Sterne’s Influence on Subsequent Literature

Digressions as a Central Technique in *Pale Fire*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *House of Leaves*

Irene Torstensen

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the MA Degree

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Laurence Sterne’s office, Shandy Hall

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ABSTRACT

Laurence Sterne’s novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, written in the 18th century, was unconventional for its time in terms of structure and narrative mode. The innovativeness of the novel largely lies in Sterne’s extensive use of the technique of digression. Sterne has been widely debated and critiqued for more than 250 years and is well known for having influenced modernist and postmodernist authors, but he also influenced contemporary authors. Although the technique of digression is the particular element that the critics ascribe to Sterne, it bears further examination. This thesis examines the extensive development of the technique of digression in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* by similar and different responses to *Tristram Shandy*. The argument is supplemented by an analysis of the examples of digression in each novel with comparative references to *Tristram Shandy*. In each of the four novels, digressions serve as a means of building the structure and providing the background for the plot, providing information about the characters, delivering the themes of the novels, and creating metafiction and intertextuality. Digressions in *Pale Fire* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as well as in *Tristram Shandy*, also serve as a means of supplying irony and satire to the novels. The explicit and subtle resemblance to *Tristram Shandy* that appears through the employment of digression in the three novels reflects the significance Sterne’s work still has on its literary successors.
I got the inspiration for this thesis at Laurence Sterne’s office at Shandy Hall, where "Tristram Shandy" was created. When I read "House of Leaves" and realized that Mark Z. Danielewski owed much of his inventive style to Sterne, I was so surprised that I wanted to explore the subject further. I shared my notion about the resemblance of Danielewski’s technique to Sterne’s with my landlady, who happened to know the live-in curator at Shandy Hall well, and she arranged a meeting there for us. There could not have been a better way to nurture my increasing interest.

The atmosphere at Shandy Hall in Coxwold is amazing. Walking along the paths in that wonderful garden, maybe the same paths that Sterne himself used to walk while considering his future masterpiece, felt inspiring, as did visiting Sterne’s grave by the church where he worked as a vicar. Having tea with the engaged live-in curator, Patrick Wildgust, and his wife while discussing the resemblance of "House of Leaves" to "Tristram Shandy," convinced me that this was what I had to write about. Wildgust proudly showed me his extensive novel collection which I was allowed to photograph and the discussion went on to some of those novels. Besides a copy of "House of Leaves," the collection included novels by authors such as B.S. Johnson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Italo Calvino, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Tom Phillips, and more recently published novels by J. M. Coetzee, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Adam Thirlwell. All these modern, postmodern, and contemporary authors are, to some degree, influenced by Sterne’s "Tristram Shandy."

I also found Vladimir Nabokov’s "Pale Fire" in the collection, which is a novel I truly admire and definitely was able to connect with "Tristram Shandy." A novel that I could not spot in the collection at Shandy Hall was Kurt Vonnegut’s "Slaughterhouse-Five." Although it may not be the most obvious comparison, it is a piece I strongly feel needs to be added to the collection, which I will give reasons for in chapter 2. Maybe I am able to convince Wildgust to place a copy of it on his shelf, after he has read my argumentation.

I would like to thank my friend, Gill Greaves, for introducing me to Sterne and Wildgust, for proofreading my papers, and for those many literary talks in general. My deepest gratitude also goes to Wildgust for his hospitality and for sharing his knowledge, my supervisor, Juan Christian Pellicer, for his guidance, and fast and thorough feedback, and not least my spouse for being patient with me and acting considerately all this time I have spent on this thesis.

Thank you!
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INTRODUCTION

Digression is a device that is used not only in writing, but also in oral communication. It can come out naturally and unintentionally, as we describe the various issues of our everyday life. The way we perceive reality, think about it, and respond to it is often fragmented and interrupted by a number of external and internal factors. In the Oxford English Dictionary, digression is defined as “a temporary departure from the main subject in speech or writing”. Traditionally, digression in literature has not been favored by the critical community and has been considered to be something to be corrected, and in no way to be regarded as a possible literary technique or a legitimate rhetorical practice. Since most narratives do by definition provide more details than a mere enumeration of the events of the plot, they cannot do without at least slight and occasional digressions.

The use of digression in world literature can be traced back as far as ancient epic narratives such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, and has persisted over the centuries, through Cervantes’, Proust’s and Sterne’s prose, and up to the postmodern authors’ texts that I will analyze in this paper. The device is an intrinsic part of a narrative that comes naturally if an author is in any way erudite. Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells go further in their definition: “… digression is far more than a rhetorical figure, literary device or technique – it is *Weltanschauung*, a way of contemplating the world in its manifold interconnectedness” (4). This definition, however, also shows the potential danger of using digression, which can turn into an uncontrollable flow of consciousness that leads nowhere. The mastery of the use of digression lies in the writer’s ability to control this flow and to manipulate digression, putting it in service of his goal. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* is a brilliant example of such mastery. The narrative is filled to the brim with digressions, but they never break the dam and are smartly directed into well-thought out streams.

There is, probably, no textbook on the technique of digression in literature that does not mention Laurence Sterne and his prominent “Shandean” digressiveness. Grohmann and Wells put it succinctly: “Had Sterne been reformed and his digressiveness rectified, there would simply have been no narrative…” (2). *Tristram Shandy* is a motley canvas of digressional episodes, excurses, references, ruminations, and inserts. Due to its non-linear structure, typographical playfulness, parody, and metafiction, it has been considered an experimental novel, and sometimes even an anti-novel.

Sterne was born in 1713 in Clonmel, Ireland, in the family of an army officer. After his graduation from Cambridge, Laurence was awarded a parish in Yorkshire. During the 23
years of his service as a clergyman, Sterne published some of his sermons, wrote memoirs and, for a short time, political articles. His church service was not based on a vocation but rather on a practical decision after graduation. He derided churchmen, and ultimately wrote a satire that mocked the clerics of the ecclesiastical courts. Obviously, he lost any chance for clerical promotion. But it was then that he realized what he wanted to do for the rest of his life – write. From that moment on, the “life and opinions” of future Tristram began to take their textual shape.

When the two first volumes of *Tristram Shandy* were published in 1759, Sterne was not familiar to either critics or the reading audience. According to Wildgust, Sterne did not even disclose his authorship at first – so uncertain seemed the future of his unconventional text, even to him. But in fact, it became a literary phenomenon, undermining the image of the 18th-century novel and propelling Sterne to sudden fame. The novel was very well received by readers, although it was somewhat criticized for its bawdiness and indecency in treating sexual topics. It was also criticized by some for the rearranged order of events and disrupted time scheme, but it was equally praised for the same thing by others.

*Tristram Shandy* consists of nine volumes but has neither a beginning nor an end. The main character acts as the narrator and describes his ‘life and opinions’ in a willful manner. The reader is forewarned by Tristram at the beginning of his ‘autobiography’ that in his narration, he will not follow any rules of literary composition, will not stick to the conventions of the genre, and will not follow the chronological order of the events. The claimed subject of the novel, the life of Tristram Shandy, is basically left in the shadow and is not developed as it should have been. Tristram’s autobiography begins at the moment of his conception, then goes back in time to the events that took place five years before his birth, and the actual birth takes place only in the fourth volume. At the end of his autobiography, Tristram goes back to the period five years before his birth. As promised, the time scheme is completely disrupted.

*Tristram Shandy* resembles the 18th-century novel in terms of the set of its elements and claimed subject – it has the dedication, the preface, the autobiographical mode, the hero’s ‘life and education’ exposed, and even its title is almost in line with those popular at the time, like “The Life and Adventures…” that were offered by Richardson, Fielding, Defoe, and others. The title of Sterne’s novel was intentionally almost completely in accordance with those common titles, yet it had one small difference, the word “opinions”. This was probably supposed to indicate a change in the way a narrative was perceived. Sterne’s novel was
intended to be as similar to and at the same time as different from those conventional exemplars as possible.

In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne inverts the conventions and reworks them into something new and unexpected. He ruins the proportions, he increases the value of certain elements at the cost of others, he moves the issues and elements that were traditionally kept in the background forward, and he disrupts the order and sequence of structural elements. The latter he does by placing the Dedication and Preface in the middle of the book, and by putting the chapters that should have come in the beginning at the end. He exaggerates the narrative devices of a traditional novel by pushing them to the extreme, which will be exemplified in this thesis. In this way, Sterne created a parody that blew up the 18th-century novel from the inside.

In his autobiography, Tristram with a disarming garrulity provides a multitude of details that, to the reader’s mind, have nothing to do with his subject. He both meets and deceives the reader’s expectations and laughs at them. Tristram promises the reader certain ‘future knowledge’ and sets up the expectation of a particular story line just to frustrate it, because his true interest lies in digressions. To the reader who expected a love affair, which Tristram has promised throughout the novel, he gives instead the comical failure of an inexperienced and incapable Uncle Toby, who is attacked by a persistent widow. To the reader who expected to see some erudition, Tristram fully supplies it, bringing down an avalanche of Greek, Latin, French and other quotes, as well as inserts from the ancient philosophers, theologians, scholars, and writers – real and fictional. With mock importance, he provides sermons and didactic passages as part of his opinions. He does it so well, his irony being so subtle, that sometimes the reader may believe in his seriousness and forget that Tristram in fact parodies the enlightening novels that were written by his predecessors. He does not educate the reader but presents a collection of fragments of knowledge, a pool of ideas and observations, and leaves their interpretation to the reader. Sterne’s entire novel can be regarded as a grandiose nine-volume joke, a literary mystification. He upsets the applecart and leaves the reader on the ruins of a moralistic novel that seemed so stable.

