the value of the individual by stressing the power of the imagination. The second generation, in particular, trusted in the poet's ability to gain metaphysical insight through physical phenomena; yet some, like Blok and Bely, would become disillusioned and question their own capacity for insight.

Pale Fire shows the influence of these second-generation Russian Symbolists. Nabokov has poet John Shade seek metaphysical insight through art and beauty but never fully understand the knowledge he gains. Wilde similarly uses *Dorian Gray* to express his conception of the relation between art and human existence. As the novel demonstrates, Wilde's aesthetic sensibility combined and extended the theories of such writers as Plato, Arthur Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Ruskin, Pater, and Nietzsche.

In Wilde's view, art provides a model for life. As he argues in "The Critic as Artist" (1891), "[L]ife is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people" (1132); therefore, "[i]t is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection" (1135). Julia Brown notes that "life," for Wilde, means not only "the inconstant physical circumstances of which we are a part, but also society and institutions" (53). All of these areas of life, Wilde believed, should be practiced as if they were art. By imitating art, life could, possibly, attain a Utopian ideal.

Wilde's title character in *Dorian Gray* expresses this desire explicitly. By changing places with the portrait, Dorian tries to live his life as a work of art. What Wilde demonstrates in Dorian's tragic journey, however, is that the ideal expressed in art includes a union of the physical and spiritual. Basil perceives this "harmony of soul and body" (14) in Dorian's beauty initially. Dorian himself, however, separates the two by

pursuing a life of physical sensation while keeping his soul locked safely away in the painting. As the novel demonstrates, though, his materialism, like his society's, can only lead to corruption if the spiritual soul is neglected. Wilde uses Dorian's increasingly hideous portrait to reflect not only his protagonist's individual soul, but his country's increasingly hideous soul as well.

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* also depicts a corrupt society through its reflection in one individual's ugly soul, although this novel's portrayal is much less explicit than *Dorian Gray's*. Nabokov wrote *Pale Fire* in an era somewhat reflective of Wilde's Decadent one. Whereas Wilde captures the urban materialism of late nineteenth-century England, Nabokov illustrates the suburban consumerism of the mid-twentieth-century United States. The amusement park that invades Kinbote's rustic retreat in the novel's opening pages and the "Music in supermarkets" and "swimming pools" that Shade complains about in his poem's fourth canto (4.928) illustrate an aesthete's perception of the false values inherent in modern suburbia. Moreover, Nabokov reveals his corrupt individual in a manner similar to Wilde, through a work of art. In *Dorian Gray,* Basil's painting increasingly reflects the ugliness of Dorian's soul; in *Pale Fire* Shade's poem increasingly exposes the ugliness of the poet's own soul. Through these artistic mirrors, the individual and society can view their corruption; thus, the works of art offer the chance for spiritual renewal.

Both authors also knew, however, that the aesthete, like Dorian, could be led astray by a perverted sense of beauty. As David Andrews points out, the love of beauty could develop into "aesthetic hedonism" (27-28), a pursuit of gratification that included treating people too "as aesthetic objects, tools for personal pleasure." Both *Dorian Gray*

and *Pale Fire* critique this form of aesthetic indulgence. In Wilde's novel, Basil, Sibyl, Lord Henry, and Dorian, all let their aesthetic desires govern the way they treat others. Similarly, in Nabokov's novel, Shade and Kinbote objectify those around them because of their own aesthetic sensibilities.

To portray the problem of aesthetic objectification, both authors allude to an earlier literary figure who was similarly victimized, Shakespeare's Ophelia from the play *Hamlet* (c1600). In Chapter One I discuss the ways in which Ophelia's objectification relates to that depicted in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire.* Ophelia, Dorian, and Hazel all become the objects of an aesthetic gaze, all fall into despair, and all meet an early death.

Although Ophelia deserves pity, I argue that Shakespeare's artistic descriptions of her suffering allow her spectators (in and outside the text) to view her as an aesthetic object, which serves their own needs at the cost of Ophelia's. Shakespeare aestheticizes Ophelia both in her madness, where she appears quoting poetry and offering flowers, and in her death, which Gertrude describes as a "mermaidlike" drowning in a stream, amid a bank of more flowers (4.7.177). Within *Hamlet*, Ophelia is routinely mistreated, as Cindy O'Donnell-Allen and Peter Smagorinsky point out:

> Controlled by her father Polonius, underestimated in her intellect by her brother Laertes, manipulated by the more powerful Claudius and Gertrude to meet their own purposes, caught in the crossfire between Hamlet and his parents, beautified even in her death by Gertrude, Ophelia is arguably the most isolated character in the play and the one whose welfare is most routinely abused or disregarded. (35)

Admired for her beauty, Ophelia is continually treated as an aesthetic object; even her father fails to attend to her suffering.[22]

While I argue that both Dorian and Hazel are similarly treated as aesthetic objects, I do find that they receive more nurturing than Ophelia does. In *Dorian Gray* Basil belatedly tries to redeem Dorian, but his efforts end unsuccessfully. In *Pale Fire* the Shade parents try to help Hazel by suggesting healthier eating and exercise, and by sending her to France. For both Dorian and Hazel, though, these attempts fail to overcome the greater harm done by their objectification.

In addition to the texts themselves, criticism about Ophelia and Hazel also tends to objectify these two figures. Elaine Showalter surveys the history of criticism on Ophelia and concludes that all of these analyses "have overflowed the text" (91), telling us less about Ophelia than "the ideological character of [the critic's] times."[23] While I consider scholarship on Dorian to be thorough, I feel that critics have failed to recognize the complexities of Hazel's character. David Galef (1985), Brian Boyd (1999), and Priscilla Meyer (1988, 2002) have given considerable attention to Hazel, but all view her as an unfortunately hideous looking young woman driven to suicide by social alienation. As I show in Chapter One, Hazel is a victim, primarily of her father's distorted aestheticism, but she has a more rebellious and assertive character than has been previously ascertained.

Ophelia's legacy as an artistic icon adds a final indicator of how her role as aesthetic object has been abusive. Magda Romanska calls Ophelia "the single most often represented female figure" of the Victorian period (485), and notes that works by such artists as Eugène Delacroix, John Everett Millais, and Odilon Redon routinely portray

Ophelia's body aesthetically, "framed by a stream, meadow, or flowers" (485).[24] These depictions focus more attention on Ophelia's beauty than on her suffering. For example, Showalter points out that in Millais's *Ophelia* (1852), "the division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object"; indeed, the work seems "cruelly indifferent to the woman's death" (85).[25]

Rather than attract empathy for Ophelia's suffering, then, these paintings, by focusing on her beauty, serve primarily to benefit the, especially male, viewer by instilling a sense of immortality. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that "In the aesthetic enactment [of death], we have a situation impossible in life, namely that we die with another and return to the living. Even as we are forced to acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of death in life, our belief in our own immortality is confirmed" (x).[26] Because the image is of a woman, "the superlative site of alterity" (xi), the representations of a dead feminine body stand in "for concepts other than death, femininity and body—most notably the masculine artist and the community of the survivors." Further, "[t]he beauty of Woman and the beauty of the image [of the dead feminine body] both give the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable signs of lack, deficiency, [and] transiency and promise their spectators the impossible—an obliteration of death's ubiquitous 'castrative' threat to the subject" (64). As Bronfen points out, though, these "artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman's death" (73). Through the beautiful images of Ophelia's death, then, the spectators gain a feeling of immortality, while the young woman's own death loses significance.[27]

Within *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire*, however, both the male Dorian and female Hazel serve as aesthetic objects. This gender-crossing is supported by queer theorists' attention to what has been considered the "male gaze" (Mulvey 436). In a study of mainstream film, Laura Mulvey argues that women who are portrayed as the objects of erotic male spectatorship lose their significance as subjects themselves:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle [. . .]; yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line. [. . .] As Budd Boetticher has put it: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. [. . .] In herself the woman has not the slightest importance." (Mulvey 436)

The erotic object provides scopophilic pleasure to the male viewer, but, as a subject herself, she has no importance.

Several critics have expanded Mulvey's analysis to apply outside film and to consider the role of homosexuality in the spectator-object relationship.[28] Steven Drukman argues for a "gay gaze" that, like Mulvey's male one, "resides in the id's scopophilic faculty as well as the ego's mode of identification" (84-85),[29] although he proposes that the "subject of ego-identification is [. . .] in constant flux between the woman and the

man." *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* demonstrate the "gay gaze" in action. For cultural and legal reasons, Wilde could not explicitly depict homosexual relationships; however, he does make the beautiful and effeminate Dorian the object of Basil's and Lord Henry's aesthetic desires. Kinbote's spying on Shade is also not portrayed as explicitly sexual; the exile does fall in love with Shade, but he is more interested in manipulating his friend's poem.

In my first chapter, I will show how Dorian Gray and Hazel Shade, primarily, are treated as aesthetic objects, and how they are harmed in the process. Although the studies of Ophelia's representation, Bronfen's work on the images of dead women, and Mulvey's analysis of the gaze all conclude that the transformation of a human being into an aesthetic object benefits the spectator, I find that in these novels the process harms both the diegetic spectator and object. The novels' viewers—those I categorize as either artists or spectators—suffer from a loss of meaningful human relationships in their devotion to beauty. Nevertheless, beauty remains a valuable source of transcendence, and it is the viewers' tendency to objectify others because of their physical appearance that results in tragedy.

Beauty as a Pathway to Transcendence

For many Decadents and Symbolists, beauty served not just as a source of pleasure or even as a path for individual growth (as Schiller suggested), but also as a means of transcendence. This desire took two forms: either an access to the noumenal world or a temporary relief from the phenomenal world of desire. Many of these aesthetes held the view that, as Vladimir Solovyov writes, "everything we see is but Reflections, / shadows of that which is / Invisible to our sight" (qtd. in Mohrenschildt

1193). Believing that artists had a special ability to perceive the noumenal, many Decadents and Symbolists regarded art as "the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty" (Symons 4). For others, aesthetic contemplation provided a way to transcend a mortal existence that was full of pain and suffering. The desire for both of these forms of transcendence appear in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire.*

Wilde and Nabokov both instill in their artists—Basil, Sibyl, and John Shade—a Platonic sense that the beauty of this world reflects the noumenal ideal. For Basil, the vision of Dorian's beauty provides artistic inspiration. Instead of developing a Platonic love for Dorian, however, Basil forms a "curious artistic idolatry" (15), which leads to objectification and obscures the painter's ability to understand fully Dorian's complex nature. Sibyl's imagination limits her to perceiving Dorian's beauty as only a fairy-tale ideal rather than a true Platonic vision. She speaks in Platonic terms, but she can only imagine a "Prince Charming" (51), someone who will carry her away from her dismal existence. Shade's perception of his wife's beauty is Platonic, and she provides him with inspiration. By setting Sybil's beauty in opposition to his daughter's ugliness, however, the poet makes Hazel a symbol of mortality.

While Nabokov presents Shade's perception of his wife's beauty as Platonic, he also draws on a prominent motif in Russian Symbolist poetry, Vladimir Solovyov's conception of the Eternal Feminine. Solovyov believed that "the whole of creation is ruled by a single, all-embracing feminine principle" (Poggioli 122), whom he called Sophia, and that "each individual loves that, essentially human, being who might best reflect Sophia's image" (Maslenikov 58). Nabokov creates an American context for the Sophia tradition by having Shade find inspiration in his wife's beauty. Just as Solovyov's

choice of the name "Sophia" appropriately suggests the wisdom this feminine spirit brings, so Nabokov's use of the name "Sybil" calls attention to Mrs. Shade's role as muse. Shade's marriage provides the unification with the Eternal Feminine spirit that Symbolists' desired; yet the poet betrays the divine nature of this union by having an affair and by using Sybil's beauty as a counterpoint to Hazel's ugliness.

In general, though, Nabokov provides Shade with an existential understanding much like his own, a sense of "cosmic synchronization" (*Speak Memory* 218), which resembles Swedenborg's theory of Correspondences. For the Decadents and Symbolists, Correspondence meant, in Gérard de Nerval's words, "All things live, all things are in motion, all things correspond; the magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things" (qtd. in Symons 17).[30] Nabokov's version is a sense that one is somehow connected at any moment to other random events, "a car [. . .] passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door [. . .], an old man yawns" (*Speak Memory* 218). As Vladimir Alexandrov explains, it is through this perception of "cosmic synchronization" that "the true artist can enter atemporal space, transcend time, and catch a glimmer of what may lie beyond death" (551). In *Pale Fire* Nabokov gives Shade the sense that, if he can just figure out the connections, he can gain some understanding of the world that lies beyond the sensuous one. Shade is never certain about his beliefs, but only "*reasonably* sure that we survive / And that my darling [Hazel] somewhere is alive" (4.977-78 my emphasis).

For many Decadents, metaphysical insight was less important than finding relief from the misery inherent in daily life. Decadents frequently conceived of existence in terms of Schopenhauer's ideology of pessimism,[31] finding the world to be meaningless

and life to be a constant striving toward goals that can only be briefly obtained. Schopenhauer teaches that the essence of life is *will*:

> Willing and striving is [man's] whole being, which may be very well compared to an unquenchable thirst. But the basis of all willing is need, deficiency, and thus pain. Consequently, the nature of [. . .] man is subject to pain originally and through its very being. If, on the other hand, it lacks objects of desire, because it is at once deprived of them by a too easy satisfaction, a terrible void and *ennui* comes over it, *i.e.*, its being and existence itself becomes an unbearable burden to it. (*World* §57)

Schopenhauer's pessimism finds its expression in Decadent writing in the frequent references to *ennui*. In Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), the narrator describes "the constrained effort of the *ennuye* man of the world" (2403). Baudelaire declared it the supreme vice: "In this menagerie of mankind's vice / There's one supremely hideous and impure! / [. . .] / I mean *Ennui*!" ("To the Reader" 2). The concept also appears in Huysmans's *À Rebours*, whose protagonist suffers from "an overpowering sense of *ennui*" (84). In *Dorian Gray* both Dorian and Lord Henry suffer from this void: Dorian becomes "sick with that *ennui*, that terrible *tædium vitæ*, that comes on those to whom life denies nothing" (113), and Lord Henry claims, "The only horrible thing in the world is *ennui*, Dorian. That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness" (155). For Decadents, then, life was seen as brief, "flame-like" (Pater 187), as meaningless, and as a constant "pendulum [swinging] backwards and forwards between pain and *ennui*" (Schopenhauer *World* §57).

Schopenhauer proposes two solutions to the suffering caused by human will, as Knox describes: "absolute self-oblivion, [. . .] the denial of the will" (130); or the temporary relief found in aesthetic contemplation, "the self-transcendence of will-less knowing." For Schopenhauer, the point of aesthetic contemplation is to silence the will, to find a moment's relief from the will's constant striving. This contemplation can be directed toward any object because every thing is beautiful: "the will manifests itself in everything at some grade of its objectivity, so that everything is the expression of an Idea; it follows that everything is also *beautiful*" (*World* §41). Decadent writers reflect this desire for will-less knowing in several works. Huysmans's Des Esseintes looks to certain books to raise him "higher than the rest, out of that trivial life he was weary of" (*À Rebours* 290). Baudelaire writes of beauty, "you beguile / Time from his slothfulness, the world from spleen" ("Hymn to Beauty" 27-28). Wilde similarly describes how a vision of beauty at sea relieves his torment in his poem "Vita Nuova": "When lo! a sudden glory! and I saw / The argent splendour of white limbs ascend, / And in that joy forgot my tortured past" (12-14). These examples demonstrate how moments of aesthetic contemplation provide relief from the suffering produced by will. In Chapter Two, I show how *Dorian Gray's* and *Pale Fire's* non-artists—Lord Henry, Dorian, Kinbote, and Hazel—similarly rely on beauty to relieve an existence that has become painful and, at times, almost unbearable, from the constant striving of their wills.

The aesthetes in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* succeed in finding moments of transcendence through aesthetic experience; however, they also objectify others in their quest. I suggest that Wilde's novel highlights the problem of objectification but does not offer a solution. Basil loses sight of Dorian's complex, often vile nature. Lord Henry

remains locked in a Schopenhauerian cycle of ecstasy and suffering. Dorian searches in the beautiful for any form of transcendence, finds brief moments of relief, but ends in despair. In contrast, Nabokov's novel provides an answer to the cruelty that too often results from the love of beauty and the desire for transcendence: as John Shade urges, "Pity" (225). Although *Dorian Gray* offers plenty of personal ecstasy—in Basil's work, Lord Henry's spectatorship, Sibyl's acting, and Dorian's hedonism—the novel provides rare moments of pity. As Betsy Moeller-Sally points out, "compassion for the suffering of others [is] an emotion quite foreign to Dorian Gray" (464), and, I would add, frequently to the other main characters as well. Lord Henry only feels pity that the ecstasy produced by the beautiful cannot last—that Basil will become disillusioned with his idol (16) or that Dorian's extraordinary beauty will fade (34). Sibyl pities only her brother's cynicism toward her own passion (57). Basil comes closest to pitying another person's suffering, but his belated attempt at reforming Dorian only demonstrates how inattentive he has been.

