

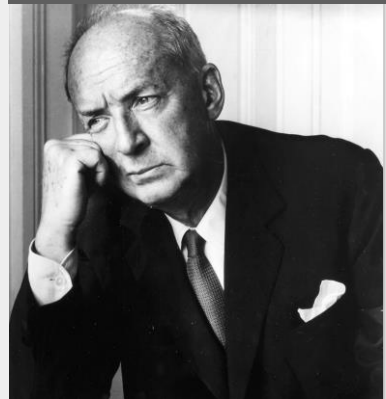
# *Despair*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Mr. Querino | Postmodernism  
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“I can readily imagine what Pushkin might have said to his trembling paraphrasts; but I also know how pleased and excited I would have been in 1935 had I been able to foreread this 1965 version. The ecstatic love of a young writer for the old writer he will be someday is ambition in its most laudable form. This love is not reciprocated by the older man...”

—Vladimir Nabokov



“The spirit of parody always goes along with genuine poetry.”

—Vladimir Nabokov

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who was Vladimir Nabokov?

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In interviews, Vladimir Nabokov freely admitted to a boyhood enthusiasm for Edgar Allan Poe, but he also claimed in his maturity to have set aside “Edgar Poe” as a faded favorite. Poe’s influence on Nabokov’s work, however, seems much more pronounced than the author would like to admit. Where do we see traces of Poe’s writing in *Despair*?

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What is German Expressionism? How might this artistic movement have influenced Nabokov when he was writing *Despair*?

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How does Nabokov’s writing anticipate the transition from modernism to postmodernism?

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What is structural irony (or dramatic irony as it is sometimes referred to)? How does Nabokov sustain structural irony throughout the novel?

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# VOCABULARY

These words which appear in *Despair* have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT tests. The vocabulary words are listed here in the order in which they appear in the novel.

1. Sonorous – *adjective* imposingly deep and full; capable of producing a deep or ringing sound.
2. Solecism – *noun* a grammatical mistake in speech or writing.
3. Laudable – *adjective* deserving praise and commendation.
4. Sheepish – *adjective* showing embarrassment from shame or a lack of self-confidence.
5. Irrevocable – *adjective* not able to be changed, reversed, or recovered; final.
6. Languid – *adjective* displaying or having a disinclination for physical exertion or effort; slow and relaxed.
7. Billow – *verb* fill with air and swell outward.
8. Digression – *noun* a temporary departure from the main subject in speech or writing.
9. Fastidious – *adjective* very attentive to and concerned about accuracy and detail.
10. Prig – *noun* a self-righteously moralistic person who behaves as if superior to others.
11. Sanguine – *noun* a blood-red color.
12. Decrepit – *adjective* elderly and infirm; worn out or ruined
13. Brooding – *adjective* showing deep unhappiness of thought; appearing darkly menacing.
14. Askance – *adverb* with an attitude or look of suspicion or disapproval.
15. Loath – *adjective* reluctant; unwilling.
16. Fallacious – *adjective* based on a mistaken belief.
17. Mercurial – *adjective* subject to sudden or unpredictable changes of mood.
18. Mar – *verb* impair the appearance of; disfigure.
19. Bourgeois – *adjective* of or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.
20. Loathe – *verb* feel intense dislike or disgust for.
21. Ghastly – *adjective* causing great horror or fear; frightful or macabre.
22. Portend – *verb* be a sign or warning that something, especially something momentous or calamitous, is likely to happen.
23. Exquisite – *adjective* extremely beautiful and, typically, delicate.
24. Aberration – *noun* a departure from what is normal, usual, or expected, typically one that is unwelcome.
25. Despair – *noun* the complete loss or absence of hope.

Names:

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## WEEK TWO GROUP WORK

Prepare a brief presentation for the rest of the class (including the students who read *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*) explaining the postmodern aspects of Vladimir Nabokov's work. You should have at least one visual aid and each member of the group should take part in the discussion. Your presentation, including time for questions and answers, should be about five minutes in length. Here are some ideas for you to consider:

- **Ambiguity/Closure** – Why does Hermann fail to explain to readers exactly who Orlovius is earlier in the novel? What about the ending of the novel... what happens? Was this whole novel an April fool's day joke on us?
- **Fiction/Real World** – Despite being a mostly playful, comedic novel about murder, could this book have a serious message? Why might the book have been banned in the Soviet Union?
- **Unreliable Narrator** – What parts of Hermann Karlovich's story can we trust?
- **Antihero** – How is Hermann Karlovich different from traditional protagonists?
- **Deconstruction** – How does the structure of the novel intentionally work against itself to deconstruct the crime/detective genre?
- **Doppelgänger** – Are Hermann and Felix doubles? How does Nabokov show the postmodern practice of pastiche in *Despair*?
- **Metafiction** – How does Vladimir Nabokov self-consciously and systematically draw attention to *Despair* as an artifact by writing about the process of writing?