As soon as *Tristram Shandy* entered into the spotlight, Sterne was called ‘witty’ (Hnatko 47). The term is quite ambiguous and may point to the unconventionality of Sterne’s work, his satire, bawdiness, or the elusiveness of his style. This elusiveness may result from the combination of the linguistic devices, and these devices may be defined by four basic principles: “a deliberate confounding of a conventional means of representing a mode of reality with the reality itself; an extensive use of what would have been to neoclassic critics’
heterogeneous terms engaged in similitude; a peculiar irony growing out of the adopted ‘blind spot’; and, finally, … a displacement of emphasis on some aspect of discourse” (Hnatko 47). Sterne’s erratic treatment of time blurs the line between fiction and reality and demonstrates how complex this reality is. Sterne denudates the limitations of a literary narrative, but through his digressions, he also shows its vast capacity. He uses the present tense in his narration and intentionally provides the time signifiers of his disrupted time scheme, to remind the readers now and then about the discrepancy between reading time and the time flow of the events that he depicts:

IT is about an hour and a half ’s tolerable good reading since my uncle Toby rung the bell, when Obadiah was order’d to saddle a horse, and go for Dr. Slop, the man-midwife; - - - so that no one can say, with reason, that I have not allowed Obadiah time enough, poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too, both to go and come; - - - tho’, morally and truly speaking, the man, perhaps, has scarce had time to get on his boots. (Sterne 92)

By juxtaposing these two perceptions of time, he confounds the modes of reality and demonstrates how writing about the events takes longer than their actual experiencing. Tristram is frustrated with the fact that he cannot catch up with describing his experiences as he lives them.

Tristram rushes, interrupts himself, chokes with words and seems unable to bring his diffluent narrative to the shores of logic and common sense. Relying on Locke’s theory of the association of ideas, he leaps, runs back and forth, suspends the action or interrupts a sentence for several chapters. His multiple excurses, and even his peculiar syntax – the piling up and crumbling phrases, the dashes that signify meaningful pauses – are narrative and graphical devices which show how disrupted the thinking process can be, how bizarre the order of associated ideas, and how they can fall through the cracks and shifts of different layers of consciousness. Tristram demonstrates extraordinary virtuosity showing how the most trivial details of everyday life intertwine in the minds of his characters with the most abstract speculative issues.

In the eighth volume of his story, Tristram refers to the reader with the explanation of his way of beginning the book. He writes, from the heart: “… of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best——I’m sure it is the most religious——for I begin with writing the first sentence——and trusting to Almighty God for the second” (Sterne 490). The reader, however, should not be misled by such a ‘sincere” revelation. Each and every
sentence that Tristram produces is thought out in detail by Sterne; the seeming
disarrangement of the structural elements of the narrative and the events within the narrative
is not the result of the author’s carelessness, and the extensive employment of digression is
far from whimsical.

Sterne’s employment of digressions is complex. William Bowman Piper has
suggested to divide the different types into three groups (65). According to Piper, Tristram
uses explanatory digression to provide the background for the plot and help his audience get
into the roots of his story. He usually clearly indicates the limits and the relevance of his
explanatory digressions, no matter how lengthy and seemingly distracted they may be, like
the digression into the story about Yorick and the midwife’s license. This story was necessary
to explain the circumstances of Tristram’s birth. The reader will regard this type of
digressions as a part of the structure of the novel, which provides the background for the plot,
as well as a means of revealing information about the characters. The second type is
opinionative digression, which Tristram uses to provide contemplations, opinions, judgments,
and speeches of all sorts by himself and by his characters that are somehow linked to the
events that are described. The digressions of this sort are not as deeply integrated into
Tristram’s story as the explanatory ones, but they are sophisticatedly woven into particular
moments. Trim’s speech about hats, and the scene where Dr. Slop reads aloud the medieval
curse by Ernulphus, handed over to him by Mr. Shandy are examples of this type. Dr. Slop is
a papist doctor and according to Elizabeth Kraft “Walter (and Sterne) is ridiculing the Roman
Catholic practice of excommunication as well as the general human tendency to blame
anyone other than ourselves for our misfortunes” (58-59). Digressions of this type provide
information about the characters, deliver the themes and supply irony to the novel. The third
type of digression that Tristram applies can be defined as an interlude, which does not relate
to the events of his story but rather considers the narrative itself and is used to establish
communication with the readers. These are the promised special ‘courtesies’, like
Slawkenbergius’ Tale or Whiskers’ anecdote; the obligations every author owes his audience,
such as explanations of his narrative choices and, for example, the lateness of his Preface.
This last type is what I consider in this paper as the digressions that create the metafictional
and intertextual aspects of the novel.

Due to his subject matter and narrative manner, Sterne is much closer to the twentieth
than to the 18th-century novel. As Colin Ferguson aptly notes, “Ideals and movements are
never necessarily bound to the years they are associated with. Movements are eternal, in that
they never actually begin or end. Countless writers are now employing the tactics used
hundreds of years ago by Laurence Sterne” (33). His manner reveals an understanding of the world that was unusual for his age and only came into its own in the modern and postmodern era. Sterne was convinced that the objective truth appears to people in a multitude of its relative incarnations. Each individual sees the world in their own way, and the correlations of these individual perspectives create a complex, motley, and volatile life landscape that unfolds in *Tristram Shandy*. He explores the things as they are, he admits his failures, misfortunes, and bewilderment about the complexity and incomprehensibility of the world. In this way, he raises questions regarding the ontology of the text itself and the ontology of the world this text projects, such as “what is the world?; what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; how is the projected world structured?” (McHale 10). But he also raises epistemological questions, such as “how can I interpret the world of which I am a part?; how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; how does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?” (McHale 9). According to McHale, ontology is dominant in postmodernism, and epistemology describes the modern paradigm. In the following three chapters, I will explore how these questions are raised and answered by Nabokov, Vonnegut, and Danielewski, through the prism of the technique of digression.

*Pale Fire* was published in 1962 and is regarded as one of Nabokov’s transitory works from the modern paradigm to postmodernism. In his novels, Nabokov invites the readers to make a discovery of what the world is, what reality is, how they are constructed and how they function. As Brian Boyd notes of such discoveries: “Nowhere does he succeed better than in *Pale Fire*, which detonates in the creative reader’s mind a chain reaction of explosive discoveries that become still more explosive the more we reread” (4). The novel is non-linear. Its main part consists of fragmented and irrelevant commentary to the poem and in that way satirizes scholarly conventions and explores the forms of existence of a text. Nabokov’s employment of metafiction blurs the line between reality and fiction, and everything that the disguised narrator says is subject to the reader’s doubt and individual interpretation. The commentary is permeated with digressions, which are also found in the poem.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, published in 1969, Vonnegut also explores what the world is, in particular the world where wars take place. His concerns are “… the fraudulent opposition between being and appearance, the ubiquity of human transitoriness and death, and the crucial alternative between either capitulating before life’s inherent meaninglessness or attempting to discover
and, if necessary, even to invent a meaning for it” (Freese 26). In the very first sentence of the novel, with a single phrase “more or less”, the author acknowledges the impossibility to present his narrative within the realistic paradigm. He creates another kind of world, a world where war can be neglected, and where time is flat, where people who die are very much alive in other episodes of their life. He contemplates the modes of existence of a person in time and space and explores how that existence can be narrated. There is no logical way of doing that, so the narrative mode in *Slaughterhouse-Five* reminds one of a flow of consciousness, like that in *Tristram Shandy*. Through the use of numerous digressions, the structure of the novel is fragmented and the time scheme is disrupted, as it is in *Tristram Shandy*.

Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* was published in 2000 and reflects the issues and the needs of contemporary reading practices, as well as incorporating the best of once innovative practices of writing. In this way, the novel is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The novel is a product of tendencies from the age of cyberspace that Danielewski lives in and experiences, as well as it incorporates a vast and diverse literary heritage. The novel unfolds as a maze of parallel narratives, some of them given as footnotes, with intertextual inserts, typographical tricks, collages, letters, drafts, poems, and photos. As Larry McCaffrey and Gregory Sinda note, “*House of Leaves* is also a book deeply concerned with exploring what a novel is (or might be) and with demonstrating what novelists have as yet barely scratched the surface of the story-telling options that have always been available to writers” (100). In his ontological search, Danielewski tries to comprehend the world in which we live and read, which has been transformed by information technology into something hyperreal or even surreal.