In *Pale Fire*, on the other hand, beauty is accompanied by curiosity, tenderness, and kindness, hallmarks of Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" ("On a Book" 313).[32] Shade's curiosity in how "White butterflies turn lavender as they / Pass through [the tree's] shade" connects with the memory of his daughter; that tree is "where gently seems to sway / The phantom of my little daughter's swing" (1.55-57). His poem is filled with tenderness toward his wife's grief: "I love you most / When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost / And hold her first toy on your palm" (2.289-91). Shade also treats Kinbote with patient kindness, despite his neighbor's constant intrusions and self-centeredness.

Indeed Shade's failure to pity Hazel, although not intentionally cruel, provides one of the novel's main moral lessons.

Conclusion

Dorian Gray and *Pale Fire* portray a confluence of beauty, objectification, and transcendence in strikingly similar ways. In addition to Dorian's and Hazel's analogous roles as aesthetic objects, the novels' other main characters hold comparable positions: as artists, whose perception of beauty creates the aesthetic vision that others share; or as spectators, whose gaze serves to reinforce their own aesthetic needs. In the two chapters of this thesis, I use these three roles—artist, spectator, and object—to explore the novels' links between beauty and transcendence, and the ways in which aesthetic objectification harms all of those involved. I argue that both works address the solipsism and hedonism inherent in Decadent and Symbolist aesthetics, and that only *Pale Fire* offers a clear solution. In the artists' quests for metaphysical insight through beauty, they develop aesthetical ideas of their beloveds. These ideas hinder the artists' ability to discern fully the complex natures of those they adore. For the spectators, the belief in beauty's ability to transcend the constant suffering imposed by human will causes them to callously manipulate the beauty of others. Finally, the objects of the aesthetic gaze succumb to the burdens of their assigned roles. Interpellated as beautiful or ugly objects, Dorian and Hazel absorb these traits into their very natures, and their own frantic attempts to find transcendence lead them to despair.

Wilde's position within the Decadent community made him conscious of both the benefits and shortcomings of aesthetic indulgence, but in *Dorian Gray* he fails to provide a model for the successful use of art as a guide to life. Nabokov's position as a mid-

twentieth-century, now American, author (forced into exile from both Russia and Germany), gave him a broader perspective on the social, political, and economic changes of the modern era. He could also draw on the spiritual values of the Russian Symbolists, as well as a Russian literary tradition that prized the individual's humanity. Considered together, the novels' portrayals of the advantages and dangers of aesthetic devotion become clearer. Beauty remains a worthy value, but the love of beauty must be tempered by compassion for and understanding of those subjected to the aesthetic gaze.

Chapter One

Beauty: Human Beings as Aesthetic Objects

Beauty commands attention in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* through the tragic lives of two main characters: the extraordinarily beautiful Dorian Gray and the pathetically ugly Hazel Shade. Despite their striking differences, both Dorian's corruption and Hazel's alienation occur as a consequence of their exceptional looks. The similar plights of these two figures call attention to a connection between beauty and despair that seems paradoxical; both the beautiful and unbeautiful suffer. The novels provide a guide to understanding this association between beauty and suffering in their allusions to an earlier literary figure who undergoes a similar fate, Shakespeare's Ophelia.[1] Through Ophelia's painful story, we can gain insight into how Dorian's and Hazel's physical appearances lead to their roles as aesthetic objects, to why Dorian becomes Basil's "motive in art" (15), Lord Henry's emblem of "new Hedonism" (23), and Sibyl's "Prince Charming" (51), and Hazel becomes a symbol of mortality to her father.

Dorian and Hazel have much in common with Shakespeare's ill-fated maiden. Like them, Hamlet's beloved suffers the betrayal of those around her, succumbs to despair, and dies tragically. Further, as in Dorian's portrait and Hazel's presence in her father's poem, Ophelia becomes a subject of art, although, in her case, the artistic representations occur outside the text. The image of Ophelia's body, lying in a stream covered with flowers, became one of the most popular motifs of Decadent and Symbolist

art. Rather than highlighting the young woman's suffering, these portrayals eroticize her dead body, moving the focus of attention from the woman to the individual viewer's own needs and fantasies.[2] Ophelia's mistreatment within the diegesis of *Hamlet*, as well as her revival as an artistic icon, highlights the way her beauty has been abused by those who claim to love her.

Like Ophelia, the characters Dorian and Hazel descend from innocence to despair because others betray them, and the betrayal is directly connected to the victims' appearance. Further, the artistic renditions of their deaths—Dorian's restored portrait and Hazel's inclusion in her father's poem—emphasize the way the two are viewed as aesthetic objects more than as human beings. To clarify how each of the various characters objectifies these captivating figures, I divide the novels' casts into three categories: artists, spectators, and objects. I designate Wilde's painter Basil Hallward and actress Sibyl Vane and Nabokov's poet John Shade as "artists." Because of their special creative ability and attention to physical appearance, these characters all form what Kant calls "aesthetical ideas" (§49) of the person they love, Dorian or Hazel. These "ideas" blind the artists to the full nature of their beloved, causing harm to all involved. I classify two other main characters—Wilde's Lord Henry and Nabokov's Charles Kinbote—as "spectators," those who are neither beautiful themselves nor capable of creating beauty, but who enjoy looking at and manipulating the beauty of others. Drawing on Mulvey's analysis of film spectatorship, I show that these characters behave like voyeurs, establishing power over the objects of their gaze in a desire for aesthetic experience. The final category that I discuss is the "objects," Wilde's Dorian Gray and Nabokov's Hazel Shade. Objectified because of their extraordinary appearance, these individuals succumb

to despair and near madness, much like Ophelia, and they in turn treat others with a heartless cruelty similar to what they have been subjected to.

The Artists: Creators of Beauty

In both novels, an artist's perception of beauty plays a key role in determining his subject's self-image. In Wilde's novel Dorian first becomes fully aware of his own beauty through Basil's painting. As the narrator tells us, "The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before" (25), and Dorian himself accuses Basil of making him "vain" (121). In *Pale Fire* Shade's poem reveals the poet's critical view of his daughter's appearance—"the dingy cygnet [that] never turned / Into a wood duck" (2.318-19)—and, I suggest, also reveals the role Shade played in the formation of Hazel's self-image. In each of the novels, however, the artist's perception is distorted because it is based on what Kant calls an "aesthetical idea" (§49) of the subject. Kant explains that "[t]he imagination [. . .] is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature" (§49). This second nature is not an imitation of the subject but rather an idea created in the artist's imagination. In both novels, the artists' aesthetical ideas overshadow their understanding of their subjects' natures.

That Basil forms an aesthetical idea of Dorian is evident in the painter's initial reaction to his new friend. As Basil admits, "from the moment I met you, [. . .] You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (89). From the very beginning of their relationship, then, the painter falls "not in love with Dorian Gray but with his own image of Dorian" (Oates 425). Basil expresses his vision in the portrait, what he calls "the real Dorian" (28), and

he lets this artistic representation become a substitute for the real man: “When you were away from me you were still present in my art” (89).

Because Basil trusts his aesthetical idea of Dorian, the painter fails to discern his friend’s full character. He insists that the young man “has a simple and beautiful nature” (17), despite admitting early on that Dorian can be “horribly thoughtless” and even “seems to take a real delight in giving me pain” (15). Basil later defends Dorian to Lord Henry—“He would never bring misery upon any one. His nature is too fine for that” (63)—but the artist becomes confused and troubled by Dorian’s callous response to Sibyl’s death: “You were the most unspoiled creature in the whole world. Now, I don’t know what has come over you. You talk as if you had no heart, no pity in you” (85). Refusing to blame his idol, however, Basil decides, “It is all Harry’s influence” (85). Even after hearing the terrible rumors about Dorian, Basil still insists that his friend is guiltless: “I don’t believe these rumours at all. [. . .] with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous untroubled youth—I can’t believe anything against you” (117). Basil’s aesthetical idea of Dorian prevents the painter from fully comprehending his friend’s fallibility. When Dorian finally reveals the disfigured painting, forcing the artist to acknowledge his fatal error, Basil responds in horror: “what a thing I must have worshipped!” (122). His strong reaction—he feels physically ill, his tongue parched, his forehead “dank with clammy sweat” (121)—illustrates how drastically he has misjudged Dorian. Once Basil’s aesthetical idea is shattered, he tries desperately to get his idol to reform, but only succeeds in inspiring Dorian’s murderous wrath.

Like Basil, Wilde’s other artist, actress Sibyl Vane, also creates an aesthetical idea of Dorian because of his beauty, and, like Basil, she pays for her misconception of

Dorian's true nature with her death.[3] Sibyl has always relied on aesthetic experience for transcendence over her tedious life, admitting, "It was only in the theatre that I lived" (69). When she meets Dorian, she believes not only that she has discovered real love but also that she has learned "what reality really is" (69). However, her artistic sensibility causes her to continue confusing reality with art. Her brother points out that she doesn't "even know his [Dorian's] name" (52), and Dorian recognizes that Sibyl "regarded me merely as a person in a play" (46).[4] As Michael Gillespie suggests, "Sibyl sees love as an unambiguous and monolithic condition, overpowering all else and focusing her imagination on a single feature," Dorian's beauty, and thus "the termination of [the] engagement [. . .] is the inevitable consequence of how the actress perceives the world" (85). I agree that it is her artistic imagination that is integral to her perception of Dorian. Although she seems willing to love him, she lets her love for aesthetic experience trap her in a solipsistic world of adoration and denial.

Sibyl speaks of Dorian in Platonic terms—"I love him because he is like what Love himself should be" (52)—but she has formed her ideal from fairy tales. She imagines Dorian as "Prince Charming" (51), a fantasy hero not only beautiful but capable of rescuing her from her dismal existence. Wilde's use of a fairy-tale motif appropriately characterizes the fanciful nature of Sibyl and Dorian's relationship. The name "Prince Charming" recalls, among others, the hero of *Snow White*, the handsome prince who saves the beautiful maiden from her stepmother's curse.[5] As Bronfen points out, the prince first sees and then desires Snow White only after she is (presumed) dead, aesthetically entombed in a glass coffin and resembling "an art object displayed in a labelled frame" (100). Bronfen argues that the prince's desire is not "a form of mourning

for a lost beloved" (100); rather, his "desire for an unknown beautiful feminine corpse exemplifies to perfection how the object of desire is never real but rather the symptom of the lover's fantasy" (102). Wilde re-genders the fairy tale to have Sibyl fall in love with the "symptom" of her fantasy, not the real man.

Through their affair, Wilde demonstrates how the artist's creative imagination can distort human relationships to the point that they become merely aesthetic fantasies rather than instances of substantial human interconnection. Both Sibyl and Dorian fall in love with fantasy images. Because he is beautiful, Dorian fulfills Sibyl's desire for a hero to rescue her. Because Sibyl acts so convincingly, she fulfills his desire for something to "stir [his] imagination" (70). Sibyl's artistic ability has enabled her to convince Dorian that she is, alternatingly, each of the dramatic heroines she plays. When she dies, Lord Henry appropriately characterizes her as Ophelia: "Mourn for Ophelia, if you like" (82), and his words emphasize how the real woman has been lost behind the image: "But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than [Ophelia was]" (82). Neither Sibyl nor Dorian considers the real nature of the human being behind the aesthetic fantasy.

Sibyl and Dorian's affair thus becomes, in Richard Ellmann's words, an "aesthetic laboratory" (315). Their fantasies give them enormous pleasure, but aesthetic judgment alone cannot substitute for a deeper recognition of human nature. Through their relationship, Wilde critiques, as Felicia Bonaparte argues, "*mere* aestheticism as a tenable ground for life" (246 my emphasis), but not aestheticism as a whole. Both Sibyl and Dorian find a temporary transcendence from the pain of daily life in their aesthetic fantasy. It is when these characters fail to see the real human being behind the beauty that

they harm themselves and each other. Sibyl's mistake leads to her suicide; Dorian's leads to his first act of cruelty and to the first gruesome change in his portrait.

Like Wilde's artists, Basil and Sibyl, Nabokov's poet, John Shade, creates an aesthetical idea out of the Ophelia-like maid who loves him, his daughter Hazel. Also like Wilde's artists, Shade expresses love for his Ophelia, but his aesthetic view of her blinds him to her humanity, and the result is tragic for both parties. Nabokov, however, reverses the aesthetic quality of Wilde's critique: Dorian is objectified because of his extraordinary beauty, Hazel because of her extreme ugliness.

As in *Dorian Gray*, the artist holds a key position in *Pale Fire*, shaping the way both readers and characters within the text view the artist's subject. Wilde uses Basil's painting to introduce Dorian to his readers; Nabokov uses another work of art, a poem, to present Hazel. Unlike the way Basil proudly bears "a smile of pleasure" as he surveys his painting (8), however, Nabokov's artist slowly, even uncomfortably, eases into the painful subject of his daughter's death. The poet first refers to Hazel contingently: "White butterflies turn lavender as they / Pass through its [his favorite tree's] shade where gently seems to sway / The phantom of my little daughter's swing" (1.55-57). By focusing on the butterflies, the passage draws attention away from the daughter, leaving just a hint that Hazel has died. A closer look at the expert crafting of the lines reveals more meaning. The mention of "White butterflies" sets up a contrast between the bland Hazel and her beautiful mother, the "dark Vanessa" (2.270), (a contrast that I discuss more fully in Chapter Two). Whiteness can also signal death, and the term "phantom" enhances that association. Still, the poet only refers to the phantom of the swing, not the little girl, although the adverb "gently" suggests a sad, tender memory. Finally the "shade" of the

tree recalls the poet's own name; thus, the complete passage creates a poetic representation of the memory of a lost daughter as it passes through the father's mind.

These lines tentatively broach the real subject, the daughter's perceived suicide, but Shade continues to avoid the difficult issue for several verses. He first relates the deaths of his parents and aunt, as well as his own near-fatal seizures. He comes nearer to acknowledging Hazel's death when expressing love for his wife: "I love you most / When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost" (2.289-90). In the next verse Shade finally (Boyd calls it "abruptly" [*Nabokov's* 134]) mentions his daughter directly, though still not by name: "She might have been you, me, or some quaint blend: / Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend / Your heart and mind" (2.293-95). Plunging ahead now, the poet details his ugly daughter's painful childhood, her social alienation, and finally her drowning. These two cantos provide a stark contrast to Wilde's first two chapters, in which Basil and Lord Henry rave at length over Dorian's beauty. Wilde's characters cannot praise their Adonis highly enough: Basil declares Dorian "is absolutely necessary to me" (14) and Lord Henry exclaims to the young beauty, "how tragic it would be if you were wasted" (23). Yet Nabokov's poet seems to be gathering the courage merely to mention his daughter, dodging her presence through poetic associations with nature, his wife, and, finally, himself. Indeed, Kinbote comments that, in their conversations, Shade "never cared to refer to his dead child" (187).

Shade presents himself in the poem as a loving, grief-stricken father—"She was my darling: difficult, morose— / But still my darling" (2.357-58)—but his verse reveals a more complex, and disturbing, portrait of a father's feelings toward his daughter. The puerile rhyme of "At first we'd smile and say: / 'All little girls are plump' or 'Jim McVey

/ (The family oculist) will cure that slight / Squint in no time'" (2.295-98) sounds cruel, more like ridicule than compassion. Shade's comment—"The prizes won / In French and history, no doubt, were fun" (2.305-06)—disparages the importance of the girl's accomplishments. Even "Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned / Into a wood duck" (2.318-19) seems a harsh way for a father to refer to his dead daughter. The fairy-tale allusion to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" (1844) reminds us of Wilde's reference to Prince Charming and fittingly recalls the perversion of the prince's love for the fantasy figure of Snow White. Shade sees Hazel, too, as a fantasy figure, not a symptom of his desires but of his fears.

The reason for Shade's earlier hesitation is now clear; in his poetic recreation of his daughter's life and death, Shade begins to realize that he is largely responsible for his daughter's tragic fate. A loving father could find his daughter at least somewhat beautiful despite her flaws. Some theorists even suggest that love leads the viewer to see the beloved as beautiful. Georg Hegel believed, as Smith and Helfand explain, that "an observer's contemplation, animated by love, projects beauty inherent in the mind onto the sensuous world of nature" (Smith 24). William Congreve puts the concept more succinctly: "Beauty is the lover's gift" (68). Like Kant's aesthetic theory, these statements present beauty as subjective, but Hegel and Congreve tie the judgment specifically to the observer's feelings of love for his or her subject. If Shade loves his daughter, then why doesn't he perceive her as beautiful, at least in some minor way?

Like Wilde's artists, Shade makes his judgment of beauty based on a preconceived notion of what a person should look like according to their purpose, reflecting Kant's theory of "dependent" beauty. Kant distinguishes between two types of

beauty: “free,” which is judged “according to mere form” and without a “concept of any end for which the manifold should serve the given object” (§16), and “dependent,” which applies to people, and is based on a concept of the object’s purpose: “human beauty [. . .] presupposes a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing is to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection” (§16). Wilde’s artists, Basil and Sibyl, consider Dorian beautiful because his looks perfectly suit the purpose he serves for them, the “harmony of soul and body” for Basil (14) and “Prince Charming” for Sibyl (51). Similarly, Nabokov’s poet has judged Hazel unbeautiful because of the purpose she serves for him; she reminds him of his own mortality.

Shade forms his aesthetical idea of Hazel based on her resemblance to himself. He describes her as “psoriatic,” “awkward,” and “plump” (2.355, 300, 296), using terms that mirror his own body as a child, which was “Asthmatic, lame and fat” (1.129). He even points out that Hazel looks like him: “She might have been you, me, or some quaint blend: / Nature chose me” (2.293-94). Similar to the way Wilde’s artists hold a distorted view of Dorian, Shade’s depiction of Hazel points to what his wife, Sybil, terms his “prejudice” (2.320), and Sybil chastises him for it: “Why overstress / The physical?” (2.321-22). John Shade, though, does stress the physical. He attributes all of Hazel’s problems—her loneliness, her “difficult” and “morose” manner (2.357-78), and the fact that “She hardly ever smiled” (2.350)—to her lack of beauty.

In addition to Hazel’s physical appearance, the poet associates his daughter’s neurotic behavior with his own. When the Shades notice various household items flying about as if thrown by a ghost, they realize that their daughter is “the agent of the disturbance” (166). Hazel was “beside herself with distress” at the time over Sybil’s

euthanasia of Aunt Maud's dog (165), and the episode is an angry outburst in response to grief. Shade, however, fails to consider his daughter's sorrow and interprets the bizarre antics as "a new genetic variant" of his own childhood "dramatic fits" (166).

The relation of Hazel's appearance and behavior to Shade's own is significant because the poet associates his own shortcomings with death. As a child, Shade felt like "a cloutish freak" (1.134); frail and overweight, he "never bounced a ball or swung a bat" (1.130), and only "played with other chaps" in "sleeping dreams" (1.135). He suffers blackouts where he feels "Tugged at by playful death" (1.140), an ironic phrase indicating that he perceived death as more of a playmate than other children. Thus Shade associates his feeble body and childhood "fits" (166) with death, a subject he becomes familiar with at an early age.

Orphaned while still an infant, Shade grows up under the care of "dear bizarre Aunt Maud, / A poet and painter with a taste / For realistic objects interlaced / With grotesque growths and images of doom" (1.86-89).[6] These macabre images keep "doom," or death, ever-present in the home. Shade's final poem reveals Maud's influence; not only does he portray Hazel as grotesque, but the poem's opening lines present an image of doom: "the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (1.1-2).

Shade's use of "azure" in these lines suggests a positive, hopeful concept of eternity, made false and fatal by its reflection in the phenomenal world. The term appears frequently in Symbolist poetry (Jullian 230). For example, Oleg Maslenikov notes the "rapturous 'azure of the sky'" (75) in Russian Symbolist Andrei Bely's *Gold in Azure* (1904). In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov turns the rapture into horror. Following the bird's death in the poem's opening lines, Shade then links the color "azure" to Hazel's death. The bar

where Hazel is rejected by her blind date has an "azure entrance" (2.397), indicating another moment, like the waxwing's, when hope has been thwarted. Thus, Shade's desire for immortality is thwarted by Hazel's resemblance to himself and to his associations between his own body and death.

Several aspects of the text support my analysis that Hazel's appearance reminds her father of his mortality: Hazel's name; her resemblance to the Russian *rusalka;* her similarity to a death mask known as *L'inconnue de la Seine*; her father's own guilty conscience; and her association with the term "grimpen" (2.368). Mary McCarthy identifies the name Hazel Shade as an allusion to a line in Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* (1883): "in lone Glenartney's hazel shade" (qtd. in McCarthy 94).[7] Nabokov's Hazel drowns in a lake, which seems to associate her with Scott's title character. Scott's lady, Ellen Douglas, however, bears little resemblance to Hazel. Ellen is beautiful and manages to get the husband she wants through her own actions. Hazel is ugly and fails to find a companion. I suggest that Nabokov is alluding not to Ellen but to the actual "hazel shade" in Scott's poem, a place of danger for the Huntsman: "Blithe were it then to wander here! [. . .] hosts may in these wilds abound, Such as are better missed than found" (1.16). Scott's Huntsman fears the "hazel shade" of the forest, just as John Shade fears his daughter, a fact Kinbote confirms: "[the Shades] were afraid of Hazel" (166).

Hazel's resemblance to a character popular in Russian literature and the wider *fin de siècle* culture, the *rusalka*,[8] enhances my interpretation. Similar to Ophelia, the *rusalka* is a beautiful young woman who drowns herself following a lover's rejection. The Russian version, however, takes the story a step further. From her watery grave, the maiden seeks revenge on her betrayer by seducing him to join her in death. Unlike

Ophelia, who is always obedient and well behaved, Hazel, like the *rusalka*, acts vengefully toward the people who have harmed her, her parents. Galef comments that "Hazel grows stunted from nurturing parents" (423), but I disagree with his characterization of the Shades as "nurturing." Both of Hazel's parents perceive her as unattractive, and, while growing up, Hazel would have overheard or sensed their critical comments. I argue that, rather than nurturing her, the Shades contribute to their daughter's dismal self-image, and the young woman ends up hating both of them. During the "poltergeist" episode (165), Hazel throws household objects dangerously near each of her parents, and particularly targets her father's writing, throwing his revered table, "upon which he kept a Bible-like Webster" (166), out onto the snow.[9] Shade also records in his poem that "She'd criticize / Ferociously our projects" (2.351-52), and, at least in Kinbote's rendition of events, the barn incident ends with Hazel shouting at her mother, "Why must you *spoil* everything" (192). While Hazel's social alienation would have been ample cause for her sorrow and anger, the young woman's parents only add to her grief by frequently criticizing her. The "poltergeist" episode is clearly a violent act of revenge, similar to Dorian Gray's attack on Basil.[10]

Another piece of evidence that points to Shade's perception of his daughter as a symbol of death appears in Hazel's resemblance to *l'inconnue de la Seine.*[11] The phrase refers to a popular item in nineteenth-century European culture and art: a death mask made from the image of an unknown woman found drowned in the Paris river. D. Barton Johnson notes that in Nabokov's earlier poem "*L'Inconnue de la Seine*" (1934), the narrator ponders "the secret of a tragic, mysterious female image," and Johnson comments that "It does not seem inconceivable that the woman is Death" (232).[12] I

contend that Shade's poem is also about a narrator pondering a "tragic, mysterious female image," who also represents death. In *Pale Fire*, however, Nabokov inverts the image of *l'inconnue* from a beautiful face to an unbeautiful one. Based on Bronfen's analysis of the artistic portrayal of feminine corpses, a beautiful dead woman would serve to affirm the male spectator's immortality (65); in contrast, Hazel's ugly body, in her life and death, only makes Shade more aware of his mortality.[13]

Further, Hazel's relation to the ill-fated woman of Nabokov's earlier poem, "L'inconnue de la Seine," implicates Shade as his daughter's betrayer. In the earlier poem, the narrator associates himself with the dead woman's seducer: "Was he [. . .] the same sort of accursed man of pleasure / and bankrupt dreamer as I" (qtd. in Johnson 227). By making Shade the narrator of his poem, Nabokov implies that Shade is also an "accursed man," guilty of fostering Hazel's self-hatred through his criticism.

Shade begins to realize his part in Hazel's tragic life as he develops his poem. He includes a minor incident concerning his daughter's query into the meaning of "grimpen." While studying, Hazel calls out for help: "Mother, what's *grimpen*?" (2.368). Hazel is referring to lines in the "East Coker" section of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1940), in which the narrator is standing on a dangerous precipice: "On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold, / And menaced by monsters, fancy lights" (2.41-42). Hazel pronounces the term "Grim Pen" (2.368), which leads Galef to conclude that Hazel views "the four walls of her room" as a grim pen (422). Shade, however, working in the room next door, is the one at the precipice, "menaced" by his monstrous daughter and the "fancy lights" she sees in the barn. His choice to retell this incident suggests his awareness of the moment's significance. Eliot's next few lines—"Do not let me hear / Of

the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, / Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession" (2.43-45)—further apply to Nabokov's old poet, whose fears have led him to see Hazel as a reminder of the monster that will possess him, death. Additionally, as Boyd points out, the term "grimpen" originally comes from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902): Grimpen Mire is the hamlet where "Holmes's adversary sinks into the mire and drowns" (*Nabokov's* 193). Doyle's forbidding hamlet is both a site of danger and investigation, similar to Shade's poetic exploration of his relationship with his daughter and of death itself.

Other aspects of Shade's text also point toward the poet's increasing awareness of his own role in the formation of Hazel's self-image. Shade hints that he fears meeting Hazel in an afterlife: "For as we know from dreams it is so hard / To speak to our dear dead! They disregard / Our apprehension, queaziness and shame" (3.589-91). The feelings of "apprehension, queaziness and shame" could indicate that Shade knows he has mistreated Hazel, an idea supported by his earlier draft: "Should the dead murderer try to embrace / His outraged victim whom he now must face?" (231). If Shade has contributed to his daughter's suicide, then he is her "murderer."

Finally, Shade realizes that his greatest insight comes from the thing he finds most beautiful, the act of composition. Shade discusses beauty directly in the beginning of his poem's final canto: "Now I shall spy on beauty as none has / Spied on it yet" (4.835-36). He follows these lines with a comparison of "Two methods of composing" (4.841), which indicates that writing poetry is the beauty he has "[s]pied on."[14] The beauty of composition is vital to Shade because it is the only way he can "understand / Existence, or at least a minute part," that is, "In terms of combinational delight" (4.970-73). The

“combinational delight” of the verse leads him to see existence also as “fantastically planned, / Richly rhymed” (4.969-70). As Page Stegner notes, for Shade, “life only has meaning when it is translated into intricate combinations and patterns” (123-24). The pattern in his poem, however, proves false. Shade asserts that “if my private universe scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine,” and “I am reasonably sure that I / Shall wake at six tomorrow” (4.978-80). Accidentally murdered, Shade does not wake the next morning, and his “private universe,” his poem, fails to scan because it remains unfinished. Writing the poem has not given him metaphysical insight, but it has made him understand his injurious feelings for his daughter, an understanding that, tragically, comes only after her death.

All of these artists, then, Wilde’s Basil and Sibyl and Nabokov’s Shade, transform the objects of their gaze into aesthetical ideas. Basil views Dorian’s beauty as the visible representation of a Platonic ideal, the “harmony of soul and body” (14), which transforms his art. Sibyl sees Dorian as a fairy-tale prince who can rescue her from a dismal existence, but his unexpected rejection destroys her. Shade perceives his daughter as a reminder of death, which reinforces his own fears and need for existential meaning, but he realizes his cruelty too late. Because they are blinded by their aesthetical ideas, these artists fail to perceive the complex natures of their loved ones. As Kinbote points out, “‘reality’ is neither the subject nor the object of true art”; rather, the artist “creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye” (130). The new creation has “nothing to do” with reality, a lesson both Wilde’s and Nabokov’s artists fail to learn.

The substitution of aesthetical ideas for reality proves harmful for the artists. Basil and Sibyl lose both their artistic ability and their lives because of their adoration, and Shade not only adds to his own neurotic obsession with death but also loses what should be a loving and fulfilling relationship with his daughter. The artists also hurt those they aestheticize: Dorian pursues a life of reckless self-indulgence, and Hazel suffers from alienation and despair.

The novels' other main characters—*Dorian Gray's* Lord Henry and *Pale Fire's* Kinbote—have a different interaction with beauty, but one that is equally destructive. Neither beautiful themselves nor able to create beauty, Lord Henry and Kinbote derive pleasure from being "spectators," from looking at and manipulating the beauty of others. Like the artists, these "spectators" of beauty rely on aesthetic experience to provide transcendence, but this goal, as it does for the artists, remains ultimately elusive.

The Spectators: Manipulators of Beauty

Wilde's Lord Henry and Nabokov's Kinbote do not simply derive pleasure from seeing beauty; they seek to transform and control the objects of their gaze. Mulvey's analysis of film spectatorship is helpful in understanding these characters' behavior. Mulvey argues that the "determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly," and that the woman then "holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (436). The male spectator derives scopophilic pleasure (erotic pleasure from looking) from gazing at the woman, but he may also become a voyeur, "ascertaining guilt, [. . .] asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (438). Both Wilde and Nabokov illustrate this

concept of voyeuristic spectatorship in the characters Lord Henry and Kinbote, with Dorian and John Shade as the respective Ophelia-like objects of their gaze.

Wilde identifies Lord Henry as a "spectator," but *Dorian Gray's* author intends the term differently from Mulvey. Wilde's meaning is that one can, in Lord Henry's words, "escape the suffering of life" (87) by maintaining an emotional distance from people and events. Lord Henry plays this spectator role by remaining aloof from his family and friends, and by turning every experience into an aesthetic one. Yet, while watching the drama, he is also a "spectator" in Mulvey's sense of the word. He derives pleasure from using others as aesthetic objects and subjecting them to his "controlling" gaze (Mulvey 434). For Wilde's spectator, the primary object of the gaze is the beautiful Dorian Gray.

Lord Henry gets his first view of Dorian from the portrait, which, like Mulvey's female screen star, is displayed as a spectacle. Upon seeing the painting, Lord Henry describes Dorian as an object suited for aesthetic contemplation: "He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at" (9). When he meets Dorian himself, the elder man finds that this young beauty is easily manipulated, and he begins to enjoy watching and controlling Dorian's passions. Similar to the way Mulvey's spectator can become sadistic, "forcing a change in another person" (438) and seeing the relationship as "a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat," Lord Henry decides "to dominate" Dorian (34), to "make that wonderful spirit his own." Throughout the novel, Lord Henry tries to manipulate Dorian's actions and feelings. He tells Dorian to quit his charity work and sends him the "yellow book" (97) to arouse his passions. When Dorian misbehaves, such as treating Sibyl cruelly, Lord Henry responds

like Mulvey's sadist, ascertaining guilt but then offering absolution. Wilde's sadist tells Dorian, "I am afraid that women appreciate cruelty, downright cruelty, more than anything else. [. . .] I'm sure you were splendid" (81).

Lord Henry's spectatorship brings him moments of pleasure, but fails to provide lasting happiness. As Joyce Carol Oates points out, "[t]o become a spectator [in Wilde's use of the term . . .] not only fails to save one from suffering—it makes suffering inevitable" (424). Lord Henry loses his wife, and he casts off friends, such as Basil, when they begin to bore him. His existence becomes "progressively empty and sterile" (Lawler "Keys" 441), and he admits his suffering to Dorian: "I have sorrows, [. . .] that even you know nothing of" (165). Near the end of the novel, Lord Henry reveals his sad awareness that "[a]ll ways end at the same point, [. . .] [d]isillusion" (157). Through the character of the spectator, Wilde demonstrates how watching and manipulating beauty produces only a momentary benefit, and, further, that spectatorship can lead to sadism, to cruelly using others for one's selfish benefit. Nabokov illustrates a similar concept through his spectator, Charles Kinbote.

Pale Fire's Kinbote becomes a spectator of the object of his affection, John Shade. The poet is not physically beautiful, but Kinbote considers Shade's "misshapen body" a "mask" of the man's poetic ability (26, 25), and Kinbote finds Shade's poetry beautiful: "Shade could not write otherwise than beautifully" (296). The lonely exile falls in love with his idol, describing himself as a "wary lover" (287), and wondering, "Would [a white-scarfed beau] ever come for me?" as he waits "for old John Shade" (184). Kinbote then behaves similar to the voyeur that Mulvey describes, whose scopophilia becomes perverse and obsessive, a "Peeping Tom" (Mulvey 434). Kinbote admits to "an

orgy of spying" on Shade (87), but not simply, as with Mulvey's Peeping Tom, for sexual pleasure. Kinbote wants to manipulate the poet into writing about the exile's own (imagined) life, so he spends most of their time together feeding Shade stories about Zembla. Like Wilde's Lord Henry, Kinbote tries to manipulate the object of his gaze by condemning and then forgiving, even indulging, the poet's vices. He compares Shade to "a fleshy Hogarthian tippler" (26), but then offers him a glass of wine, which has the added effect of allowing Kinbote to finally touch the venerated poem.[15] Unlike Lord Henry's power over Dorian, however, Kinbote is unsuccessful in controlling Shade. The poem turns out not to be about Zembla at all, although Kinbote convinces himself otherwise: "as many as thirteen verses [. . .] bear the specific imprint of my theme" (81-82). Spectatorship, Nabokov suggests, can be deluding, producing a false sense of power.

This feeling of power derives from the male spectator's ego-identification with another male. However, as Drukman suggests, for the homosexual spectator, the "subject of ego-identification is [. . .] in constant flux between the woman and the man" (84-85). In addition to objectifying Shade, Kinbote identifies with the poet and also the object of the poet's attention, Hazel. By having his lonely exile identify with Shade, Nabokov stresses the spectator's cruelty; both Kinbote and Shade betray the objects of their gaze. By having Kinbote empathize with Hazel, Nabokov emphasizes the suffering that the object of the gaze undergoes; both Kinbote and Hazel are desperately unhappy.