As mentioned in the preface, critics have for generations examined and proved the influence of Sterne in numerous fictional works, mostly in modernist and postmodernist fiction. Further research into his influence on contemporary fiction, such as novels by Foer and Thirlwell, is yet to be done. Although the technique of digression is the particular element that the critics ascribe to Sterne, it bears further examination. This thesis demonstrates that the artful technique of digression is extensively developed in *Pale Fire*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *House of Leaves*, by similar and different responses to *Tristram Shandy*, which elucidates the significance that the novel still has on literary successors.
CHAPTER 1: *Pale Fire*

1.1 Vladimir Nabokov as a Constructor of Ambiguity

Vladimir Nabokov was a controversial author: discussions about his works quickly became a clash of critical opinions regarding his contribution to or retreat from literary tradition. His irony, parody, and satire were often misunderstood; his allusions, codes, and labyrinths were not seen and not followed; his metaphors were called perverted. The questions raised in his “devious narratives”, as Michael Wood calls them, often regard “… the role of irony and silence, and the nature and uses of fiction – fiction as estimate, hypothesis, framework, model, instance, experiment, downright lying” (7). The perception of his novels has changed with the shift in conditions of reality, but his novels created their own reality.

Nabokov was a skillful and enthusiastic chess player. A lot of critics agree that this passion definitely influenced his literary works (Rampton 3). He has a game theory and a mindset trained to play and to move the figures on the chessboard, to create intricate strategies and make winning moves, to mislead the opponent or the reader, and to anticipate their moves. He fully exploits these skills in his works, which situates him in literary postmodernity, the non-conventional era where the line between reality and fiction is blurred, and where any combination of genres and forms in art are acceptable. *Pale Fire* is like a chess board to Nabokov: he moves the pieces of the story and the characters, confusing the readers and making them wonder what is going to be his next move. Nabokov explored the world, tried different combinations of its existence and tested its limits. Boyd regards *Pale Fire* as Nabokov’s best attempt at such an exploration, or discovery, and as an invitation for the reader to make their own discovery (3). But the reader needs to be prepared to question the results of their discovery, because *Pale Fire* has also become a pattern of literary ambiguity.

The visibility of adherence to the tradition and the accentuated academism of the structure of *Pale Fire* in fact represent Nabokov’s departure from the realistic tradition even more radically than the more liberated forms of some postmodern novels. Under the traditional façade, we find provocation and even mockery of the conventions of the genre, as we find in *Tristram Shandy*. Like Sterne, Nabokov is more interested in a character than in a plot. This is why, like Sterne, he widely applies the device of digression in depicting his characters in *Pale Fire*. The readers are provided with the characters’ opinions on a variety of topics and get to know their background a lot more than they actually see them act. In this
way, both Nabokov’s and Sterne’s digressions thicken the fabric of their stories and expand them, slowing down the advancement of the plot.

It is worth mentioning Nabokov’s poetry in *Pale Fire*, which has also received a lot of critical attention. The poem “Pale Fire” can be regarded as a pastiche and Nabokov could be accused of overindulging in intertextuality,¹ as Sterne was accused of plagiarism because of his references and reworkings of other authors’ work. But both the poem “Pale Fire” and the intertextual digressions in *Tristram Shandy* have the unique voice, ideas, and style of their authors. Nabokov’s own interest in observing the details of nature is granted to Shade, his allegorical images of nature throughout the poem supply a peculiar aesthetic to the poem. Nabokov the poet can be compared with Sterne the painter in that each creates unique aesthetics in their novels. A lot of scenes in *Tristram Shandy* are ‘painted’ with words. In some moments the characters’ moods are clearly visible, and the readers are able to follow their moves, rather than just reading about them.

Digressions, as a part of the aesthetic patterns of both novels, are like fragments of a puzzle that the readers are challenged to put together into a solid picture. But the most cunning thing here is that there may be not a single picture for each reader, but plenty of them. Those individual pictures may differ, but they are all more or less grounded in our common reality and together they contribute to a new reality of Nabokov’s works. In creating his own reality and in breaking the rules, Nabokov had a large stock of instruments at his command from the older literary tradition. It is interesting to explore how the same device used in the 18th and in the 20th century can serve to create both confusion and integrity in the text, and how the ways of its application may resonate.

1.2 The Technique of Digression in *Tristram Shandy* and *Pale Fire*

Analyzing the technique of digression in the novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, and Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*, I will consider the purposes that digression serves in these texts, as well as the contents of the digressive elements and their influence on the plot and structure of the novels under discussion. Through consideration of these aspects, one will be able to trace the influence of postmodern features and devices in *Tristram Shandy* on the postmodern *Pale Fire*, and determine similar themes and features of the two novels. The following manifestations of

¹ For more discussion on poetry in *Pale Fire*, see Morris 318-329.
digression are considered below: digression in forming the structure of the novels, providing information about the characters and background for the plot, delivering themes, adding a metafictional layer to the texts, creating intertextuality, and supplying irony and satire.

1.2.1 Digression in Forming the Structure and Providing Background for the Plot
In both novels, digressions ruin the conventional structure of the genre and obscure the line between autobiography and fiction. They break the narrative into fragments and challenge the reader to keep up with the storylines, to reflect on those fragments, and to create their own interpretation. Due to the digressive structure, the plot in both novels may seem unrealized and unestablished, but that is a question of individual perception. Considering the structure of *Pale Fire*, Pekka Tammi claims that the “… construction of internal links between the embedded levels of fiction, which reverse the standard narrative hierarchy” (572), is a distinctive ‘Nabokovian’ method. However, it could be claimed that Sterne has successfully employed the embedded narrative to disrupt the structure of his *Tristram Shandy* and masterfully connected the threads of internal patches of fiction, two centuries before Nabokov.

The novel *Pale Fire* consists of a Foreword, the text of the poem “Pale Fire”, a comprehensive Commentary, and an Index. The poem and the critical apparatus follow the rules and conventions of their corresponding genres, which may trick the reader at the beginning and make them believe that they are reading what is claimed. But by the time they get to the following lines of “Pale Fire”, they will probably have guessed that something is wrong:

… not text, but texture; not the dream
But a topsy-turvy coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game… (Nabokov 59-60)

These lines, ostensibly written by Shade, may serve as a good description of the novel’s structure in general: it is scattered, topsy-turvy, but it is also a web of linked meanings.

In his Foreword, the commentator Charles Kinbote, provides not only introductory information about the poem, but also engages in a long excursus about how he arrived at the point of making the commentary to this poem. The poem provides the autobiographical reflections of the established university professor and poet John Shade. He starts with his
early childhood and leads the reader up until the unexpected end of his life, where the reader
does not realize he has been murdered by a mysterious assassin until Kinbote disclose it in
his commentary. The structure of the poem itself is quite linear, and one can follow the
sequence of the events of Shade’s life, though he makes some short philosophic and
emotional digressions.

As the readers try to follow the standard procedure of reading a poem with the
commentary, they soon discover that the commentary to “Pale Fire” does not relate to the
poem at all, but tells another story. The readers are drawn into the “enigmatic and playful”
(Grabes 63) structure of a novel with two storylines. One of them takes place in New Wye, a
small city in New England, where John Shade lived, and the second story takes place in some
remote place called Zembla. Progressive-digressively, through the comments, the readers find
out that Charles Kinbote, the professor and neighbor of Shade’s who makes the comments,
considers himself to be the king of Zembla in exile. In the novel, the reader may notice that
Zembla resembles Russia, Nabokov’s homeland which he was forced to leave. This
resemblance to the real world and this kind of structure where “…every fictive level
coincides or borrows something from the others” (Tammi 578) have made the novel the
subject of a lengthy critical discussion. In the narrative structure, Zembla provides one of the
postmodern features of Pale Fire. The details of the real world have been reworked by the
author into a duplicate and are presented in the novel as a series of digressions.

The plot and the scope of the critical apparatus supplant the plot of the poem. The
poem consists of only 999 lines, while the commentary occupies two thirds of the novel. It
seems like the commentary to the poem does not serve to explain and expand the reader’s
understanding of what John Shade the poet meant, but rather that the poem is actually a stem
from which the story of Charles Kinbote the commentator grows. It may look like Kinbote
digresses from commenting on the poem into his own opinions, but one may also stumble
into a dilemma: where exactly is the digression and where is the main plot? As stated by
Kinbote himself in his Foreword: “Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come
after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their
help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done
with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture” (Nabokov 11).
Basicallly, the commentary to “Pale Fire” can be read independently, as a separate story.

Kinbote’s commentary contains a lot of digressions within its own storyline. A
comment might be several pages long and contain references to Kinbote’s other comments, a
retrospective of his relations with Shade, or long irrelevant digressive speculations with
dialogues. An example of such an unreasonable excursus may be the comment on line 286 where from the phrase “A jet's pink trail above the sunset fire” a long story about the activities of the assassin Gradus in Paris was somehow derived (Nabokov 132-137). Reading Kinbote’s commentary seems like walking along a corridor with numerous doors on the left and on the right, and as the readers stop by each door and open it to have a glimpse of what is going on in the room behind it, they find other doors in each room, so they peek in there, and so on.

The digressions that form the complicated structure of *Tristram Shandy* can hardly make sense if read separately, as they are dispersed throughout the body of the novel. Unconventional in the sense of its structure and purpose, *Tristram Shandy* does not follow the “… accepted autobiographical mode of the eighteenth-century novel, which looks back on the vagaries of a fulfilled (or misspent) life, gives it shape and draws a wholesome moral from it” (Klein 125). The chapters may incorporate various inserts, like black, blank, or marbled pages, tales, anecdotes, sermons, memoirs, and legal documents. There is no other way for Tristram to tell about his life and opinions, as he is in the midst of experiencing them. And all those constant interruptions, digressions, prompts and reminders do indeed make us experience his autobiography simultaneously with him.