Kinbote identifies with Shade as an artist. Although he humbly claims, "I do not consider myself a true artist" (289), he adds that he does have the true artist's ability to "see the web of the world," a reference clearly inspired by Shade's poetic insight into "a web of sense" (3.810). Kinbote understands at least his part in the phenomenal web; he

knows he needs Shade's poem to make his fantasy come true. He thus manipulates not only the poem but also Shade's family into his Zemblan creation. As Galef points out, the exile "consistently warps everything around him into reflections of himself, his own type of art" (428).[16] Through Kinbote's character, Nabokov points out how all art is part of a larger web, an imitation or reflection of another artist's vision.

As the holder of a gay gaze, Kinbote identifies with both Shade and the objects of Shade's attention, creating Zemblan replicas of the people in Shade's life and empathizing with their suffering. He recasts Hazel as the "Ophelia-like" Fleur de Fyler (Maddox 24), another rejected maiden, and demonstrates a recognition of Fleur's pain, describing her as a figure "of ineffable grief" (214). He transforms Sybil into Disa,[17] a woman he is forced to marry. Because he is jealous of Shade's love for Sybil, Kinbote takes revenge by imagining himself spurning his lovelorn wife, but he again acknowledges the woman's despair: "he was, had always been, casual and heartless [to her]" (209). Kinbote also directly associates himself with the lonely and alienated Hazel: he states that "Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects" (193); compares her hope for love to his own, asking "Would [a white-scarfed beau] ever come for me?" (184); and respects what he considers her intentional act of suicide (312).[18] In his identification with the objects of the gaze, Kinbote equates beauty with suffering; none of these characters benefit from their roles as aesthetic objects.

Through their "spectators," then, Wilde and Nabokov demonstrate another way in which beauty can be abused. Lord Henry and Kinbote manipulate the beauty of others in an attempt to fulfill their own needs. Lord Henry enjoys not only looking at Dorian but also influencing the beautiful young man's behavior. Kinbote derives pleasure just from

seeing Shade—"I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at him" (27)—and from appropriating Shade's life and art into his own. He harms Shade, though, by ignoring the poet's grief and by managing to work his own story into the published poem through his commentary. Further, as a gay spectator, Kinbote identifies with both Shade and the object of the poet's gaze, Hazel, reinforcing Nabokov's portrayal of each side of the spectator-object relationship.

I find Nabokov's spectator a more tragic figure than Lord Henry, and suggest that, through Kinbote, Nabokov provides a harsher critique of excessive aestheticism. Wilde mentions Lord Henry's suffering, but he portrays the aesthete as cold-hearted, undeserving of sympathy. In contrast, Nabokov paints a heart-wrenching portrayal of Kinbote as a lonely, ridiculed homosexual taunted by a homophobic society. While these characters provide a critique of aestheticism, it is those who function as objects of the gaze, Dorian and Hazel, that most draw our attention and sympathy.

The Objects: Bearing the Burden of Beauty

Like the beauty of the heartbroken Ophelia that captivated *fin de siècle* culture, the despair of Dorian Gray and Hazel Shade highlights the cost to those cast as aesthetic objects. Wilde explores these tragic consequences in his portrayal of the extraordinarily beautiful Dorian, whose own devotion to beauty, formed by the betrayal of those he loves, results in the corruption of his soul and ultimate death. Nabokov offers a mirror image of Dorian's plight in the story of Hazel Shade, a young, fragile woman whose physical ugliness leads to both her father's betrayal and her own fatal self-image. By juxtaposing the two characters, we see that beauty itself is not to blame; both the

beautiful and unbeautiful suffer. It is the objectification of others that makes beauty become a burden and that causes grief.

I have argued that, in Wilde's novel, both Basil and Lord Henry betray Dorian by treating him as an aesthetic object rather than as a human being. This betrayal sets up a chain of events; Dorian begins to think of himself as an object and then treats others in the same manner. Because Dorian gets his wish to change places with the portrait, a literal aesthetic object, he comes to think of his soul as a separate entity from his body. Much of the time, Dorian delights at the way the painting degrades while his body remains beautiful, even asking himself, "What did it matter? [. . .] Why should he watch the hideous corruption of his soul?" (95). At times, though, this "visible emblem of conscience" (74) torments him. He makes brief vows of repentance, but each time only turns to another aesthetic or sensuous experience to assuage his guilt, as Lord Henry has taught him, "to cure the soul by means of the senses" (22). These experiences, though, include other people, and, when they fail to serve his aesthetic needs, he treats them heartlessly. He rejects Sibyl when she loses her ability to act. He murders Basil when the artist tries to reform him. We never learn the details of his other relationships, but Basil accuses him of filling others "with a madness for pleasure" (118) and being a "fatal" influence (117), and his acquaintances begin to shun him. Wilde's portrayal of Dorian's cruelty provides a critique of Decadent hedonism, of the ways in which that era's aesthetes changed their focus from a desire for aesthetic experience toward a self-indulgent and abusive love of any form of pleasure.

Dorian's demise cannot solely be blamed on Basil and Lord Henry, but their influence leads him into a Decadent obsession with beauty that proves corrupting. Some

critics view Dorian initially as a blank slate: he is "neutral at the beginning of the novel, [. . .] at the threshold of life" (Bonaparte 238); "not yet in possession of an identity—he is empty of and available for one" (Jaffe 304); "an absolute innocent" (Oates 426). I agree that Dorian is initially naïve and impressionable, but I concur with Sarah Kofman's assessment that Basil's and Lord Henry's influence only "makes [Dorian] become aware of what he himself unwittingly already is, [and] of what he really can become" (28). Dorian knows before he meets his two mentors that he is beautiful: "he knew what he had got from [his mother]. He had got from her his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others" (112). He also senses that he has acquired some characteristics from his ancestors. As Liz Constable et al. note, Dorian surveys his family portraits in a manner similar to the hero of Huysmans's *À Rebours*,[19] trying to discern their influence. I suggest that Dorian has inherited a capacity for both good and evil, and that he responds too easily to others' influence.

Dorian can be good; he has been led by Lord Henry's aunt to "help her in the East End" (16). Yet the aunt does not show concern for Dorian's beauty; Lord Henry comments that she "never told me he was good-looking" (16). It is those who objectify Dorian because of his beauty that corrupt him. As a child, Dorian's grandfather mistreats him because the lad bears a "strange likeness to his mother" (95). When he is older, Basil, Sibyl, Lord Henry, and most of Dorian's other acquaintances treat him as an aesthetic object. This objectification influences him to become evil.

Dorian's own sense of beauty becomes perverse. Like the Decadents, he finds beauty in evil, feeling "moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (115). He finds Sibyl in the seedier

section of London where “an exquisite poison” fills the air (42). He begins to find beauty only in “fresh shapes and colours” (102), in which “the past would have little or no place.” Beauty becomes a refuge from reality, which is ugly: “how horribly real ugliness made things!” (97). Dorian’s response to objectification, then, is to lose touch with the unpleasant aspects of reality and to cause harm to those around him.

Pale Fire’s Hazel Shade reacts in a similar way, beginning her retreat from the ugly side of life at an early age. Shade describes her as a “shy little guest” left out of children’s Christmas games (2.308). As a college student, she withdraws further: “Mostly alone she’d be” (2.341). Eventually, she sits alone in her room, “with eyes / Expressionless” and “murmuring dreadful words in monotone” (2.352-53, 356). Because the real world is so painful, Hazel creates “a world of her own” (Galef 423). She develops what Shade considers “strange fears, strange fantasies” (2.344), and she pursues an interest in the paranormal, such as investigating the light in the barn. Also like Wilde’s Dorian, Hazel brings pain to those around her. She attacks her parents both emotionally—“She’d criticize / Ferociously our projects” (2.351-52)—and physically (in the “poltergeist” episode).

Hazel’s problems stem directly from her lack of beauty,[20] a quality expected of her as a woman. This expectation was characteristic of some Decadents. For example, in “Adam’s Curse” (1903), Yeats suggests, “To be born woman is to know— / [. . .] / That we must labour to be beautiful” (2.18-20), and Donoghue adds that “Women in [. . . the narrator’s high] social class were not expected to do much more.” That sensibility remained well into the twentieth century. In 1975 Susan Sontag argues, “To be called beautiful is thought to name something essential to women’s character and concerns. (In

contrast to men—whose essence is to be strong, or effective, or competent)" (118). Nabokov depicts this view at the mid-twentieth century in *Pale Fire*. Although Sybil Shade argues, ""Good looks / Are not *that* indispensable" (2.324-25), John Shade, and most of Hazel's other acquaintances, indicate otherwise.

Although the poet's perception of his daughter is certainly distorted because of his own fears and his sense that she resembles him, nothing in the text indicates that Hazel looks other than how Shade describes. Kinbote is hardly a reliable narrator, but he calls Shade's portrayal "quite clear and complete" (164), and the blind date's hasty retreat confirms Hazel's extreme unsightliness: "He took one look at her," and "suddenly Pete Dean / Clutching his brow exclaimed that he had clean / Forgotten an appointment" (2.406, 391-33). The Shades are not the only ones who reject Hazel because she is ugly, but their criticism of her, particularly John Shade's "prejudice" (2.320), ensures the young woman's neurosis. Because women are often expected to be the beautiful objects of the male gaze, Hazel is shunned as an ugly object. Lacking love and nurture, Hazel has little chance of developing into a normal, emotionally healthy, adult.

As both *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* illustrate, the preoccupation with beauty that leads to objectification has a devastating effect on the victims. Dorian and Hazel each withdraw into a perverse world void of compassion; they suffer from the cruelty of others, and they in turn treat others with a similar cold-heartedness. Whether the victim is beautiful or unbeautiful, the desires of those who worship beauty—Basil's artistic needs, Shade's existential quest, Lord Henry's aesthetic detachment, and Kinbote's fantasy fulfillment—all place an unbearable burden on the objects of their attention. Like

Ophelia's madness, Dorian's and Hazel's plights provide a harsh critique of aesthetic obsession.

Conclusion

A comparison of *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* clarifies the role of beauty in each. Similar to the way Shakespeare's Ophelia succumbs to madness and despair from the betrayal of those around her, Wilde's Dorian Gray and Nabokov's Hazel Shade suffer from being treated as aesthetic objects. In Shakespeare's text, Hamlet blames beauty itself for causing this betrayal: "[t]he power of beauty will [. . .] transform honesty from what it is to a bawd" (3.1.112-13). Hamlet's words reflect an aesthetic sensibility held in the seventeenth century that beauty was a property of the object. Beauty was something Ophelia possessed, and it could be blamed for its effects. In the post-Kantian era of the late-nineteenth- and mid-twentieth centuries, scholars and artists generally have thought of beauty as subjective. Wilde and Nabokov thus create situations in which those who bear the gaze, the novels' artists and spectators, are responsible for the betrayal.

Further, the two authors' adoption of Kant's notion of dependent beauty illustrates the way that the observer's judgment becomes distorted. Kant argues that the judgment of human beauty is dependent on a prior concept of the object's purpose. The characters in these novels approach Dorian and Hazel with preconceived ideas of the purpose that each of them should serve. Basil and Sibyl worship Dorian because he provides either a "motive in art" (15) or a fairy-tale hero. Shade expects his daughter to be a beautiful muse like her mother, and thus transforms her ugliness into a sign of mortality. Lord Henry finds in Dorian an emblem for his "new Hedonism" (23), and Kinbote sees in Shade a way to make his fantasy come true. These dependent judgments of beauty make

it difficult for the viewers to see behind their objects' purposes to their objects' humanity, to extend their gaze beyond beauty. As Rorty points out in his discussion of *Pale Fire*, Nabokov knew that the individual's pursuit of "aesthetic bliss" (qtd. in Rorty 198) could lead to cruelty through inattention to others' needs. Rorty suggests that Kinbote's behavior illustrates this concern, but I find that all of Wilde's and Nabokov's main characters let their private pursuit of beauty blind them to others' suffering.

Pale Fire differs from *Dorian Gray* in that it calls more attention to the effects of aesthetic objectification on the victim by focusing on the ugly rather than the beautiful, and by making Hazel's suffering more apparent. Both Dorian and Hazel are young and impressionable, and both resort to violence; Dorian becomes a cold-hearted killer, and Hazel attacks her parents. Yet I feel that Hazel is the more sympathetic character because her despair evokes her parents' grief, and thus the readers' own compassion. In contrast, while Dorian arouses Basil's concern, his final act of destroying the portrait only confirms his vanity; he wants to erase the ugly past and continue being beautiful. The difference points to the authors' diverging aesthetics. Wilde revised Arnold and Pater by contending that the critic should "see the object as in itself it really is not" ("Critic" 1128), an approach that allows viewers to transform their subjects to serve their own ends. As Andrews notes, Nabokov critiques this Wildean view in Kinbote's callous appropriation of Shade's poem, having the exile transform pieces of the text into aspects of his own life (46). In contrast to Wilde, Nabokov resurrects the Kantian view that observers should come as close to an understanding of objects as they can. One's perception of reality may be inexact, but self-indulgent relativism can lead to a failure to perceive "specificity, uniqueness, and, in the end, pity" (Andrews 41). By highlighting

Hazel's suffering and death, Nabokov honors her humanity and reminds us of that the judgment of beauty is tied to the viewer's individual, and fallible, aesthetic sensibility.

As my second chapter shows, beauty itself in these novels remains a worthy value. Following in the tradition of the Decadents and Symbolists, *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* demonstrate that beauty can provide at least a temporary transcendence from the limits of mortal life and the pain of daily existence. By exploring the theme of transcendence in the two novels, I hope to define more clearly the balance between the advantages and disadvantages to aesthetic experience that *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* articulate.

Chapter Two

Transcendence: The Rewards of Experiencing Beauty

Like the Decadents and Symbolists, the characters in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* find beauty to be a powerful and transformative force. For the artists—Basil Hallward, Sibyl Vane, and John Shade—this power means that earthly beauty can provide insight into the noumenal world. They seek artistic inspiration and find their art transformed by their experiences with beauty. For the spectators—Lord Henry and Charles Kinbote—beauty serves as a way to transcend the pain of daily existence. By watching and manipulating beauty, they achieve temporary relief from life's sorrows. For those treated as objects—Dorian Gray and Hazel Shade—the expectations of beauty drive them to a frustrating search for any form of transcendence. They become overwhelmed by despair and find their only escape in death. While both novels illustrate beauty's power to provide transcendence, *Pale Fire* also portrays the tragedy that occurs when beauty is found lacking.

The Artists: Idealists

In both *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* the artists—Basil, Sibyl, and Shade—see earthly beauty as a reflection of a metaphysical ideal. The transcendence they feel in this momentary vision inspires them, and they use their art as a means of communicating their insights to the outside world. Each artist's transcendent experience differs significantly. Basil achieves a potential glimpse of the Platonic ideal, and he expresses this vision in Dorian's portrait. Because he has created an aesthetical idea of Dorian, however, he loses touch with his friend's humanity. Sibyl believes she has had a transcendent vision, but her imagination proves incapable of real insight; she can only perceive Dorian as a fairy-

tale prince, and, instead of receiving artistic inspiration, she loses her ability to act. Shade recognizes the ideal in his wife's beauty and becomes inspired by her. He also sees the beauty of composition as a way to gain even greater insight, as well as a means of communicating his metaphysical understanding. Yet the beauty he perceives in Sybil and in composition only reinforces the association he makes between Hazel's ugliness and death.

Both Wilde and Nabokov evoke the Platonic ideal in the portrayals of their artists' transcendent visions. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates describes an immortal world where human souls, by following in the path of the gods, can get a glimpse of what "truly is—without colour, without form, intangible, visible to reason alone" (123). He theorizes that those souls who have "seen most will enter into a seed from which will come a man who is destined to be a lover of wisdom or lover of beauty" (125). When these men see beauty in the material world, they are "reminded of true beauty" (127) and experience a strong reaction: "they [. . .] are dumbfounded; they are no longer masters of themselves" (128). The vision of beauty then leads to love: "Besides the awe [the lover's soul] feels before the possessor of beauty, it has also found the sole healer of its great suffering. This is the feeling, [. . .] which men call 'love'" (131). Following Plato's model, Wilde and Nabokov portray that emotional moment each artist experiences when encountering the beautiful. Yet these visions of beauty do not always lead to love. Basil's idolatry, Sibyl's imagination, and Shade's prejudice all distort the artists' ability to find true transcendence.

In characterizing Basil's first meeting with Dorian, Wilde invokes this moment of Platonic vision. Basil reacts physically and emotionally to his first sight of the beautiful

Dorian Gray: “I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. [. . .] I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself” (11). The artist then begins to worship Dorian, and, like the Platonic lover, gets relief from pain by being with his beloved: “I was only happy when I was with you” (89). Because the artist has created an aesthetical idea of Dorian, however, he fails to experience true Platonic love, instead achieving only a “curious artistic idolatry” (15). He worships his aesthetical idea rather than loving a fellow human being.

Wilde reveals less about Sibyl’s first response to Dorian, but the young actress seems equally moved. She grows “shy,” her “eyes opened wide in exquisite wonder” (46), and she later exclaims repeatedly to her family how happy she is (51). She then describes her feelings in Platonic terms: “I love him because he is like what Love himself should be” (52). Sibyl’s imagination, however, proves unworthy of obtaining real transcendent insight. Instead of perceiving Platonic beauty, she sees only a fairy-tale image. The mistake is tragic. Sibyl loses her artistic ability, leaving her with “no medium in which to express” her emotions (Varty 116), and she kills herself in despair.

Pale Fire’s artist, John Shade, does receive a transcendent vision, not through the flawed Hazel but through the beautiful Sybil. As it did for Wilde’s artists, Shade’s transcendent moment overwhelms him emotionally: “How could you, in the gloam of Lilac Lane, / Have let uncouth, hysterical John Shade / Blubber your face, and ear, and shoulder blade?” (2.272-75). Of the novels’ three artists, Shade comes closest to experiencing Platonic love. He makes his adoration evident in the poem’s blazon to Sybil’s beauty and in its tender praise of her most trivial gestures. Like Wilde’s artists,

though, Shade ultimately proves incapable of this idealized love. He betrays Sybil by having an affair with one of his students,[1] and his perception of beauty in his wife only enhances the ugliness he sees in his daughter.

For Basil and Shade, this transcendent vision of beauty proves valuable in that it inspires their work. Kofman relates Basil's experience to the one Plato describes in the *Symposium* (27). In this work Socrates teaches those desiring happiness to begin by seeking beauty in one human being, which then leads the seeker to perceive beauty in all forms. Wilde grants Basil this inspiration. As Lord Henry comments, the painter finds that "the mere shapes and patterns of things" seem as if "they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real" (34). Basil similarly describes the feeling as a "subtle influence" that "passed from him to me," enabling the artist to see "in the plain woodland the wonder [he] had always looked for, and always missed" (14). This inspiration is significant, but temporary. The artist produces masterpieces under Dorian's influence, but, as Lord Henry comments, when Dorian and Basil "ceased to be great friends, [the latter] ceased to be a great artist" (163). Basil takes comfort in his other paintings of Dorian: "When you were away from me you were still present in my art" (89). Yet the artist's loss of ability shows that he needs the real Dorian to provide inspiration. His transformation of Dorian into an aesthetical idea alienates the two from each other, and the artist's work suffers for it.

Sibyl Vane believes that Dorian's beauty inspires her: "He is going to be [at the theater] and [. . .] Oh! how I shall play [Juliet]! [. . .] I am afraid I may frighten the company, frighten or enthrall them" (56). What she finds, however, is that she can no longer act. Rather than being inspired by a true transcendent vision, Sibyl comes to see

the drama of the theater as “nothing but shadows” (69). She thinks Dorian has revealed “something higher” to her, “something of which all art is but a reflection” (70), but Sibyl can only imagine a fairy-tale beauty, not the Platonic ideal. Like Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott” to whom she alludes, Sibyl can only perceive the world as a distortion.[2] When Tennyson’s Lady tries to break through her distorted vision to see the beautiful Lancelot directly, the process destroys her; Bronfen calls it “the absolute cancellation of her existence” (167). Sibyl suffers a similar fate. When her Prince Charming rejects her, Sibyl is left with neither the theater nor the fairy tale to protect her, and she literally cancels her existence by killing herself.

Pale Fire’s artist, John Shade, does obtain inspiration from a vision of beauty, his wife Sybil. Shade acknowledges his wife’s influence in his poem: “And all the time, and all the time, my love, / You too are there, beneath the word, above / The syllable” (4.949-51). In addition to Platonic inspiration, his feelings echo those of the Russian Symbolists, who saw the beauty of women as a manifestation of what Vladimir Solovyov calls the Eternal Feminine soul, or Sophia. This divine feminine presence appeared as a prominent motif in Russian Symbolist poetry, with the poets depicting the earthly love between a man and woman as a reflection of a union with this spirit. Alexander Blok thought of his wife as a form of Sophia, and in a series of poems to her, called “Poems on the Lady Beautiful” (1905), he describes her influence:

> Enraptured by a mystery great,
> Triumphantly I stand
> And know full well that not by chance
> Are prophecies at hand. (qtd. in Maslenikov 158)

This feminine presence enables the poet to receive "prophecies," moments of transcendental insight, that Nabokov recaptures in the inspiration Shade receives from his wife.

Shade's verse, however, indicates that he has another muse in addition to Sybil. Shade precedes the words "You too are there" with these: "that odd muse of mine, / My versipel, is with me everywhere, / In carrel and in car, and in my chair" (4.946-48). A "versipel" is a "creature capable of changing from one form to another" (Nabokov *Novels* 893 n483.29), which points to Hazel. Unlike Sybil, whom Shade believes remains constant and loving throughout his life, Hazel's nature constantly changes. The poet associates her with the white butterflies that "turn lavender as they / Pass through" the shade of a tree (1.55-56). She evolves from the young girl who plays "Mah-jongg" with her parents (2.360) and asks for help with homework, into one who is "difficult, morose" (2.357). And she eventually dies, changing from matter to spirit. Although Shade realizes that he has a second muse, I suggest that he is unable to identify it as Hazel because of her lack of beauty. However, the text itself reveals that the sources of inspiration are more inclusive; both beauty and ugliness inspire the artist.[3]

Although Nabokov portrays Shade's perception of his wife's beauty as both a Platonic vision and a reflection of Solovyov's eternal feminine, *Pale Fire's* author also gives his poet a metaphysical sensibility similar to his own. Nabokov believes in what he terms "cosmic synchronization," the concept that one is somehow connected at any moment to other seemingly random events: "a car [. . .] passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door [. . .], an old man yawns" (*Speak Memory* 218). Somehow these

events are linked, and the best one can do is try to understand “one’s position in regard to the universe” and to express this insight in poetry (218).

Nabokov grants this sense of synchronization to *Pale Fire’s* poet, John Shade. As J. B. Sisson notes, Shade’s description of a childhood blackout depicts a moment of synchronization when “the mind not only sees everything in the universe but expands physically through all space and time” (158). This passage appears at the end of Canto One:

> I felt distributed through space and time:
> One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
> Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
> One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
> In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.
> There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green
> Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,
> An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,
> And all tomorrows in my funnybone. (1.148-56)

Sisson points out that “Nabokov's primary device of cosmic synchronization [. . .] is the catalogue of remote activity” (158). Nabokov illustrates this device in Shade’s poem, such as when the poet mentions his birthday in relation to other, seemingly random, events: “Today I’m sixty-one. Waxwings are berry-pecking. A cicada sings” (2.181-82). The two passages reveal an evolution in Shade’s existential understanding. While his childhood episode felt exhilarating, it was also embarrassing: “The wonder lingers and the shame remains” (1.166). As an adult, Shade feels more comfortable trusting that

someone is coordinating “Events and objects with remote events / And vanished objects” (3.827-28). He believes that by understanding this “topsy-turvical coincidence” (3.809), he can find his place in the cosmic scheme and communicate that knowledge through his poetry. Shade is never certain about what he learns; he only has faith that a correspondence, or a synchronization, exists between his verse and the uni-verse: “if my private universe scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine” (4.974-75).

Shade also captures this sense of correspondence in his use of butterfly imagery. The poet connects the colorful Vanessa Atalanta butterfly to Sybil: “Come and be worshipped, come and be caressed, / My dark Vanessa” (2.269-70). He associates the Vanessa Atalanta’s beauty with his wife’s, and as Kinbote notes, the poet also links the butterfly’s name to the character Vanessa in Jonathan Swift’s *Cadenus and Vanessa* (1726). In Swift’s poem, Vanessa passionately loves the poet, just as Shade believes his wife loves him.

Shade connects the blander Toothwort White butterfly twice in his poem to Hazel. In the first canto, he comments that “White butterflies turn lavender as they / Pass through its [the tree’s] shade where gently seems to sway / The phantom of my little daughter’s swing” (1.55-57), and, in the second, interrupts a description of Hazel to add that “The Toothwort White haunted our woods in May” (2.316). As Boyd points out, the Toothwort resembles Hazel; the insect is “a dingy white, with a visible scaling, and shy—like the ‘difficult, morose’ Hazel, who has ‘psoriasis’” (*Nabokov’s* 136). In addition to resembling her physically, the butterfly behaves like her. It “haunted” the Shades’ woods (2.316) just as Hazel’s “poltergeist” antics haunt their home like “a domestic ghost” (2.230). Shade recognizes that, together, the dark and light butterflies demonstrate a

“correlated pattern” to existence (3.813). However, Shade’s existence is determined by his author, and Nabokov has created a larger pattern with the butterflies than he allows his character to discern.

Shade’s allusion to Swift’s poem reflects the similarities between the two love relationships, but Nabokov’s poet should have read more of Swift’s verse. In the following lines, Swift warns his poet that he has deceived himself about Vanessa:

> Thou hast, as thou shalt quickly see,
>
> Deceived thyself, [. . .] ;
>
> For how can heavenly wisdom prove
>
> An instrument to earthly love?
>
> [. . . . . .]
>
> Nor shall Vanessa be the theme
>
> To manage thy abortive scheme:
>
> She'll prove the greatest of thy foes. (292-300)

These lines would make Shade reconsider the “heavenly wisdom” he feels from his own Vanessa, Sybil, inspiring his “abortive scheme,” his unfinished poem. The greatest of Shade’s “foes” is death, which is what the Vanessa Atalanta actually foretells. Nabokov has the butterfly appear as a harbinger of death three times.[4] Its name is scrambled in the warning that Hazel receives in the barn from Aunt Maud, as Boyd explicates by capitalizing the applicable letters: “pada ATA LANe pad noT ogo old wArT ALAN Ther tAle feur fAr rAnT LANT tAl told” (*Nabokov’s* 133).[5] It flitters by just before Shade is killed (4.993-95),[6] and it appears near the assassin Gradus (202). Like Sybil, this butterfly is a metaphysical messenger, although Shade does not perceive its message.

As I have noted, Shade has also failed to detect the inspiration he receives from his versipel, the unbeautiful Hazel. I suggest that, in addition to having Hazel inspire her father's poetry, Nabokov presents the young woman and her correspondence, the Toothwort, as visible emblems of Shade's soul. Boyd connects Hazel's resemblance to the Toothwort and her trip to the barn to Browning's poem *Pippa Passes* (1843).[7] He notes that Browning's poem contains a reference to the Greek myth of Psyche, and that Webster's Second dictionary (Nabokov's favorite) glosses "Psyche" as "A lovely maiden, the personification of the soul, usually represented with the wings of a butterfly, emblematic of immortality" (qtd. in Boyd 142). Although Boyd uses the connection to Psyche to argue Hazel's post-death inspiration, I suggest that Hazel's appearance, while she is alive, has metaphysical meaning. The unattractive, "psoriatic" (2.355) young Hazel and the bland, scaly Toothwort are correspondences of Shade's soul, which is also ugly: he has cheated on his wife and been cruel to his daughter.

Additionally, Shade only appreciates the beauty of the Toothwort when it turns lavender in the shade. The color lavender represents memory,[8] and it is only through the poet's recollection of his daughter in his poem, her passage from the paleness of death to the lavender of his memory, that he fully appreciates her. Through the two butterfly allusions, Nabokov develops a more intricate "correlated pattern" (3.813) than he allows his poet to discern. Nabokov connects the Vanessa Atalanta to death and the Toothwort to the immortal soul, a concept directly opposite to Shade's. Shade perceives his wife as a tie to the immortal world and his daughter as a reminder of death.

Nabokov's depiction of the ugly Hazel and the ugly Toothwort as corresponding representatives of the soul is similar to Wilde's use of the degrading portrait. The hideous

figure in the painting has served as a symbol of Dorian's evil soul. Similarly, Hazel's hideous appearance has been a sign of Shade's evil soul. While both *Dorian Gray's* and *Pale Fire's* artists trust in beauty's ability to provide transcendence, Wilde and Nabokov demonstrate that ugliness too can be a source of transcendental insight. Dorian's portrait and Hazel's correspondence with the Toothwort butterfly also hold metaphysical meaning; as Dorian comments, "The soul is a *terrible* reality" (164 my emphasis).

Through the portrayals of all of the artists in these novels, Wilde and Nabokov demonstrate beauty's potential to offer transcendental insight. Basil perceives the Platonic ideal in Dorian's beauty, and that perception benefits his art. Because he forms an aesthetical idea of Dorian, however, Basil's inspiration is limited. His art declines as Dorian drifts from his life. His "idea" of Dorian also causes him to fatally misjudge the evil side of his idol's nature. Sibyl has escaped her unhappy life through the beauty of drama, but she rejects that life when she meets Dorian. Rather than recognizing the Platonic ideal, Sibyl imagines only a fairy-tale prince. Her art suffers, and her prince's unexpected rejection leads her to suicide. Shade receives inspiration from the beauty of his wife and his own poetry, but his obsession with beauty causes him to see the ugly Hazel as a constant reminder of his own mortality. While depicting beauty's transcendental potential, however, Wilde and Nabokov caution that the insight can be distorted or misunderstood. Beauty holds transcendental meaning, but not everyone is capable of fully recognizing that meaning.

The "spectators"—Lord Henry and Kinbote—have different expectations of beauty. Finding life to be full of misery, they turn to aesthetic experience to transcend their grief. The results are powerful but temporary. Lord Henry and Kinbote find their

greatest moments of happiness in aesthetic contemplation, but their despair quickly returns. Further, because they fail to empathize with the objects of their gaze, they treat others callously, not noticing the harm they cause.

The Spectators: Escapists

The characters I designate as "spectators"—Lord Henry and Kinbote—see aesthetic experience as a way to improve the quality of their daily lives. For them, transcendence does not mean gaining insight into a noumenal world but rather escaping the pain of their lived reality. Like the Decadents in general, Lord Henry and Kinbote seek escape from a Schopenhauerian cycle of constant striving and suffering through aesthetic contemplation. Schopenhauer teaches that everything is beautiful, but he argues that "one thing is more beautiful than another, because it makes this pure objective contemplation easier" (*World* §41), and "man is more beautiful than all other objects." Wilde and Nabokov both portray their spectators as having the ability to perceive and benefit from many forms of beauty, but they focus their characters' attention primarily on human beings. For Lord Henry, this person is Dorian Gray. For Kinbote, the main focus is John Shade; however, the unhappy exile also identifies with the Ophelia-like Hazel as an object of a spectator's gaze. Further, in his Zemblan fantasy, Kinbote personifies Schopenhauer's description of the madman, a figure who withdraws into a fantasy world, what Schopenhauer terms "the lethe of unendurable suffering" ("On Madness" 318), to forget his overwhelming despair.

While I relate Lord Henry's aesthetics to Schopenhauer's, many critics seem to regard this character as merely an inadequate spokesman for Pater's aesthetic theory.[9] Andrews comments that "Lord Henry takes Pater's influence farther than Pater is

comfortable with" (29), and Ellmann notes that "Lord Henry is forever quoting, or misquoting, [. . .] from Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*" (317). Certainly, Pater's influence appears throughout the text, as Bonaparte notes: "whole phrases from [Pater's *Studies*] make their way into *Dorian Gray*" (228). She points out that Dorian's lesson from Lord Henry—that the aim of New Hedonism "was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be" (*Dorian Gray* 101)—comes directly from Pater's "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (188). However, Wilde does not give Lord Henry the same goals that Pater has. Pater advocates fully experiencing every moment in order to delay death: "we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of reprieve [. . . .] our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (190). For Lord Henry, the point of experience is "[t]o realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for" (19). In this statement of Lord Henry's creed, Wilde is not echoing Pater's desire for transformative experience, but rather Schopenhauer's belief that our daily experiences serve to reveal our true natures. Schopenhauer teaches that man is "a *phenomenon* of will" and thus can only live according to a nature that is predetermined; however, we gain self-knowledge only "*a posteriori*, through experience" (*World* §23):

> [E]very one believes himself *a priori* to be perfectly free [. . .] and thinks that at every moment he can commence another manner of life [. . .]. But *a posteriori*, through experience, he finds to his astonishment that he is not free, but subject to necessity; that in spite of all his resolutions and reflections he does not change his conduct, and that from the beginning of

> his life to the end of it, he must carry out the very character which he himself condemns, and as it were play the part he has undertaken to the end. (§23)

Wilde incorporates Schopenhauer's ideology into Lord Henry's training of Dorian. Lord Henry begins his lessons by calling Dorian's attention to desires he has already felt: "you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror" (20). Dorian too realizes this influence has only "reveal[ed] him to himself" (22). Lord Henry instructs Dorian to experience life so that the younger man may come to realize his full nature, to know himself, not merely, as Pater argues, to delay death.