Tristram himself defines his work as “digressive, and … progressive too, – and at the same time” (Sterne 64). But, unlike the digressions in *Pale Fire*, the digressions and the main plot of *Tristram Shandy* are related by the principle of cause and effect: the information in the digressions provides the background for the following events, and in slow advancement, the readers are given more context for the actions that will follow. It makes the story richer and gives them a wider perspective and more material to ruminate on. All these digressive parts are mostly unrelated but are somehow masterfully and naturally woven into the body of Tristram’s autobiography.

Digressions here, like in *Pale Fire*, occupy the larger part of the novel, confusing and blurring the plot. In *Tristram Shandy*, as well as in *Pale Fire*, there is another storyline, the one of Tristram’s uncle Toby, which seems to intrigue the narrator even more than his own storyline. The life of Tristram, like the poem “Pale Fire”, serves a kind of conductor into this other story.

Tristram’s digressions can be divided into two types: the first takes us from a certain point of the story to prior or future events to add clarity or enhancement to the story; the second takes us from the current story to the personal reflections of the author. In *Pale Fire*, these two types are also present in both parts of the novel, the poem, and the commentary.
But here, the two parts are mutually digressive, which brings the technique that Nabokov may have learned from Sterne to a higher level. I may playfully suggest that there could be three stories to analyze in this chapter: The Life and Opinions of John Shade, The Life and Opinions of Charles Kinbote, and The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy.

Lisa Zunshine regards Sterne as Nabokov’s undeniable precursor, using Nabokov’s own definition of a novel as a “late development permeated with memories and unified by depth of consciousness”. She also points out that Sterne was the only 18th-century writer whose “lewd, rich, and fantastic” style Nabokov admired (180). The “lewdness and richness” of Sterne’s style are extensively revealed through his widespread use of digression – his wayward tales with double entendre, like the one about the noses, his willful play with words and others’ ideas, like those of Locke. Like Tristram, Kinbote makes lengthy excurses in his commentaries, digressing even within his own story. In both Pale Fire and in Tristram Shandy, the readers often have to leaf back through the pages to remind themselves at what point they were taken on another digressive trip. What is most fascinating about Tristram’s digressions is that they are all self-sufficient. They have their structure and a finished message. In the same way, Kinbote’s comments, no matter how irrelevant they may be in relation to Shade’s poem, deliver each either a certain self-contained, wrapped episode of Kinbote’s story or a finished speculation. The focalizers of the digressions in both novels – varying in Tristram Shandy and mainly embodied by Kinbote in Pale Fire – always weave these digressions into the main story. Here, another feature is visible that Nabokov might have derived from Sterne: they both tried to make “their style, their diction, their language games functional” (Zunshine 180). Thus, getting back to Nabokov’s definition of the novel, one can claim that Pale Fire is permeated with memories given in digressions, as much as Tristram Shandy, and those seemingly disruptive pieces are unified by the ‘depth of consciousness’ of the author.

1.2.2 Providing Information about the Characters by Means of Digression
Through the short digressions that John Shade makes in his poem, the readers find out about his personality, his reflections on the process of literary creation and the role of poetry and philosophy in the comprehension and description of reality, and about his beliefs, his attitudes to death and mortality. The abundance of digressive and detailed descriptions of nature, the variety of images of flora and fauna throughout the poem serve the purpose of Shade’s search for a universal truth. Shade explores the larger, cosmic issues through a careful examination of details in the nature that surrounds him.
Maria Lobytsyna suggests that the way Nabokov works with fictional metamorphoses, where a character becomes a text and becomes immortalized in this way, resembles “the eighteenth-century English literary tradition and Laurence Sterne … rather than Russian or American tradition” (389). My reading of *Pale Fire* and *Tristram Shandy* supports this statement and suggests that such metamorphoses are delivered by means of digression. Shade re-considers his life in his poem, and after his death, he becomes a pile of cards with a written text. Kinbote tries to inscribe himself into the context of Shade’s poem by his digressive commentary. They both define themselves through the text, just as Tristram tries to convert his life into a multivolume book in his attempt to write about his life simultaneously while living it.

In his numerous digressions, Kinbote also provides information about Shade’s life. With only a minimal connection, Kinbote takes the chance to tell about his own adventures and his subjective judgments on a variety of things, events, and people. Certainly, the readers may have a lot of doubt about whether the information he provides is true and whether the opinions he ascribes to Shade are not his own. For example, in his commentary to line 172, he recounts a discussion that he and Shade ostensibly had on literary critics, on their colleague professor Pnin, on teaching, and on Marxism and Freudianism (Nabokov 121-122). The way Shade ‘talks’ about these issues does not correspond to his ‘voice’ and style in the poem.

The name of Shade’s daughter does not appear in the poem. In the lines that relate to her, he uses the word “haze” (Nabokov 46), which makes the readers perceive her as a blurred, foggy figure that slips and vanishes from their field of vision. Only from Kinbote’s comments do the readers find out that the daughter’s name was Hazel. In his comments, he takes them into an excursus about Hazel’s notes from the night in the allegedly haunted barn when she experiences “a roundlet of pale light” (Nabokov 109) while “investigating certain sounds and lights” (48). In this way they get to know her better – if that part of Kinbote’s commentary about Shade and his family is true. In that way, each of the three Shades gets a double representation in the novel: a lyric one provided by Shade in the poem, and an actual one provided by Kinbote in the critical apparatus (the Foreword, the Commentary, and the Index).

Each major character in *Tristram Shandy* serves the purpose of revealing Tristram’s own personality. From the very beginning of his autobiography, Tristram tells the story of his conception, ostensibly told to him by Toby. In the middle of that crucial event, Tristram’s mother asked his father if he had not forgotten to wind up the clock. Tristram claims that that
awkward moment, which caused great irritation in his father, laid the foundation for lots of his own weaknesses, both mental and physical. Were it not for that irritating question, Tristram would have become a better person, he claims.

The most prominent feature of Mr. Shandy, Tristram’s father, is his obsession with theories and hypotheses. Tristram constantly lets his father speak on his obsessions, to confirm that Mr. Shandy “… would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis” (Sterne 49). There are many digressions throughout the novel where Walter engages in long philosophical speculations. These uncover his opinions, but they also serve to provide a description of other characters such as Toby, and they allow the readers to suggest that Tristram has inherited his mental tendency of wandering philosophizing from his father.

Tristram begins to explain his uncle Toby’s character, digressing in the middle of Toby’s sentence. It should be noted that this sentence will be completed in the next volume. But before getting directly to Toby’s character, Tristram first describes Walter and Toby’s aunt Dinah. After that, he decides to use uncle Toby’s hobby-horse, which is his obsession with building fortifications, to exemplify his character, but before telling about that unusual hobby-horse, Tristram feels the urge to explain how Toby acquired it. Here, digressions are made within digressions, but through them the readers do get an outline of Toby’s personality before Tristram actually describes it – by Toby’s modest reactions to Walter’s stories about Aunt Dinah, by the way he ‘whistles’ his arguments to his brother’s senseless speeches and so on. In one of Tristram’s descriptions of Uncle Toby, he claims that Toby would not hurt a fly, and he immediately tells the story about Toby and the fly. In that digression, it is revealed that Tristram learned half of his philanthropy from that experience.

By recounting the stories and opinions of other characters, Tristram tries to find and establish his own identity. But the other characters’ personalities are stable and do not evolve, unlike Tristram’s. The other characters are passive and only brought into action and even only speaking by Tristram’s decision, whenever he needs them to speak or move. They possess some clearly defined and unchangeable features and attitudes, representing the concept of the self as a substance, whereas Tristram represents the self as consciousness (Klein 126-127). Other characters, including Uncle Toby, serve as a basis for Tristram’s development. He contrasts their ideas, and sometimes agrees with them, he comments extensively on their behavior, their hobby-horses, and the events they are engaged in. Through that deconstruction of others’ identities, Tristram’s personality finally takes shape and his opinions on a variety of issues are revealed.
It looks like Nabokov derived his cocky Kinbote from Sterne’s Tristram. Both Tristram and Kinbote have that grandiloquent style of delivering audacious meanings and ambiguous hints, which makes these characters both comical and intelligent. Like Tristram, Kinbote lapses into memories and speculations that remind the reader of a flow of consciousness and he wanders to whatever matters he needs. Just as Tristram’s narrative may seem disrupted and chaotic because of his constant digressions, Kinbote’s own story is told in fragments and may appear to be falling apart. Tristram and Kinbote are also very much alike in that they use other characters to reveal their own personalities. And although Shade may seem like a self-sufficient and well-rounded personality, far saner that Kinbote and evolving in the course of his poem, he too becomes a passive character within Kinbote’s narration. In the novel, apart from the poem, Shade is just an auxiliary object around which Kinbote’s persona is being uncovered.

1.2.3 Delivering the Themes of the Novels through Digressions

The themes of *Pale Fire* and *Tristram Shandy* are the relations between reality, delusion and disguise, destiny and fate, exile and memory, death and mortality, and the theme of hobby-horses.