Wilde also follows Schopenhauer in presenting Lord Henry's influence over Dorian as immoral. Schopenhauer argues that man can be "led astray by [. . .] the craft, falseness, and wickedness of others" (*World* §55). Even though our nature is predetermined by our will, we do not fully know our nature until we reflect on it, and therefore can act out of conformity with our will: "I can never repent of what I have willed, though I can repent of what I have done; because, led by false conceptions, I did something that was not in conformity with my will" (§55). Reflecting this theory, Wilde has Lord Henry appropriately declare, "All influence is immoral. [. . .] Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions" (19). Although Lord Henry knows his influence is improper, he nevertheless delights in it because Dorian's beauty is his primary tool for aesthetic contemplation, and because the relationship gives him power. Lord Henry feels "[t]here was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death" (34); he watches

Dorian "with a subtle sense of pleasure" (47); and he remarks, "with his beautiful face, and his beautiful soul, he was a thing to wonder at" (49).

Although Lord Henry encourages Dorian to gain experience, the mentor himself only wants to watch. Rather than gaining insight into his own character, Lord Henry hopes to transcend his recurring, painful *ennui* through the aesthetic experience of watching Dorian. Wilde's characterization here again reflects Schopenhauer's ideology. Schopenhauer describes two aspects to life: the concrete, which involves suffering; and the abstract, the realm of the spectator, in which contemplation silences the will:

> [B]esides his life in the concrete, man always lives another life in the abstract. In the former he is given as a prey to all the storms of actual life, [. . .] he must struggle, suffer, and die like the brute. But his life in the abstract, […] is the still reflection of the former [. . .]. Here in the sphere of quiet deliberation, what completely possessed him and moved him intensely before, appears to him cold, colourless, and for the moment external to him; he is merely the spectator, the observer. (*World* §16)

Lord Henry tries to remain in this peaceful realm of the spectator, believing that "[t]o become the spectator of one's own life, [. . .] is to escape the suffering of life" (87). He remains impassive about Dorian's fate: "[i]t was no matter how it all ended, or was destined to end" (49). He expresses no concern for Basil's disappearance: "If Basil chooses to hide himself, it is no business of mind. If he is dead, I don't want to think about him" (161). Indeed, Lord Henry turns most of his acquaintances into aesthetic objects. He chooses his friends "for their good looks" (13), sees women as "decorative" (42), and even finds "something [. . .] quite beautiful about [Sibyl's] death" (81). David

Walton argues that Lord Henry is successful in transcending suffering: "Lord Henry Wotton is the only major character to escape suffering because he alone truly regards life as if it were an object or art: as if he were a spectator of it" (27). However, as I pointed out in Chapter One, Lord Henry continues to suffer; he finds that "[a]ll ways end at the same point, [. . .] [d]isillusion" (157). Wilde's depiction of Lord Henry's ultimate disillusionment reflects Schopenhauer's view that aesthetic contemplation "is not a permanent departure from the world of desire, [. . .] it is more like a chain of single exalted experiences" (Knox 130). The contemplation of beauty provides transcendence over pain, but it is only a temporary escape until the striving of the will reasserts itself.

For *Pale Fire's* spectator, Charles Kinbote, aesthetic contemplation also serves to temporarily relieve suffering. Kinbote's homosexuality has made him an exile in a homophobic society. Because his existence is so painful, he escapes into the beautiful fantasy world of Zembla, what Galef terms an "aesthetic retreat from reality" (427). In creating Kinbote's need for Zembla, Nabokov, like Wilde, draws on Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer describes this type of fantasy escape as madness. Whereas some people, as illustrated by *Dorian Gray's* Lord Henry, find relief in observing life, Schopenhauer's madman finds life so excruciating that he suppresses his pain and replaces it with pleasurable fantasies:

> When certain events or circumstances become for the intellect completely suppressed, because the will cannot endure the sight of them, and then, for the sake of the necessary connection, the gaps that thus arise are filled up at pleasure; thus madness appears. For the intellect has given up its nature to please the will: the man now imagines what does not exist. Yet the

> madness which has thus arisen is now the lethe of unendurable suffering. [. . .] one may thus regard the origin of madness as a violent "casting out of the mind" of anything, which, however, is only possible by "taking into the head" something else. ("On Madness" 318)

Nabokov's use of this Schopenhauerian model reflects that of an early Decadent author, Joris-Karl Huysmans. As Elisa Glick notes, the protagonist in Huysmans's *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes, also suppresses his pain by creating a fantasy: "a self-created world [built] by aestheticizing experience itself" that "will transport him beyond ordinary reality and to a place where the past is banished" (142-43). Des Esseintes describes the desire as "an impulse towards the fantastic, the land of dreams" (Huysmans 290-91), a depiction that, I suggest, prefigures Kinbote's Zembla.

Kinbote imagines Zembla as an idyllic land where even "Taxation had become a thing of beauty" (75), where he holds power as king, and where his looks, though ridiculed in New Wye, are the norm: "All brown-bearded, apple-cheeked, blue-eyed Zemblans look alike" (76). It is also a land filled with attractive, Dorian-like boys, who provide the "king" with his own scopophilic pleasure. Similar to Schopenhauer's madman, Kinbote temporarily forgets the pain of his existence by escaping into a beautiful fantasy world.

At some level, however, Kinbote realizes that Zembla is not real; he must turn to Shade to make the fantasy come true: "Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true" (214). Unlike Lord Henry, who finds delight in Dorian's beauty but who keeps an emotional distance from the younger man, Kinbote falls in love with Shade, and finds, as Steven Bruhm describes, "a safe closet in which to express [his] censored sexuality"

(81). The two do not have a sexual relationship, but Shade is the one person in New Wye who befriends Kinbote and allows the exile to feel "safe."

Because Kinbote is in love with Shade, the poet's physical unattractiveness does not deter Kinbote from using him as an object for aesthetic contemplation, and, this contemplation provides relief from pain: "My admiration for him was for me a sort of alpine cure. I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at him" (27). Kinbote even turns Shade's death into a dramatic tragedy, as Dorian does with Sibyl's. Dorian states that Sibyl's suicide "has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded" (80). Similarly, Kinbote terms Shade's death "a tragedy in which I had been not a 'chance witness' but the protagonist" (299), and one in which the exile has not been wounded.

Neither the beauty of Zembla nor his use of Shade as a source of aesthetic contemplation, however, is enough to provide Kinbote complete relief from pain. The despairing exile increasingly longs for suicide. He proclaims that the Ophelia-like Hazel deserves "great respect, having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (312), and he identifies with her loneliness, glossing Shade's lines about Hazel—"a white-scarfed beau / Would never come for her" (2.333-34)—with "Would he ever come for me?" (184). Just as *Dorian Gray's* Lord Henry claims, "I have sorrows, Dorian, of my own, that even you know nothing of" (277), so Kinbote tells his readers, "I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine" (300). Schopenhauer argues that, despite moments of aesthetic-induced respite, the will continues to assert itself, even instigating a desire for suicide: "suicide is a phenomenon of strong assertion of the will" (*World* §69). When the circumstances of one's life cause great suffering, the "will to live

[. . .] cannot put forth its energies" (§69); the suicide desires a "transcendental change" that would destroy the individual life, the manifestation of will. Kinbote's will, thwarted by the circumstances of his existence, urges him toward suicide. Although Kinbote does not finally kill himself, neither does he demonstrate Schopenhauer's understanding that, because the will itself would not be destroyed, suicide is "vain and foolish" (§69). Rather, Kinbote merely postpones the urge, continuing to try to relieve his suffering through aesthetic contemplation.

Both Lord Henry and Kinbote end disillusioned but continue trying to aestheticize life. Wilde leaves Lord Henry resigned to his unhappy existence—"You [Dorian] and I are what we are, and will be what we will be" (278)—and seeking another moment of relief from an experience with beauty: "Come round tomorrow. [. . .] The Park is quite lovely now." Nabokov makes Kinbote's end more ambiguous. Although the author contends that "Kinbote committed suicide" after finishing the book (*Strong Opinions* 74), Kinbote assures us that he "shall continue to exist," and may find other aesthetic means of escape, as "a writer in exile," producing a motion picture or stage play, or even returning to Zembla (301).

Through the portrayals of their spectators, Wilde and Nabokov demonstrate that experiences with beauty can provide temporary transcendence over suffering, but that aesthetic contemplation alone cannot fully eliminate the pain inherent in existence. Both Lord Henry and Kinbote remain locked in a Schopenhauerian cycle of despair relieved by moments of aesthetic pleasure, and Kinbote increasingly desires suicide. Further, they show how spectatorship harms those who become objects of the gaze. For those whose existence is formed solely by their roles as aesthetic objects—Dorian and Hazel—

transcendence in any form remains ultimately elusive. They fail to find either existential meaning or more than momentary relief from suffering, and, like Ophelia, their pain leads to despair.

The Objects: Failed Seekers

While the artists in these two novels find metaphysical transcendence through beauty, and the spectators achieve a temporary transcendence over suffering through beauty, the aesthetic objects themselves, Dorian Gray and Hazel Shade, remain lost in a myriad of frustrating attempts to achieve either noumenal insight or respite from despair.

Because they are treated as aesthetic objects, Dorian and Hazel behave accordingly. Their recognition of their roles reflects Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation" (1503); the social forces of their friends and family define their subjectivity. In Wilde's novel Dorian uses his beauty to attract admirers and to behave as the "visible symbol" of new Hedonism (23). In *Pale Fire* Hazel lives as an ugly object; she develops an ugly temperament (morose and rebellious) and, because she cannot be a beautiful spectacle, she isolates herself in an attempt to withdraw from the painful onslaught of the spectator's gaze.

Both Dorian and Hazel have tried to find happiness. Following the influence of the novels' artists, they make attempts at transcendental knowledge. For Dorian, noumenal insight means coming to understand the desires of his will. This insight begins with his recognition of himself as an object of beauty. When Dorian sees the portrait, the narrator tells us, "[he] recognized himself for the first time" (25). Interpellated as an aesthetic object by Lord Henry's seductive words and Basil's glorious painting, Dorian then begins to behave like a beautiful object. Walton suggests that "[Dorian tries] to live

as an object of art or genius as Schopenhauer saw it" (27). Schopenhauer's geniuses are those who, as Dale Jacquette explains, become so focused on beauty that they merge into a unity with the object: "the aesthetic genius stands so enraptured in an encounter with beauty or the sublime that there occurs something like a mystical union of the subject with the object in a dissolving of the subject-object distinction" (8). Dorian is certainly enraptured by his own beauty when he first sees the painting: "he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, [. . .] He stood there motionless and in wonder" (25). Rather than losing the distinction between subject and object, however, Dorian wants to actually change places with the painting: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old" (26), and he gets his wish. As the portrait changes, Dorian remains physically beautiful while the portrait degrades. He does not understand his full nature, though, his capacity for both good and evil, and the portrait's increasing hideousness torments him.

Because Dorian understands himself so little, he lets Lord Henry lead him along a path alien to his own will. Schopenhauer suggests that a man who lacks self-knowledge "finds in himself the germs of all the various human pursuits and powers"; thus like "children at the fair, [we] snatch at everything that attracts us" and "skip about like a will o' the wisp, and attain to nothing" (*World* §55). Such "abortive attempts," however, will "do violence to [one's] character," and "what he thus painfully attains will give him no pleasure" (§55). Dorian's drug use, his obsession with gems, tapestries, music, and other items of beauty all become ineffectual ways of finding what truly makes him happy, what satisfies his individual will. He finds that each new pursuit eventually bores him and he tries another, becoming "tired of" himself (116).

After Sibyl's death, Dorian looks at the hideous portrait and decides that it is his true nature to be evil: "There were passions in him that would find their terrible outlet, dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real" (93). This insight confirms his earlier perception that his nature has been formed by both real and literary forebears. By using the portrait as a visual record of Dorian's deeds, "a document of his own guilty past" (Brown 80), Wilde illustrates Schopenhauer's contention that it is only through reflection on our deeds that we gain self-knowledge. Dorian's last look at the disfigured painting shows him that his final attempt at reform, that of sparing Hetty, was only self-serving: "Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. [. . .] He recognized that now" (169). Dorian cannot bear this literal picture of his acts, and thus he destroys the painting in an effort to "kill the past" (169). Dorian's true nature, though, contains aspects of both good and evil, as evidenced by his earlier charity work and the torment that his conscience causes. The portrait records only the deeds committed under Lord Henry's immoral influence. Rather than gaining self-knowledge, Dorian tries to erase his evil deeds, and the act ends his life. Dorian destroys the manifestation of his will, and the portrait regains its original beauty, the thing-in-itself that has a harmony of body and soul.

Like Dorian, *Pale Fire's* Hazel Shade also seeks metaphysical transcendence. Her attempt is not directed at discovering her own nature but rather at trying to communicate with a mysterious light in a barn, as if it were a paranormal entity. Hazel makes three trips, diligently recording the odd sounds and movements of the light. She believes the light responds to her questions, but when it seems to come toward her, she becomes "overwhelmingly conscious that she was alone in the company of an inexplicable and

perhaps very evil being" (190), and she runs home. This attempt at transcendental insight fails; she never understands the warning from Aunt Maud.

Just as these attempts at metaphysical transcendence fail for both Dorian and Hazel, so too do their endeavors to transcend, more than momentarily, the pain of daily life. Dorian instinctively knows that intense contemplation can ease suffering. When Lord Henry's words first begin to unsettle him, Dorian stares at a bee "with that strange interest in trivial things that we try to develop when things of high import make us afraid" (24). Watching the bee calms him; he soon smiles at Lord Henry. Throughout the novel, Dorian repeats this fluctuation between fear and pleasure. His sensuous indulgences become a circular path from satisfying his will to calming it. As Schopenhauer teaches, "satisfaction of desire is not a positive joy but a temporary appeasement of a need" (Knox 129). Dorian spends years collecting elaborately decorated and fantastic objects, each time becoming "absolutely absorbed for the moment in whatever he took up" (107), but these aesthetic diversions only provide a temporary appeasement. They enable Dorian to forget, temporarily, his growing fear: "everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (109).

In addition to his collections, he experiences other moments of temporary transcendence over pain. When he leaves the theater, distressed by Sibyl's performance, he stops to contemplate some flowers and finds "their beauty seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain" (71). When the pain becomes more intense, after he learns of Sibyl's suicide, Dorian must aestheticize their whole relationship as "the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part" (80), and so it becomes for him

another “marvellous experience” (82). Schopenhauer contends that the satisfaction derived from one experience will only lead to *ennui*. Similarly, Dorian moves from his “marvellous experience” (82) to feeling “dreadfully bored” (85). After Basil’s murder, Dorian first turns to Gautier’s poetry to calm himself. That aesthetic relief, too, is only brief: “after a time the book fell from his hand. He grew nervous, and a horrible fit of terror came over him” (128). He then turns from desiring escape through beauty to seeking reality through ugliness, from silencing the will to indulging it: “From cell to cell of his brain crept the [. . .] wild desire to live, most terrible of all man’s appetites [. . .]. Ugliness that had once been hateful to him because it made things real, became dear to him now for that very reason” (143). This constant wavering between the elation of each fulfilled desire and the pain of its realization drains him; he comes to feel that his “own personality has become a burden” (156) and desires only “to escape, to go away, to forget.” Thinking he can completely forget his past by destroying the evidence, he stabs the portrait, but the deeds recorded there are part of his full nature, and he only succeeds in killing his physical body.

Like Dorian, *Pale Fire’s* Hazel tries to transcend the pain of her life through haphazard attempts at aesthetic pleasure. She knows she is expected to be beautiful; she has heard her parents’ criticism and been rejected socially. To relieve her despair, she twists words (2.347), suppresses her loneliness at school by reading or knitting (2.340), tries on her mother’s furs (2.360), and visits France (2.336). These attempts offer momentary relief, but, most of the time, “She hardly ever smiled” (2.350). Galef notes, for example, Hazel’s trip to France “only occasions more unhappiness” (422). Hazel’s decision to leave her friends after her blind date rejects her indicates her depression.

Rather than staying at the bar with Jane and her fiancé, Hazel decides to ride the bus to Lochanhead and then walk alone in the darkness.

Nabokov's text remains ambiguous as to whether Hazel drowns intentionally or accidentally. Just as *Hamlet's* Queen Gertrude describes Ophelia's drowning from hearsay, so Shade describes his daughter's last moments even though he too did not witness the event. The clues in *Pale Fire* can be added up to point to either conclusion. Shade's description indicates that the death may have been an accident, but also that he believes it was suicide:

> People have thought she tried to cross the lake
> At Lochan Neck where zesty skaters crossed
> From Exe to Wye on days of special frost.
> Others supposed she might have lost her way
> By turning left from Bridgeroad; and some say
> She took her poor young life. I know. You know.
> [. . . . . .]
> A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank
> Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank. (2.488-500)

The phrases "I know. You know" following "She took her poor young life," and the use of "stepped" rather than, for example, "slipped" off the bank, indicate that Shade believes Hazel intentionally killed herself. Kinbote also thinks Hazel's death was a purposeful act: "[she] preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (312). Many critics accept the death as intentional (e.g., Galef 421, Boyd *Nabokov's* 29, Meyer *Find* 5). However, Shade's and Kinbote's perspectives are distorted. Shade only begins to

understand his daughter fully as he works his way through the poem. Kinbote longs for suicide himself and projects his own desires onto Hazel.

Several clues point to a different conclusion. Shade's opening lines, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (1.1-2), describe a bird accidentally killed by the azure color of the sky reflected in a window. The poet uses "azure" again to describe the bar's entrance where Hazel is rejected by her blind date, which associates the bird's accidental death with Hazel's. Another death in the novel adds to the ambiguity: Iris Acht's falsely-reported suicide. Kinbote records that Iris "died officially by her own hand; unofficially, [she was] strangled" (305); i.e., she was reported to have committed suicide but was actually murdered. Boyd notes that Hazel's name links her to Iris: "'Hazel' is rare as a color word in being so preponderantly applied to a single object, [. . .] the colored part of the eye, the *iris*" (*Nabokov's* 160). He also points out that Hazel is an actress like Iris: "among the few scenes we witness of Hazel are her roles as Mother Time in a school pantomime, as a participant in 'a triptych or a three-act play' on the domestic stage, [and] as 'Daughter' in the playlet of 'The Haunted Barn'" (160). Nabokov gives no indication that Hazel has been murdered, as Iris was, but Hazel may not have killed herself. The ambiguity of her death, however, only strengthens her relation to Ophelia. Neither Nabokov nor Shakespeare allows his heroine to assert her own desires. Instead, both women function primarily to assist in the male character's development.

Both Dorian and Hazel, then, are tragically affected by their roles as aesthetic objects. They know the parts they are supposed to play: Dorian tries to live his life as a work of art, as the "visible symbol" of new Hedonism (23), but he only "loses his nature

through his experiments" (Di Mauro-Jackson 143); Hazel understands that she cannot fulfill the role expected of women, to be beautiful, and therefore withdraws into isolation. Dorian's and Hazel's frustrating attempts at transcendence, both in achieving insight into the noumenal world and at escaping pain, fail to end their despair, and death becomes their only final relief.

Conclusion

As the Decadents and Symbolists did, the characters in both *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* try to gain transcendence through their experiences with beauty. Both novels indicate that aesthetic experiences can satisfy this goal temporarily; yet they also show that transcendence can be limited by the viewer's distorted perception.

The characters' need for transcendent beauty suggests a Schopenhauerian pessimism toward modern life. The characters seek answers to their place in the universe or relief from a constant cycle of suffering and respite through experiences with the beautiful. Both the luxury of Wilde's Decadent London and the Arcadian suburbia of Nabokov's New Wye are portrayed as alienating and hostile environments from which the only escape is through either beauty or death. Yet Nabokov offers another alternative in Shade's response to Kinbote's query:

> KINBOTE. And so the password is—?
>
> SHADE. Pity. (225)

By showing compassion towards those who are suffering, individuals can, if not redeem society, at least provide some bridge to others. Art still provides the ideal, as Wilde had suggested. Dorian's restored painting models the harmony of body and soul. Nabokov's unfinished poem provides a revelation of the web of existence, but one that

only becomes complete when Hazel's ugliness is valued as much as her mother's beauty. Beauty can provide transcendence, but only when aesthetes recognize their limited, distorted perspectives.

Conclusion

Though written over half a century apart, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* feature similar critiques of the aesthete's devotion to beauty. Both novels demonstrate the trust that many modernists held in the ability of beauty to offer transcendence over the limits and suffering of mortal life. Yet they also call attention to the dangers of aesthetic obsession. They show how a solipsistic and hedonistic pursuit of beauty can lead to treating people, too, as merely aesthetic objects.

The authors employ different approaches. Wilde constructs a chronological narrative interspersed with aspects of Gothic horror to explore obsession and corruption. Nabokov creates a deceptive amalgam of poetry and scholastic parody to express loss and despair. Yet they unite in their reflection of *fin de siècle* Decadence and Symbolism, their portrayal of beauty as a subjective judgment, and their formation of similar roles for their main characters, that of artist, spectator, or aesthetic object. Together the novels provide a sensuous and haunting confluence of aesthetic ecstasy and aesthetic cruelty that encourages respect for the power of beauty while cautioning against its abuse.

Wilde's insider look at aristocratic Decadence illustrates how London's wealthy aesthetes escape their industrialized, vulgar, *fin de siècle* society by cloaking themselves in beauty. Dandies Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray fill their homes with elaborately decorated furnishings, clothe themselves in lush silks and finely tailored

suits, and devote their time to fine art—paintings, drama, music, and literature. Yet they find that corruption does not come from the seedier East End, portrayed by actress Sibyl Vane, but from their own apathy toward their fellow human beings.

Nabokov relocates Decadence to the mid-twentieth century, American suburb. The manicured landscapes of the "innocent land" (78) of New Wye mask an equally insular and cold-hearted populace. John Shade's middle-class marriage and successful career hide an insensitive and frightened modern male, who betrays those he loves while searching desperately for existential meaning in his work. Charles Kinbote, the ridiculed homosexual and transplanted dandy, imagines himself superior to his less-sophisticated adversaries. Yet even his fantastical Zembla includes the constant approach of the enemy, the post-industrialized "clockwork man" (152), whose "hopeless stupidity" threatens to destroy the carefully crafted haven of the elitist aesthete.

The real enemy in both novels turns out to be, not the philistines, but the aesthete's own myopic obsession with beauty. As the artists pursue metaphysical insight through beauty, they transform those around them into aesthetical ideas—Basil's "motive in art" (15), Sibyl's "Prince Charming" (51), or Shade's dichotomy of inspirational muse versus symbol of mortality. The spectators—Lord Henry and Charles Kinbote—become voyeuristic sadists, manipulating the objects of their gaze to relieve the painful *ennui* or isolation of their existence. The aesthetic desires of both artists and spectators harm themselves and those they objectify. Although the artists gain some inspiration, their distorted perceptions blind them to a larger reality; Basil and Sibyl fail to recognize Dorian's capacity for deceit, and Shade fails to discern the full "correlated pattern" (3.813) of his existence. The spectators remain caught in a Schopenhauerian cycle of

ecstasy and suffering, and they cruelly manipulate the objects of their gaze. Those interpellated as beautiful or ugly objects—Dorian Gray and Hazel Shade—find their assigned roles lead only to despair. Dorian uses his physical beauty to pursue pleasure, while trying to avoid the remonstrances of his visible soul. Hazel realizes she cannot be the beautiful spectacle expected of women, and so withdraws or rebels against the critical gaze. Both make their own attempts at transcendence through beauty, but their efforts prove frustrating and, ultimately, only lead to more grief.

The novels' portrayals of aesthetic desire reflect a number of philosophical and theoretical viewpoints. Kant's theory of dependent beauty sheds light on the ways that the characters judge beauty based on a preconception of the object's purpose. Mulvey's and Drukman's theories explain how the spectators find pleasure and ego-identification from the objects of their gaze, while devaluing the object's subjectivity. Ophelia's victimization provides a pattern for understanding Dorian's and Hazel's similar fates. The desire for transcendence demonstrates the belief that earthly beauty reflects a Platonic ideal or presence of the Eternal Feminine spirit. This desire also reveals a sense of Schopenhauerian pessimism and the perception that the painful striving of the will can be suppressed through aesthetic contemplation.

Finally, the characters' devotion to beauty illustrates the individual's attempt to combat the corruption and degradation of the modern world by recognizing a higher ideal in art. Basil's painting suggests a harmony of body and soul that Wilde's characters never achieve. Shade's poem reveals a complexity to Hazel's nature that her father only belatedly understands. Viewed together, *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* show that art's ideal can be realized only if the pursuit of beauty is accompanied by compassion.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Dorian dies by his own hand, but accidentally. He destroys the portrait in an attempt to erase the past, but the act kills his body instead. Hazel's own actions also end her life; she steps or falls into a pond. I argue in Chapter Two that Nabokov's novel remains ambiguous in terms of whether this death was accidental or intentional.

[2] Most critics interpret *Dorian Gray* as a fine-tuned critique of Decadent aestheticism. Christopher Nassaar contends that the novel's message is that "[a]n art that delves into the dark caverns of the soul and fully explores and celebrates the evil within can remain beautiful, but a way of life that seeks to translate inner evil into action will finally cease to be beautiful and become an inescapable nightmare" (71-72). Donald Lawler reads the work partly as an "aesthetic allegory": "The aesthetic lesson [. . .] for the artist or would-be artist is that life can be art only in art, never in life" (449). Richard Ellmann describes *Dorian Gray* as a "tragedy of aestheticism": "the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers. [. . .] The life of mere sensation is uncovered as anarchic and self-destructive" (315). Christopher Lane suggests that "the corruptive possibilities of the painting are demonstrated and destroyed because they ruin a precarious distinction between life and art, subject and object, and imaginary and symbolic representation" (47). Felicia Bonaparte argues that *Dorian Gray* is an attempt not to reject aestheticism per se, but to redefine it "as a principle that can function only within carefully circumscribed moral boundaries" (231). David Andrews contends that the novel criticizes not aestheticism, but "aesthetic hedonism," which "aestheticizes *all* experience to give the aesthete greater opportunity for pleasure" (27). Anne Daniel considers the work partly a "critique of aestheticism" (46), in Lord Henry's inaction (49) and in Basil's reworking of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth. She suggests that Basil commits the (homosexual) physical act he desires by making the portrait into the "real Dorian" and the human Dorian into "an ivory automaton" (50).

Notably, a Decadent novel that *Dorian Gray* draws heavily on, Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884), also critiqued Decadent aesthetics. As Arthur Symons suggests, "[Huysmans] showed us that sterilising influence of a narrow and selfish conception of art, as he represented a particular paradise of art for art's sake turning inevitably into its corresponding hell. [. . .] Worshipping colour, sound, perfume, for their own sakes, and not for their ministrations to a more divine beauty, he [protagonist Duc Jean des Esseintes] stupefied himself on the threshold of ecstasy" (qtd. in Clayton 42).

[3] Aspects of each of these authors' works can be directly related to *Pale Fire*: Poe's expression of love for the lost, young child in "Annabel Lee" (1850) resembles Shade's poetic grief over his dead daughter; Baudelaire's trust in Correspondences is similar to Shade's; and Verlaine's dislike of "*la pointe assasine*," which Nabokov describes as "introducing an epigrammatic or moral point at the end of a poem, and thereby murdering the poem" (*Strong Opinions* 129), offers one reason that Nabokov leaves Shade's poem unfinished. Kinbote suggests that the final line of the poem would have repeated the first, "I was the shadow of the waxing slain" (292), which would supply an epigrammatic ending that too narrowly focuses on Shade's death; the poem as a whole offers a much larger consideration of death and afterlife.

[4] I agree with Andrews that Nabokov's aestheticism resists stringent classification. As Andrews writes, "Nabokovian aestheticism [. . .] combines classical, romantic, modernist, and postmodernist elements" (64). However, I feel that relating *Pale Fire* to Russian Symbolism helps clarify the novel's treatment of beauty, transcendence, and aesthetic objectification. For a discussion of Nabokov as a formalist rather than Symbolist, see Michael Glynn.

[5] James West notes that it "is customary to divide the Russian symbolists into an earlier, 'decadent' group, [. . .] and a 'second generation,' whose leading representatives were Ivanov, Bely, and Blok" (2).

[6] West states that the second-generation Symbolists "felt the need to temper the doctrine of individualism with a summons to some form of collectivity. This need [. . .] appears in at least three guises: as an attempt to find a force that would bind each individual to a common, absolute world order; as a longing for a universal means of communication among men; and as a desire for a common bond between the artist and the 'people'" (131).

[7] Shade even offers a "sermon" on "Why Poetry Is Meaningful to Us" (4.683-85), which could be Nabokov's mild rebuke to Symbolist critics. Shade's poem may be one individual's vision, but it is "Meaningful" to society.

[8] Struve adds that many Russian émigré critics "kept referring to his [Nabokov's] 'un-Russianness,' to his lack of ties with Russian literature and its traditions" (154). Struve finds an exception to Nabokov's coldness in *The Luzhin Defense*, suggesting that here, "Sirin [Nabokov]—perhaps against his own will—seems to escape this circle of 'lack of love for man': in the fate of the mentally and spiritually defenseless monster and moral abortion there is something genuinely and pathetically human" (163).

[9] See Anthony Synnott for an overview of aesthetic theory in western culture, including the views of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Saint Aquinas, Dante, Castiglione, and Bacon. Synnott concludes that in the pre-Kantian period, "[t]he consensus within European cultural history has been impressive. Beauty is objective, related to goodness and to God, and moral and physical beauty are related" (625).

[10] Regarding subjectivity, Kant states, "In order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the understanding to the object for cognition, but by the imagination (perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or pain. The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*" (§1). He also argues that the judgment of beauty must be disinterested: "Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgment of taste" (§2).

[11] Kant states, "In all judgments by which we describe anything as beautiful, we allow no one to be of another opinion, without, however, grounding our judgments on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore place as its basis, not as a private, but as a common feeling" (§22).

[12] Karin Schutjer also notes that Kant's awareness of the communal sense seems somewhat "hypothetical," and suggests that Kant expresses a "certain wariness toward real others" (83).

[13] The idealization of Greek society had begun earlier and continued through Wilde's own time. It appears in Johann Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764), as well as in Walter Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893). Wilde praises the Hellenic ideal in "The Critic as Artist" (1891) and in *Dorian Gray*: Basil states that Dorian's beauty reflects "the perfection of the spirit that is Greek" (14), and Lord Henry feels that Dorian has "beauty such as old Greek marbles kept for us" (33-34). Indeed, Wilde's choice of the name Dorian suggests that the young man's beauty represents the Hellenic ideal.

[14] As Baudelaire points out in "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), "even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest, the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction" (3).

[15] Knox notes that "[the phrase] *l'art pour l'art* (in Benjamin Constant's *Journal*) was coined with reference to the views of Kant and Schiller" (76).

[16] Knox points to Schiller's concepts of "play-theory and the doctrine of aesthetic semblance" as contributing to the view that art can provide "an evasion of the problems of life, [. . .] an escape from reality" (76).

[17] West points out that although the Russian Symbolists were "inspired by the example of symbolism and modernism in Europe" to champion "the independence of the artistic imagination" (2), only "a few individuals" advocated "art for art's sake."

[18] Brown calls "the categorical opposition of the ethical and aesthetic" a "characteristic of nineteenth-century thought in general" (37).

[19] Pater published revisions to *The Renaissance* in 1877, 1888, and 1893.

[20] Although the most prominent names in the Decadent canon come from France and England, Decadence flourished throughout the European continent and British Isles. George Schoolfield's *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927,* includes chapters on Decadent writing from Italy, Sweden, Poland, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Iceland, among others. Similarly, Patrick McGuinness notes that Symbolism was "international in its constitution" (2), and mentions Greek, Belgian, Swiss, Polish, and American authors and artists.

[21] Forth lists writers Daniel Halévy, Fernand Gregh, Robert Dreyfus, Marcel Proust, and Léon Blum as early devotees to Nietzsche's anti-Decadent message (103), and describes a "noticeable Nietzsche vogue in Paris" in 1892 (111) that continued to develop through the following decades.

[22] In addition to Shakespeare's aesthetic treatment of Ophelia's madness and death, he leaves her death ambiguous, removing what could be Ophelia's most significant choice: her decision to commit suicide. Shakespeare follows Gertrude's artistic description of the drowning, which suggests Ophelia fell accidentally, with the gravediggers' discussion, which asserts that the young woman intentionally killed herself. Since Shakespeare provides no witness to the drowning, the young woman's actions remain uncertain. Kaara Peterson argues that, because the text does not allow us to determine whether Ophelia drowned accidentally or committed suicide, "paintings of Ophelia rearticulate the site where referentiality potentially collapses, [and] paradoxically [. . .] also insure the ultimately referentiality of [Prince] Hamlet" (7). Romanska counters that Ophelia does intentionally take her own life. Drawing on the work of Heidegger and Derrida, Romanska argues that it is Hamlet's ability to speak about his mortality "that makes him human" (488), and thus Ophelia's presence at Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech is crucial. The theatrical tradition of having Ophelia exit before the speech, Romanska suggests, contradicts the text and "deprives Ophelia of the little agency that Shakespeare bestowed upon her" (501). Romanska argues that Shakespeare intends for Ophelia to remain onstage, and thus "[b]y listening to Hamlet, [Ophelia] does participate in man's, or rather, the *human* existential tragedy and commits a very *conscious* act of ending her own life" (493). While Romanska makes a strong argument regarding the text's stage directions, *Ophelia's* voice still remains unheard. Hamlet's influence increases the possibility that Ophelia intentionally kills herself, but does not confirm it.

The nature of suicide in *Dorian Gray* and *Pale Fire* is also complex. Wilde clearly makes Dorian's death accidental. Dorian wants to destroy the painting, and thereby his past, but he does not speak about killing himself. In *Pale Fire* Nabokov, like Shakespeare, leaves his maiden's death ambiguous. Hazel may or may not have intentionally drowned, and thus, like Ophelia, Hazel is denied explicit agency.