**Reality, Delusion, and Disguise**

Through digressions, both authors obscure our understanding of what the readers are dealing with – fiction or autobiography, reality or delusion. As Madeline Descargues puts it, “Sterne and Nabokov both use and abuse biography and biographers. Part of their energy and glee as novelists derives from the very rhetorical contest with their real or imaginary opponents…” (178).² For both writers, the opponents are the critics, and the readers are the assistants in creating their fictional realities.

In a fine and exquisite manner, Nabokov makes his readers clearly see both Shade’s real life and Kinbote’s ‘wonderland’. While reading the poem, the readers are involved in a realistic autobiographical story of a fictional character. In “Pale Fire”, Shade refers to real personalities and alludes to real concepts, images, and artifacts that exist in the readers’ world. However, their view of his life will be totally confused if they try to refer to Kinbote’s comments on the poem. There are hidden meanings and certain patterns in his comments, but they have nothing to do with Shade’s poem. They are guided into a fantasy world that

² In her essay, Madeline Descargues discusses *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, but some of her conclusions regarding the blurred border between fiction and history as genres may be aptly applied to *Pale Fire* as well.
vaguely intersects with the ‘real’ world of the poem. The ‘real’ life of Shade is interwoven with and bound to the delusional life of Kinbote. That makes the realism of Shade’s poem seem less believable, and the fantasy of Kinbote’s commentary less irrational. It makes truth seem false and falsehood seem true. The readers find themselves suspended in the middle of sanity and ravings, on the edge of falling into delirium.

Kinbote may be disguised king of Zembla Charles the Beloved, who escaped from his country after the revolution broke out and who hides in New Wye from the Soviet agents that might be sent at any time to kill him. He may also be professor Botkin, a Russian immigrant whose name may be an anagram of Kinbote. As is indicated in the index part of the novel, the word “botkin” also stands for the “maggot of [an] extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought to have hastened their phylogenetic end” (Nabokov 213). Kinbote may be that “fly” who hastened the end of the literary “mammoth” John Shade. Whoever he is, he is very well disguised, and throughout the entire novel he continues to confuse with his comments that shift from ludicrous to quite realistic. He provides a relatively consistent explanation of how he found each piece of the information about Shade that he presents; he provides the names of the people he references and gives a lot of dates. The readers might think: What if he is telling the truth?

In the commentary to line 130, Kinbote digresses from the plot of that comment to reflect on the paintings by a painter called Eystein. That painter used a technique of inserting real wood, wool, velvet, or gold into his paintings to imitate paint, while in the rest of the painting these materials were imitated by paint. From that observation, Kinbote draws a brief and simple conclusion that “… “reality” is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average “reality” perceived by the communal eye” (Nabokov 107). The readers may see what they are not shown, and they may be shown something they are unable to actually see. One may interpret things in a way that is far from their ‘real’ meaning. Here, they probably hear Nabokov giving them a hint about his own work: there is no sense in trying to comprehend whether a work of art is real or fictional, because it creates its own reality. It is real within its fictional world.

The reality of Tristram Shandy is blurred by its shifted time scheme and by the fragmentariness of the events that are presented to the reader. Tristram jumps backwards and forwards in time, laying out the background for what he is about to tell and peeking into the future to promise the knowledge that the readers will soon receive. He engages in rhetoric disputes with Locke throughout the novel, and it seems like he tests and proves his ideas on his audience. Here is how he puts it: “… the cause of obscurity and confusion, in the mind of
man, is threefold. Dull organs, dear Sir, in the first place. Secondly, slight and transient impressions made by objects when the said organs are not dull. And, thirdly, a memory like unto a sieve, not able to retain what it has received” (Sterne 77). Thus, the source of obscurity for Tristram is the receiver of information and not the way this information is delivered. Delusion is a problem of individual perception of an idea and not an issue of the idea itself.

The theme of reality and its philosophic implications in Pale Fire has been the subject of extensive discussion, which has inevitably led to associations with the works of Diderot and Sterne (Rampton 148-180). Both Nabokov and Sterne go beyond the realm of literature in their works and move to philosophy, psychology, and epistemology in their explorations of how the human mind filters reality and interprets received ideas. One of the purposes of writing is structuralizing the chaotic reality that humans live in, in an attempt to make sense of the enormous volume of events, accidents, and happenings that have been taken place since the beginning of our memory. Philosophers have been attempting to classify those issues and to provide a logical, sane interpretation of them, and writers have illustrated those concepts by characters and plot.

The very forms of both novels can actually serve as metaphors of reading and writing. The reality is too complex for a writer to deliver it via a common language, the ideas are too big to gauge them and fit them into a literary work of the volume that a reader can deal with. The use of literary devices can only complicate the undertaking and confuse the reader even more than reality itself. The readers on their end are constantly distracted from comprehending the literary work by the events of the reality they actually live and read in. The sense the readers attempt to make out of a work of art is based on their real-life perception and their real-life experiences and knowledge. Thus, the unexplainable, incomprehensible and controversial occurrences of their ‘autobiographical’ reality can make fiction seem more realistic to them.

Exile and Memory
Memory plays a crucial role in both novels: both Nabokov and Sterne challenge the ability of the readers’ memory to keep track of the stories and to perceive the information that is given in chunks through a filter of the characters’ memories rather than their own.

Regarding exile and memory as themes in Pale Fire, one cannot help but consider Nabokov’s own story. Is he a disguised king? Is he an aging poet recalling his “demented” youth and trying to understand the existential truth? On the last page of the commentary,

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3 For Daniel Albright’s interpretation of Pale Fire as a metaphor of writing and reading, see Rampton 156.
Nabokov peeks out from behind Kinbote, who may be “… an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” (Nabokov 212). Each character of each author can be analyzed through the prism of this author’s actual biography, and in many cases, a resemblance can be found.

Kinbote, Charles the Beloved, Botkin, or whoever he is, is a lonely immigrant, who was forced to leave his country and start his life over again. The readers do not get much information on the landscape of Appalachia, but they do get a complete picture of the ‘crystal land’ of Zembla. Does that Zembla even exist? If it does, is it as beautiful as Kinbote pictures it? The readers do not know that and they will never know. They do not know how much of the information that Kinbote gives them comes from his memory of his actual life in Zembla and his friendship with Shade either, and how much of that is a pure fiction of Kinbote’s sick imagination. His own words show that he is not well accepted in the society he lives in, not understood, and not welcomed. The only friend Kinbote ostensibly had in New Wye, died before the readers had a chance to get to know him. The only enemy Kinbote ostensibly had also died not long after he met Kinbote. Now it is up to his memory and imagination to tell any story he wants, to construct the world he would like to live in, and in the process of doing that, he is also in a kind of exile, hiding in an imaginary ‘cave’ from the phantom enemies that haunt him.

In *Tristram Shandy*, Uncle Toby can surely be regarded as an exile. He was exiled from his previous life at war and forced to recover in a completely different, peaceful world that he had forgotten how to live in, which he now is unable to readapt to. He does not fit in here, he does not think like other people think here, he is unable to explain how he was wounded, and people around him are unable to understand him. His memory is visual, perceptual, reflex, and not theoretical. That is why he tries to gain that lack of knowledge and becomes absorbed with military manuals, and later on with the physical reconstruction of the fortifications where the siege took place. He tries to adapt to this new life by courting the Widow Wadman for some time, but his attempt fails when she poorly interrogates him about his wound in his groin and whether it would prevent him from having sex. Toby responds equally inadequate to her approach by claiming that “…’Tis better in battle than in bed,” (Sterne 321). He readily gives up this affair and gets back to his solitary obsession.

Both Kinbote and Toby reconstruct their previous (or desirable) lives on the basis of the reality they now live in, and by means available to them at the moment. Kinbote takes the advantage of Shade’s story to (re)create his own and Toby uses the unoccupied land to
reconstruct the siege. Both of them feel outcast in their societies and both of them create shelters for themselves where they can take a deep plunge into their memories or fantasies.

**Death and Mortality**

Death is subject to discussion in both novels, though in quite different moods. In *Pale Fire*, it is contemplated and experienced, and in *Tristram Shandy* it is mocked and escaped.

In “Pale Fire”, death is something that follows John Shade throughout his life, taking away his loved ones. It takes away his parents, his aunt, his daughter, and it finally comes for him. Shade constantly tries to comprehend what death is and whether there is an afterlife. He once finds himself on the edge of life and death and tries to interpret what he saw. Shade asks himself questions that he will never be able to answer:

Does resurrection choose? What years? What day?
Who has the stopwatch? Who rewinds the tape?
Are some less lucky, or do all escape?
A syllogism: other men die; but I
Am not another; therefore I'll not die. (Nabokov 24)

At the end of the poem, he concludes that he believes there is life after death and that his daughter is alive somewhere.

Through digressions in Kinbote’s commentary, it is also revealed what he thinks about death and suicide. He believes it is a bliss to finally break free from this life and to be embraced by God: “We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins” (Nabokov 162). His dispassionate and somehow sarcastic commentaries about Hazel and her allegedly ambiguous notes are in drastic dissonance with Shade’s grief. Kinbote himself admits that he does not want to comment on Hazel, because he finds the topic boring and uninteresting - probably because he cannot link his own story to it. Yet, he is forced to make those comments, because he is a responsible commentator and because in Hazel’s notes he managed to see an omen of her death, which Shade had not been able to predict. Kinbote’s only feeling about Hazel is respect for her boldness to finally break free from this life. His cold-blooded reaction to Shade’s murder is also striking, given that he cared a lot about Shade. His only concern is that the poem is safe and in his possession and that in this situation his dignified behavior and bravery are worthy of a true king. Such a radical discrepancy between Shade and Kinbote in their attitudes to death give a certain balance to the novel. Grief is balanced with indifference, seriousness with buffoonery, and complexity with simplicity.
In *Tristram Shandy*, death is treated in a simpler way than in *Pale Fire*. The only reflection Tristram himself has on his brother’s death is the acknowledgment that from that moment on, he is the only heir of the Shandy family, and he basically starts his ‘life and opinions’ from the time of his brother’s death. “What is the life of man! Is it not to shift from side to side? – from sorrow to sorrow? – to button up one cause of vexation! – and unbutton another!” he exclaims (Sterne 302). Tristram is not afraid of death, he treats it more as an annoyance that comes at the wrong time. He is simply concerned that he may not have enough time to finish his story, and he still has so much to tell, he has promised so much to the reader. When he feels that his death is close, he simply escapes to France, where he succeeds in leaving death far enough behind that he can continue his writing, digress to speculate about French inconveniences, and mock travelogues and their writers.

Walter laments the death of his son but claims that it would be strange if he did not die, because everybody dies, and that this is for the better because death leads to fame and shuts the door for envy. It is better not to live at all than to live, and it is better to be freed from all the hardships of life, Walter continues. During his oratory, he completely forgets about his recently dead son and concludes that “when we are – death is not; – and when death is – we are not” (Sterne 321). The death of his son is just another reason for Walter to practice his eloquence.

Death is something not to be scared of, it is just something that happens sooner or later, no matter how eloquently one may speak about it and how skillful our syllogisms may be. There is an ironic resemblance between the single unfinished line by Shade to whom death unexpectedly came, and Tristram who escaped death to finish his writing.

Hobby-Horses
Commenting on the lines 433 – 434 (Nabokov 152-158), Kinbote, as usual, digresses deeply into his own past, and here, notably, he talks about the idea of escaping to America. That is where he wants to finally give himself over to his hobby of analyzing literary masterpieces. This is important, because it may allude to the widely explored theme of hobby-horses in *Tristram Shandy*. When a person gets on their hobby-horse, they may be drawn too far into their excitement and into the expression of their “expert” opinions. What is this short mention of Kinbote’s intention if not a hint that Nabokov gives his readers, referring to Sterne? Having set out to provide a commentary on Shade’s poem, Kinbote got on his hobby-horse and was blown far away from the true meaning of Shade’s lines.

The theme of hobby-horses is much more developed in *Tristram Shandy*. All the major characters in the novel have their own hobbies, including Tristram himself. Even the
autobiography that he writes is a hobby to him – he enjoys it and has said upfront that he would tell his story in his own way. There is nothing wrong with people having hobby-horses, but only if a man rides his hobby-horse “peaceably and quietly along the King’s highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him” (Sterne 13). A hobby-horse can do harm to the person who has it, as well as to other people, and it can make people lonely – that is what Tristram means. Through Tristram’s digressive passages the readers learn his opinions about hobby-horses. An example can be found already on the first pages of the novel, when Tristram questions the too-formal style of the midwife’s license, which was issued by the lawyer Didius who got on his hobby-horse of field-specific prolixity and made the license incomprehensible.

Through the speeches of the characters, mainly Walter, Toby, Trim and, of course, Tristram himself, each of their hobby-horses is exposed. His father’s hobby is theories and hypotheses, and he gets carried away with them, disregarding all other people around him. No one ever understands him and his benign and compliant wife never contradicts him even when he craves argument. All these issues make him frustrated and he consequently engages in new rhetorical speeches about his frustrations. Like everyone else’s in the Shandy family, Walter’s sorrows stem from his failure to communicate with other people and to create the “essential connections between himself and the world around him” (Towers 26). Instead of taking actual care of the child Tristram, Walter sets out to write a ‘Tristraedia’, an extensive manual on Tristram’s best upbringing. But Tristram grows too fast without getting any upbringing at all, and Walter’s theory becomes outdated without having ever been employed. Here, it is emphasized how Tristram resembles his father, being carried away by his own hobby-horses and not being able to keep up with the actual life that outruns his narration.

Another example of the damage to Tristram by his father’s hobby-horse was in the very beginning of his life. Because of Walter’s Shandean hypothesis, special forceps were used in Tristram’s birth, to protect the most important part of the baby’s brain. As a result, Tristram had his nose flattened by those forceps, but Walter does not realize anything. His hobby-horse can be compared with Don Quixote’s insanity and regarded as a satire “… against learned folly to indict an ethically obtuse theological dogmatism that Erasmus associated with idolatry and tyrannical promotion of letter above spirit” (Wehrs 89). Walter puts theory above emotions and feelings, and is blunt in his never-ending attempts to impose his views on others.
Toby’s hobby-horse of military methodology and the reconstruction of the fortifications of the siege where he was wounded means everything to him, but nothing to others. It only makes Toby more distant from the world that he is supposed to live in, and it makes him lonely in his obsession, as happens to each character in the novel. Certain words trigger them to get on their hobby-horses, and Sterne uses metaphors to show how far away people can be blown away by their obsessions, and how that might affect their perception of reality. But, “A Hobby-Horse allows a man to forget himself, his limitations, and his failures” (Davidson 20). The paradox of a hobby-horse is that although it causes alienation, it also serves as a form of adaptation and shelter. Kinbote’s hobby works in the same way.

1.2.4 Digression as a Means of Metafiction

Any novelist is occupied with two essential issues: the self-perception of the narrator and his own work as a piece of art, and the concept of the reader. Writers are usually aware of these issues, but a writer of metafiction makes the narrator’s questions, his narrative, and the reader the subject of his work. This is what sets him apart from other authors, according to Inger Christensen. Metafiction thus provides an inner perspective on the process of creation of fiction and reveals its fundamental issues (13). Both Sterne’s and Nabokov’s texts are highly self-reflective.

*Pale Fire* is a story that presents itself as a narrative about another, ostensibly autobiographical text. In his comments and the Foreword, Kinbote reflects on the very process and context of writing these comments and presents his own writing as an artistic artifact, thus creating another layer of narrative. Kinbote frequently appeals to his audience in his comments. As if mockingly, he writes to the reader in the very beginning: “My Foreword has been, I trust, not too skimpy. Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader” (Nabokov 11). As Tristram does, Kinbote promises the reader that he will digress into the topics that he mentions in the current irrelevant commentary. An example of this is when he says that he will later describe the ritual of invitations and responding to invitations in New Wye. However, unlike Tristram, he never keeps his promises, because he is too preoccupied with his own interests, and does not really care for the reader. Kinbote reflects on his writing, explains his choices, comments on the process of his work, and acknowledges where he stumbles and engages into too much distracted detail. But this acknowledgment does not prevent him from doing just that. He does not judge his own method, like Tristram does, but simply admires it.
Tristram Shandy is a self-conscious narrator who analyzes his own text and reveals his reasons for writing or not writing particular parts. Instead of simply telling his story, he deviates to admit that he does not progress much in delivering his story, and reflects on his slow progress: “…unforeseen stoppages …, which … will rather increase than diminish as I advance, – have struck out a hint which I am resolved to follow; … to go on leisurely, writing and publishing two volumes of my life every year” (Sterne 35). As the writing continues, he keeps reflecting on his progress and acknowledges the moments when he gets too distracted into digressions and reveals how he escapes from it, for example by starting the next chapter or leaving the pages blank.

Along the way, Tristram provides his readers with various distracted inserts and promises of future knowledge about particular things, without asking if they want them. Unlike in Pale Fire, most of the promises the narrator makes are fulfilled. Each promised tale is told, Tristram’s identity is more or less shaped by the end of his second European tour (with the help of the digressive story about his first tour), and, finally, uncle Toby’s promised love affair is delivered and brought to its unhappy ending. Basically, the readers get what they were promised, and just a little bit more. It should be mentioned that Tristram warns his readers about that upfront: “…if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road, – or should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along, – don’t fly off, – but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;—and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing, – only keep your temper” (Sterne 11). Tristram values his readers highly, and he regards the self-reflective explanations as an obligation of any author to his audience.

*Tristram Shandy* is an astounding work of metafiction in the 18th century, and if one examines the 20th century’s novel in this regards, one should look at its contours against the background of Sterne’s masterpiece. I agree with Christensen, who claims that “… the examination of Tristram Shandy serves mainly to set off the features of the later novels” (11). As Tristram Shandy dazzles with self-conscious, self-reflective narrator’s digressions, it can indeed be regarded as a metafictional encyclopedia for the future authors.