[23] Showalter finds three critical approaches to Ophelia: 1) an attempt to "'tell' Ophelia's story," which is hindered by the limited role she has in the play (she "appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes") and because "[h]er tragedy is subordinated in the play; unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives" (78); 2) as a feminine figure "which escapes representation in patriarchal language and symbolism; [. . .] Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes [. . .] that of] feminine difference" (79); and 3) as "the repressed story of Hamlet," or "Hamlet's anima" (79). Showalter offers a fourth approach: "the *history* of [Ophelia's] representation" (79). Ophelia was regarded by the Romantics as an icon of female insanity, who became "an *objet d'art,* as if to take literally Claudius's lament, 'poor Ophelia / Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures'" (83-84). The Victorians portrayed Ophelia "as a consistent psychological study in sexual intimidation, [. . .] 'a normal girl becoming hopelessly imbecile as the result of overwhelming mental agony'" (89). The Symbolists saw Ophelia as "a blank page to be written over or on by the male imagination" (89). In the 1960s, Ophelia is viewed as schizophrenic, which still negates her agency. As R. D. Laing writes, "In her madness there is no one there. [. . .] She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person" (qtd. in Showalter 91). Since the 1970s, feminist discourse has granted Ophelia more strength of character, presenting her "madness as protest and rebellion" (91).

[24] See, for example, Delacroix' *The Death of Ophelia* (1844), Millais' *Ophelia* (1852), and Redon's *Ophelia* (c1900). For a discussion of these and other paintings of Ophelia, see Romanska and Peterson. As the century progressed, aesthetic tastes degraded (in my view) from what Philippe Jullian describes as "the sad sensuality of Rossetti's models" to "the cadaverous type in vogue at the end of the century" (39). Romanska notes that "the consumptive paleness and morbid fragility captured in the image

of the dead yet aesthetically pleasing Ophelia [became] a staple of turn-of-the-century erotic imagination" (485).

[25] In contrast to these renditions of Ophelia, Ivan Albright's painting, *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1943-44), does graphically capture the horrid decay of Basil's portrait. The painting's gruesome figure captures Dorian's corruption, and thus calls attention to the young man's spiritual degradation. I am not aware of any paintings of Nabokov's Hazel Shade.

[26] Robert Ziegler offers an additional benefit to aesthetic representations of death, the resurrection of the lost object. Ziegler suggests that, "Mourning the death of everything, the Decadents wagered that the pain of loss could be eased by the object's resurrection as an image" (12). Ziegler's analysis supports Sarah Kofman's argument that the reason Dorian feels so strongly about remaining beautiful is that he comes to see his own beauty as a way to recreate his lost mother: "Is it not because of [. . .] the loss of his mother's beauty and of her smile, that Dorian tries to save her for all eternity, incorporating in himself forever the beauty of his mother that was passed on by her?" (45).

[27] Bronfen's analysis also adds meaning to Wilde's statement in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (3).

[28] For an overview of gaze theory, see Evans and Gamman.

[29] Mulvey argues that the male protagonist exists to provide a "screen surrogate" for the male spectator: "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (437).

[30] Evelyn Bristol notes the importance of Swedenborg's doctrine to Symbolists: "[Baudelaire's] avowed debt to Swedenborg, whose doctrine prescribed correspondences between the heavenly and earthly spheres, gave rise to the overwhelming importance that Symbolists attached to the metaphor, and consequently to the symbol" (269). Prominent examples of the theme of Correspondences in Symbolist writing include Baudelaire's "Correspondences" (1857) (*Flowers* 12) and Rimbaud's "Vowels" (c1870) (*Rimbaud* 141).

[31] Schopenhauer's ideology was extremely influential to Decadents and modernists in general. In "The Decay of Lying" (1889), Wilde states that Schopenhauerian pessimism "characterizes modern thought" (1083). Bristol also notes that "the decadent was prone to elevate his own *ennui* to cosmic proportions, and then to describe the universe in terms that coincided with Schopenhauer's" (270).

[32] Nabokov connects "aesthetic bliss" with "other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" ("On a Book" 313).

Chapter One – Beauty: Human Beings as Aesthetic Objects

[1] In Wilde's novel, Lord Henry refers to Ophelia twice: in reference to Sibyl Vane's suicide, "Mourn for Ophelia, if you like" (82), and in his later suggestion that the rejected Hetty Merton may be "floating at the present moment in some star-lit mill-pond, [. . .] like Ophelia" (161). Both Sibyl and Hetty intentionally commit suicide. In Nabokov's work, Kinbote includes the drowning of "clumsy Ophelia" (220) in his list of suicide methods. Although *Hamlet's* Ophelia may have died accidentally, as I discussed in my introduction, Kinbote is referring to intentional suicide. Kinbote seems to contradict himself by using the adjective "clumsy," which could indicate that Ophelia fell, but, because he is building up to his own preferred method of suicide, I interpret his words to mean that he thinks drowning itself is "clumsy."

[2] As Bronfen has shown, the artistic image of a beautiful feminine corpse stands in for concepts other than death, such as the viewer's desire for immortality, and "what is literally represented—femininity and death—often entirely escapes observation" (xi).

[3] I consider Sibyl "the other artist" besides Basil. Christopher Nassaar also labels Lord Henry an artist "in his conversation" (39), and I agree that language is a significant theme in *Dorian Gray.* In one sense, language provides a connection to *Pale Fire's* John Shade, who clearly employs it as an art form by writing poetry. However, I view Lord Henry as an art connoisseur, one who appreciates the nuances and subtleties of language.

[4] Some critics interpret Sibyl's view of Dorian differently than I do. Ellmann feels that "Sibyl is the opposite of Dorian. She gives up the pretense of art so as to live entirely artlessly in this world, only to commit suicide. Dorian tries to give up the causality of life and to live in the deathless (and lifeless) world of art, only to commit suicide too" (316). Bonaparte relates the actress's feelings to Plato's lesson in the *Symposium*: "Love has taught her to distinguish between the truth of those ideals and their copies in the world" (246). However, I think the text indicates that Sibyl is neither capable of giving up the pretense of art nor of distinguishing between the Platonic ideal and reality. When she revises her view of the other actors from "godlike" to "hideous, and old" (69-70), she is still relating to them in only aesthetic terms, as she does Dorian. When he rejects her, Sibyl continues to perceive him as a character in a play, responding, "You are acting" (70).

[5] Current readers will associate the name "Prince Charming" with *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, but turn-of-the century versions of these stories did not call the prince "Charming." Earlier fairy tales featured the name "Charming," such as Madame d'Aulnoy's "The Blue Bird" (1698), which includes a handsome hero named King Charming. Andrew Lang's contemporary adaptation of "The Story of Pretty Goldilocks" (1889) also has a character named "Charming" who becomes a prince. Rather than pointing to a specific fairy tale, the name "Prince Charming" seems to have gradually become associated with any handsome hero who rescues a beautiful maiden. These fairy-tale heroes, however, routinely fall in love with a woman simply because she is beautiful, a superficial form of love that Wilde re-genders into Sibyl's love for Dorian.

[6] Aunt Maud also deserves to be noticed as another artist in the novel who uses people as aesthetic objects. She likes "realistic objects interlaced / With grotesque growths" and "lived to hear the next babe cry" (1.88-90). Additionally, as an artist himself, Shade could not help but be influenced by his aunt's macabre art, which contributes to his own use of poetry as a means of exploring death. Galef also considers Hazel an artist, suggesting that she tries first through "Word Golf" and later through "eidolism" to create "a private spirit world" (423). I consider her delight in transposing words as evidence of her intellectual curiosity and the barn incident as an indication of her interest in the metaphysical (both resemblances to her father). The "poltergeist" episode is an act of rebellion.

[7] Boyd uses the allusion to Scott's poem to support his argument that Hazel provides metaphysical inspiration to both her father and Kinbote (*Nabokov's* 152-53).

[8] For a discussion of the *rusalka*, the death mask known as *l'inconnue de la Seine*, and their relation to Ophelia in Nabokov's works other than *Pale Fire*, see Johnson.

[9] Although Galef notes that Hazel "makes havoc" (423) in the poltergeist episode, he interprets her behavior as an attempt "to bend natural law," to forsake the real world for a "private spirit one." Boyd sees the episode as a manifestation of Aunt Maud (*Nabokov's* 231). Meyer describes Hazel as "in touch with poltergeists" (*Find* 129). I argue that Hazel's increasing anger erupts when her parents put Aunt Maud's dog to sleep, and that she takes revenge on them.

[10] I have not found any evidence that Wilde was familiar with the *rusalka*; however, the legend was popular outside of Russia during the *fin de siècle*. Dvorak wrote an opera entitled *Rusalka* (1901), and Wilde was familiar with some of his work ("The Critic as Artist" 1109). Further, Johnson notes that "the vengeful nature of *rusalki* accords not only with Russian lore, but also with a *fin-de-siècle* fashion of depicting women as creatures of evil" (238), such as Wilde does in his play *Salomé* (1894). Johnson further points out that "[w]ater sprites [related to the Ophelia image] formed a special sub-genre of such paintings" (238). Thus Dorian's murder of Basil is in keeping with a tradition of the beautiful victim returning to kill her betrayer.

[11] Johnson discerns an evolution in Nabokov's work from the *rusalka* and *inconnue* images to an Ophelia one. While he devotes more attention to Nabokov's other novels, Johnson briefly mentions Hazel Shade as "[p]erhaps the saddest of these water-linked characters" (243).

[12] Johnson points out that Nabokov's *"L'inconnue de la Seine*" recalls Russian Symbolist Alexander Blok's poem "Incognita" (1906), which features a similar narrator pondering the secret of a mysterious and tragic woman. Notably, Blok's narrator is drunk, just as *Pale Fire's* John Shade frequently is.

[13] While I assert that Shade views Hazel as an image of mortality, I agree with previous scholars that Nabokov uses Hazel as a metaphysical figure (that Shade does not recognize), as I discuss in Chapter Two. Marilyn Edelstein comments that "Though [Shade's] imperfect creation of flesh—Hazel—dies, his beautiful linguistic creation [of her] will live on beyond even his own mortal existence" (217). McCarthy notes that, in addition to alluding to Scott's poem, the name Hazel refers to "a divining rod, used to find water," as well as to "witch Hazel": "in her girlhood, the poor child, witch Hazel, was a poltergeist" (94). Meyer interprets Hazel as a "fairy," who "returns to the world she came from by entering the three O's [the other world], the natural habitat of the spirits" ("Dolorous Haze" 97). Boyd argues that Hazel returns after death as the Vanessa butterfly in order to inspire both Shade's and Kinbote's imaginations (*Nabokov's* 146). Galef notes that Hazel "remains in her parents' memory as 'a domestic ghost,' [. . .] a spirit" (426).

[14] In contrast to my reading, that the act of composition is what Shade finds beautiful, some critics seem to accept the character Kinbote's explanation for these lines: "the promise made in these four lines will not be really kept" (263). Boyd writes that the canto repeatedly "seems to promise some mighty theme [. . .], only to lapse back into the mundanity of the moment" (*Nabokov's* 31), and Phyllis Roth insists, "Certainly, this description fails of a successful spying on beauty" (221).

[15] The Hogarth comment refers to William Hogarth's paintings *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* (1751). Together the paintings contrast hard-working beer drinkers with the lazy and slovenly who prefer gin. Several other items in the novel point to Shade's alcoholism: Shade keeps "a flask of brandy concealed about his warmly coated person" (22); he "is forbidden to touch alcohol" (23); he hides his liquor bottle (89); he appears with a "liquor-flushed face" only an hour into his birthday party (161); he quotes Alexander Pope's line "The sot a hero, lunatic a king" (from *An Essay on Man* [1702]), juxtaposing Shade as the heroic "sot" and Kinbote as the lunatic "king" (203); Kinbote describes Shade looking like "an old tipsy witch" (287); and Kinbote comments that Shade "could never resist a golden drop of this or that" (288).

[16] In addition to Shade and his family, Kinbote incorporates his New Wye associates into his Zemblan fantasy. See Lucy Maddox for examples of Zemblan characters who echo Kinbote's colleagues, events that mimic *Hamlet*, and other transformations.

[17] Adding a Decadent twist, Kinbote gives his wife the title "Duchess of Payn" (112), and gets her name from "Dis, the kingdom of the dead" (Boyd *Nabokov's* 164-65). For an extended analysis of the connection between Sybil and Disa, see Janie McCauley-Meyers.

[18] Phyllis Roth also notes the similarities between Kinbote and Hazel, but she interprets the relationship as an "Oedipal situation," in which "Kinbote feels rivalry with Hazel" (223). Galef sees the similarities as "correspondences between the characters," and calls "the suicide-daughter" a "hazel shade of Kinbote" (429).

[19] Constable et al., however, note that the ancestral line in Huysmans's novel features a gap that suggests "there is no positive (or positivist) evidence to support the idea that Des Esseintes's decadence can be explained in terms of biological degeneracy" (19). They argue that the narrative as a whole "offers numerous competing explanations for Des Esseintes's decadence," and, further, find "a similarly complicated relationship between decadence and interpretation in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*." They contend that Wilde's novel offers multiple interpretations for Dorian's degeneration, as Wilde writes in his preface, "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (qtd. in Constable 20); both the characters' responses to Dorian's portrait and the readers' to Wilde's novel reflect "their own interpretive strategies" (21).

[20] My reading is consistent with previous scholarship: it is Hazel's "own lack of beauty, her *own* ugliness, that drives her to suicide" (Boyd *Nabokov's* 64); "Hazel's face, as her social rejection makes her only too well aware, is completely revolting" (Stegner 120); Hazel is "utterly devoid of [. . .] beauty" (Galef 421), which results in alienation and "betrayal [. . .] through a loss of connection" (430).

Chapter Two—Transcendence: The Rewards of Experiencing Beauty

[1] I interpret Nabokov's text as indicating that Shade loves his wife, but that he also fell in love with one of his students. When Shade imagines meeting the dead in the afterlife, he writes of a widower with two wives, "both loved" (2.571). He describes one of these wives grieving "on the brink of a remembered pond" over a "changeless child" (2.575, 574), which points to Sybil mourning over Hazel's drowning. He mentions "the other" a few lines later, and Kinbote glosses this line with the "hint" that there has been "some other woman" in Shade's life (228). Kinbote invites this other woman, a student, to dinner along with the Shades. After ten minutes, the Shades abruptly leave, revealing their discomfort. A couplet that Sybil translates from Andrew Marvell's "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn" (1681)—"Thy love was far more better than / The love of false and cruel man" (242)—also implies she knows about the affair.

[2] Sibyl's statement, "I have grown sick of shadows" (70), paraphrases a line from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1833): "I am half sick of shadows" (2.71). Lawler identifies the allusion to Tennyson's poem in a footnote to Wilde's text (*Picture* 70 n8). Like the image of the dead or dying Ophelia, the dying "Lady of Shalott" became a popular icon in nineteenth-century art, such as in John William Waterhouse's painting *The Lady of Shalott* (1888) (Engelking 363).

[3] Some critics consider this acceptance of diversity a postmodernist value. For example, Stephen Bonnycastle argues that "[w]hat is striking about postmodernism is that it [. . .] does not seek unity or a shared ground for human culture. Instead it celebrates [. . .] diversity, contradiction, and variety" (232). Many modernist works, however, also reflect this concept. Indeed, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* presents gay identity as beautiful at a time when homosexuality was still a crime.

[4] The Atalanta's position as a harbinger of death illustrates its reputation as "The Butterfly of Doom." In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov comments that the Vanessa earned this nickname because it was especially abundant in 1881, the year Tsar Alexander II was assassinated (170). The butterfly's markings, which "on the underside of its two hind wings seem to read '1881'" (170), recall this pivotal year.

[5] Boyd notes that both Nabokov and his wife confirmed that the lights should be interpreted as a message from Aunt Maud to Hazel to warn Shade not to go to the Goldsworths', where the poet is killed.

[6] Some critics disagree about the meaning of the Atalanta's last appearance. Boyd interprets the Atalanta that appears just before Shade's murder as an incarnation of Hazel's spirit, having finally adopted her mother's beauty in death (*Nabokov's* 136-37). Meyer argues that "Aunt Maud's spirit" inhabits the Vanessa (*Find* 184). Similar to my reading, Alvin Kernan considers the Atalanta's final appearance to be a correspondence: "A reader inescapably responds to this butterfly, [. . .] particularly because of its appearance at the moment of death and the verbal associations with 'shade' and the poet's laurels, as a manifestation of some transcendental force in the universe moving in correspondence with human life" (121).

[7] Boyd notes that Shade's reference to the Toothwort in Canto Two is followed by the fairy-tale allusion in the lines about the dingy cygnet never turning into a wood duck. That verse is followed by one that mentions the barn episode, which Kinbote turns into another fairy tale, "The Haunted Barn" (*Pale Fire* 190-92). The barn is located near Dulwich Forest and is the location where a little boy comments, "Here Papa Pisses" (186), which alludes to Browning's poem. Boyd uses these connections to support his theory that Hazel transforms into the Atalanta after death, when she inspires Shade's poem.

[8] *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that "to lay (up) in lavender" means "to lay aside carefully for future use" ("Lavender," def. 2a), as in *Academy* (1888): "the lavender of memory."

[9] Walton suggests that a "significant source for Wilde's ideas may have been the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. That Wilde knew Schopenhauer's works is clear from the references he makes to them. [. . .] but that Wilde knew Schopenhauer's aesthetics is, arguably, reflected in his own aesthetic theory" (23).

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