**Narrator vs. Author**

In *Pale Fire*, the author of the poem is claimed to be John Shade and the author of the commentary Charles Kinbote. But although the two parts of the novel are very disintegrated and can be read separately, the reader still perceive some latent signals between the parts and observe their integrity. It is important to note that Kinbote allegedly possesses the drafts of the poem and includes some of the lines that Shade omitted into his commentary whenever he
needs them for his own story. And, finally, there are some shocking lines closer to the end of the poem:

And now a silent liner docks, and now
Sunglassers tour Beirut, and now I plough
Old Zembla's fields where my gray stubble grows,
And slaves make hay between my mouth and nose.

*Man's life as commentary to abstruse Unfinished poem.* Note for further use (Nabokov 67).

These lines, the first and the only mention of Zembla in the poem, and a clear prediction about the contents of the comments and about the unfinished status of the poem, completely confuse the readers’ understanding of what is reality and what is fiction, and who actually is the narrator. There has been a lot of discussion about who is the narrator in *Pale Fire,* and Boyd suggests one of the more interesting solutions (107-127). It could be that Kinbote is the narrator, making up not just the poem and Zembla, but also Shade and all other characters, at least in the way they are portrayed in the novel. In this case, the poem would be a digression from the main plot of Kinbote’s Zemblan life and exile. Equally possible is that it could be Shade who wrote the poem, made up Zembla and everything that is connected with it, including Kinbote, at least in the way he is portrayed in the novel. If this is the case, then the digression would certainly be the commentary.

As much as Kinbote’s commentary, Tristram’s narrative causes his readers to have doubts about the narrator’s credibility. Tristram writes his autobiography starting five years before his conception, he digresses to tell the stories of his mother and father, his uncle Toby, parson Yorick and the midwife, and to speculate on writing. How does he know all that if he has not even been born yet? He claims that he got this knowledge from the members of his family, from various documents, diaries, letters, and from hearsay, but the readers may believe him as much as they believe in the ‘truthfulness’ of Kinbote’s claim to be the friend and muse of Shade. But their constant, coherent reference to various sources of information serves to remind the readers that the narrators are Kinbote and Tristram, and not the omniscient authors Nabokov and Sterne.

Tristram puts his characters, who are supposed to be the real members of his family, in different situations and places, he leaves them there when he remembers that he should

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4 For further discussion on the person of the narrator in *Pale Fire,* supporting and contradicting Boyd’s theory, see Grabes 60-62, and ReDewal and Roth 1-36.
digress to tell another thing, then he gets back to his characters where he left them, or he
simply puts them in other situations for his own convenience, to digress again. Their stories
succumb to his opinions, they are being left out and then picked up again to illustrate his
thoughts. At the beginning of his work he clearly states his authoritative role: “In writing
what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules nor to any man's rules that
ever lived” (Sterne 3). He plays a chess game of his own, moving the figures on the board as
he likes, forcing them to stop in the middle of a sentence. He lets them speak when he likes
and they say what he needs them to say. Sterne has additionally provided the reader with a
minor number of footnotes throughout the novel to explain his allusions regarding the issues
that Tristram talks about. It once again leads to the conclusion that the narrator of The Life
and Opinions is Tristram, not Sterne. Sterne acts only as an invisible editor.

Thus, it is important that the narrators in both novels are not confused with their
authors Nabokov and Sterne. Most of the time, the readers do not see the authors and they do
not hear them. However, unlike Nabokov, Sterne occasionally takes on an active
participatory role by questioning the opinions of Tristram, whereas Nabokov tends to mock
the reader, being disguised behind Kinbote, who provides an irrelevant commentary to a
serious poem and asks the reader if they enjoyed it. In both novels, the consciousness of a
fictional author serves as a filter through which everything in the novels happens. In this
regard, Sterne offers the postmodern authors a vast reservoir to dip into. In the same way that
Tristram juggles with his characters in his narration, Kinbote juggles with the meanings of
Shade’s poem, picking up the words and phrases at his own discretion and for the
convenience of linking to them his own story as digressive comments.

The Narratee as a Character

In their digressions, both Kinbote and Tristram refer to their audiences many times. But their
audiences, obviously, are not to be confused with the audiences of Nabokov and Sterne
(Pegenaute 135-138). Kinbote’s and Tristram’s readers are the assistants in creating their
reality, while Nabokov’s and Sterne’s readers know that this reality is a fiction.

Kinbote occasionally addresses his implied reader regarding the order in which to
read his work, and recommends the reader to interpret his commentary, support his opinions,
and appreciate his work in the way he intended. The actual reader does not recognize
Kinbote’s commentary as adequate notes to Shade’s poem, but rather reads the comments as
a separate story, draws their own conclusions and does not respond to Kinbote’s appeal. This
latter reader is Nabokov’s ‘real’ reader, and the former is another character of the novel.
This pattern is more complex in *Tristram Shandy*. Here, the narrator does not only make numerous references to his audience in general, but he divides this audience into “Sir” and “Madam”, and often refers to them separately, deciding which parts of his narrative are more suitable for the female reader, and which for the male. He engages in imaginary discussions and arguments with his male and female readers, he has a certain view of their qualities and mental abilities, and he tries to teach them something, digressing into deductive speeches and stories. In that way, he creates a fictional reader of his autobiography, whereas we remain the actual readers of Sterne’s novel.

This pattern of the fictional narrator and their fictional narratees employed in both novels may prevent the actual readers of the actual authors, from becoming completely immersed in the fictional reality, and enable them to stay above it as unbiased observers.

1.2.5 Intertextuality and Problems of ‘Translation’

References to other literary works, their analysis, reworks, style inheritance and reconsideration of borrowed ideas are employed by the digressions in both novels. They serve various purposes and may lead to different interpretations.

The very title *Pale Fire* reminds us of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* and to the motif of thievery and borrowing. The readers may interpret it as they wish: the poem can resemble the sun from which Kinbote snatches “pale fire” for his own story, or the poem can be just a pale glow, a shade of Kinbote’s grand story. In his Zemblan-to-English translation of this excerpt of Shakespeare’s play, Kinbote rewrites “pale fire” as “silvery light”. Next, Shakespeare uses the word “resolves”, but Kinbote replaces it with “dissolves” (Nabokov 75). Instead of conveying the meaning that Shakespeare intended, he interprets it and modifies it. For whatever reason, he also inverts the genders of the Shakespearean sun and moon. This shows how inverted and biased his vision is, how he may not only translate wrongly, but also replace and permute obvious things. This is exactly the case with his commentary to Shade’s poem: he not only interprets it in his own way, he “dissolves” it into something different (Farhadiba). There is another aspect to this. By ‘dissolving’ Shade’s poem and deriving new meanings from it, Kinbote creates his own artistic artifact from the borrowed material. This new creation may have its own value, despite the fact that it perverts the other’s text.

Written words can be confused, misprinted, and may completely change their meaning. In that way, Shade’s “white fountain” easily turns into “white mountain” (Nabokov 59). Here, a minor typo creates a huge difference in the meaning of these words. This kind of
misunderstandings, may seem like a trivial and insignificant misprint to one person, but can be crucial to the other. This is how words can become a reason for the alienation of an individual. The very possibility of a correct rendering of a text and its adequate translation is here called into question by Nabokov. Written texts, words and misprints can have different connotations dependent on where, when and by whom they are read, Nabokov claims. Anyone can misinterpret a written text, because everyone is biased and has their own mental preoccupations, regardless of being sane or insane. As an example, Shade refers to the sonnet “Chapman’s Homer” by John Keats in his own poem “Pale Fire”, by intentionally giving misleading references to a newspaper headline about a baseball player named Ben Chapman (Nabokov 18). Kinbote recognizes this mistake and blames the absent-minded printer for it.

Nabokov questioned the very possibility of the correct interpretation of written texts, regardless of what they are – a poem of a neighbor or allusions to Classical Hellenic mythology. Kinbote's commentary on Shade's poem makes terrible errors of “translation”. Whether intentionally or unconsciously, Kinbote is unable to interpret the meaning of Shade’s lines. This is only one example of a wider aesthetic inquiry: which, if any, is the right way to interpret a literary piece? Does the author’s intention matter? One of the questions that Shade asks himself is whether poetry can be a suitable vehicle for philosophical debate, for remembering the past and for dealing with grief:

How ludicrous these efforts to translate
Into one's private tongue a public fate!
Instead of poetry divinely terse,
Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse! (Nabokov 25-26)

There is a certain controversy between Shade's reflections on poetry and the narrative role of the poem as part of the novel. It presents a tension between the internal and external design of the poem. Within the poem, Shade talks about the purpose of poetry as a genre. But in its context, the poem works in a narrative manner: it constitutes a chapter of a larger story. The commentary to line 549 can be a sarcastic response given by Shade to his own question. There, Kinbote provides the dialogue that ostensibly happened between him and Shade, where Shade claims that there would have never been poetry if people had not been engaged in three of the mortal sins: “Pride, Lust and Sloth” (Nabokov 163-166). Returning to intertextual digressions, another of Nabokov’s attacks on poetry is visible. By referencing *Little Gidding*, Nabokov creates a fatal mood around Hazel. Her inquiry about the meaning of the word “sempiternal” creates anxiety and a subtle dissonance between Eliot’s eternal season and some future tragedy. Here, Nabokov “cannibalizes Eliot’s language by
ingeniously making it serve his own purposes…” (Foster 222). Sterne here demonstrates how easy it is to manipulate the language and to create new interpretations for authentic words when they are torn out from their original context.

Kinbote’s intertextual digressions serve other purposes. Here, Nabokov anticipates possible attacks of the critics regarding his method and style. Thus, in his commentaries, Kinbote gives a negative evaluation of Shade’s method of synchronization and reminds the reader that this method has already been exhausted by Flaubert and Joyce. It is funny, because Kinbote himself employs synchronization, telling about Gradus who gradually comes closer to New Wye, while Shade writes his poem, card by card. In the commentary to line 426, Kinbote compares Shade with Robert Frost and digresses a little to reflect on Frost’s mastery (Nabokov 151-152).

Tristram’s regular references to John Locke and his Essay on Human Understanding, often contradicting Locke’s ideas, but sometimes also paraphrasing them, serve as a conductor to reveal his opinions and to uncover his personality. Tristram refers to a “train and succession of our ideas” (Sterne 92), paraphrasing Locke’s concept of duration, and here is another hint of Tristram’s narrative method: as the readers derive their perception of duration from their reflections on the chain of ideas that they are presented with, there is no need to follow a conventional scheme of time and space in narration. One can see that Sterne, no matter how unconventional his work in terms of structure and content, still largely relies on the psychology and philosophy of the 18th century.

Occasionally, to dilute the seriousness of philosophizing and to add humor, Tristram appeals to his “dear and dearer” Rabelais and Cervantes. In various digressive parts, he adapts their stories, rephrases and parodies them, and masterfully imitates them according to his needs. Comparing the discordance of Walter’s, Toby’s and Trim’s conversations with those of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Sterne references his characters’ hobby-horses and develops Cervantes’ thought that tolerance and care are the means of not letting us become mere “products of our own ideas and schemes” (Wehrs 89). Allusions to Cervantes’ characters enhance the feeling of the grotesque that one has reading Tristram Shandy.

Contemplating Uncle Toby’s life and recovery after his wounding, Tristram states that his life was put in danger by words, not ideas, and he declares that “…a fertile source of obscurity it is, – and ever will be, – and that is the unsteady uses of words which have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understandings” (Sterne 78). Whenever someone asked Toby about the details and circumstances of his wound, he would find himself unable to explain it in a way that his audience could comprehend. That was how the idea of actually
showing it occurred to him and developed into a hobby-horse that raised even more concerns about his health.

When Walter Shandy struggles to interpret the meaning of Erasmus’ dialogue about noses, he studies it over and over again, trying to get the sense he wants out of it. When he is unable to do so, he simply scratches the letters with a knife, literally changing the words and thus the meanings, and in that way he receives the sense that he wishes for. As Tristram says about his father, his “… way was to force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified Truth at the rate he did…” (Sterne 586). It is another example of the lengths to which people can go in misinterpreting a written text, relying on their own convictions.

Tristram’s sophisticated quibble with the word ‘bridge’ demonstrates how the language that one uses as a means of communication can become the means of one’s isolation. The fact that one word can have so many different meanings demonstrates the subtlety of language as well as, again, that an individual's own views and preoccupations affect their interpretation of words. Compare the confusion between ‘fountain’ and ‘mountain’ above, where Nabokov’s reflections about the adequacy of the “translation” resonate with Sterne’s concern. It is interesting that Sterne mentioned a typical postmodern problem that has been noted by critics two centuries later and has now been widely explored in the writings of postmodern authors: “The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and “objective” world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own ‘meanings’” (Waugh 3). What a word means may differ significantly from the meaning that each individual attaches to it.

Through his own struggles with his narration, Tristram admits it is difficult to describe the rich, sophisticated, and diverse reality even with the most versatile and inventive kind of writing. Nabokov, as well as Sterne, raises the epistemological question of how knowledge is transmitted from one knower to the other, and how reliably this knowledge can be interpreted by each receiver. According to Sterne, this interpretation is highly unreliable, and Nabokov proves his claim to be correct. The interpretation of pre-written texts and transmitted knowledge, and the interpretation of trains of ideas are ultimately subjective issues. Adequate literary resources have hardly ever been available to deliver any common meanings, and there are no devices to clearly and sufficiently reflect both public reality and intimate feelings.
1.2.6 Digression as a Means of Irony and Satire

Both *Pale Fire* and *Tristram Shandy* are considered to be philosophical works, but the pompousness, seriousness and moralizing that are common for regular philosophical works, and the ambitions mockingly set by the plots of both these novels, are obscured by the grotesque situations and events shown in the digressions.

The irony of *Pale Fire* is mostly subtle, delivered by the comically pompous style of Kinbote’s Foreword and notes, by their discrepancy with the poem and with Kinbote's own serious and responsible attitude to his job. Shade’s search for a universal truth is contrasted and balanced by Kinbote’s ravings. An established poet, who has just written what is probably the best work of his life, self-reflective and deeply personal, dies on the porch of a deranged king of ‘Wonderland’, having been accidentally shot by an assassin who suffers from a bowel disorder. The poem, an elevated ethical work, enters into the possession of an eloquent, deranged commentator who louses it up and adapts it to his fantasies. In the comment on line 149, Kinbote uses several pages to tell about the king’s adventurous escape journey through the miraculous land of Zembla and, as if mocking his readers, ends the comment with the words: “I trust the reader has enjoyed this note” (Nabokov 111). What he makes of Shade’s poem is outlandish enough for the readers not to become bored in the process of reading, and sometimes it also makes enough sense to not throw it away.

In *Tristram Shandy*, the misfortunes that fall upon poor Tristram, starting even before his birth, at the moment of his conception, seem ludicrous: the wrong name, the flattened nose, the accidental circumcision. Tristram satirizes social limitations and narrow-mindedness by means of his metaphors. He provides a tale about noses and shows how Walter becomes utterly frustrated while trying to prove that people do not make stories about noses where a nose is just a nose. However, he does not come up with a legitimate idea. As if mocking him, Tristram stops his readers from trying to comprehend what he means:

I define a nose, as follows, – intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female, of what age, complexion, and condition soever, for the love of God and their own souls, to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put any other ideas into their minds, than what I put into my definition.—For by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs, – I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less (Sterne 197).
The readers can either trust that the word ‘nose’, or any other word, has to be regarded literally, or choose to interpret it in their own way with other connotations.

Walter is probably the most prominent object of Tristram’s irony. Nobody understands his rhetoric, no matter how much sense his theories make to him or how eloquent he is. Walter cannot convince anyone, but he never stops trying. Having gotten on his hobby-horse, he is blind to anybody’s reactions and to everything that is going on in front of him. He wanders in his theories, unable to fix the door that has been creaking for ages. It should be noted that Tristram is also unable to do that simple thing, because he is too busy sharing his own opinions. Sterne is here peeking out and satirizing the futility of ‘learned’ talks accompanied by oblivion about reality.

Nabokov and Sterne use seriousness and foolishness, absurdity of situations, and ambiguity of metaphors to add balance to their work, to paint an ironic smile on the reader’s face and to make the reader constantly question: What is it that I am reading? What does that mean? How is that possible? Am I getting it right? There are, probably, as many correct answers to these questions as there are readers.

1.3 Conclusion to Chapter 1
The discussion about whether Nabokov is a modern or a postmodern writer or about his contribution to the literary tradition may never end. If one regards postmodern literature as a non-conventional metafictional obscurity of genres, satirizing and mocking the modernist search for a universal truth, obscuring the line between fiction and reality and questioning the very possibility of an adequate interpretation of reality, questioning the ability of words to deliver clear meanings to each individual, then Nabokov is definitely a postmodern writer. And, applying the same definition, I may certainly claim that Laurence Sterne is as postmodern as Nabokov. The consonance between Pale Fire and The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy has multiple levels. They share a resemblance in structure, thematic scope, irony, intertextuality, and metafictional manifestations. All these features are delivered in both novels by the authors’ masterly employment of the technique of digression.

There are a lot of issues that Nabokov would not have been able to mention without digression. He guides his readers through two storylines, which would not have been possible if Kinbote had been a reliable commentator who provided relevant comments to the novel, rather than extensive digressions into his own life. Digressions in Pale Fire tell a lot about the characters, and it is up to the reader whether to believe them or not. Due to the
digressions, characters become more complex, the readers know their background and opinions, and it is up to them to decide on how true that information is.

In *Pale Fire*, the readers are challenged to dissect truth from lies, and digressions serve another purpose here – to obscure reality. Through digressions, Nabokov opens up possibilities to discuss topics that he would have been unable to discuss within a poem alone. These discussions are too great to be omitted, they expand the reader’s interest and the value of *Pale Fire* as a whole. Kinbote’s long passages on a variety of topics, the discussions that he and Shade ostensibly had, about for example religion and sin, death and life, and God, could not have been covered without digressions. And at this point, there is no concern as to whether or not Kinbote is insane or whether or not those discussions really happened, because we know that it is Nabokov who talks and we are amazed by his masterly technique, as much as we are amazed by what he actually says. And, finally, the content and the very use of digression as a technique resonates with the technique of Sterne, establishing the significance of once unconventional device.
CHAPTER 2: SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

1.4 Kurt Vonnegut and the Tralfamadorian Way of Neglecting War

During his writing career, Vonnegut’s works have been called science fiction, satire, black humor, and postmodern. The last one is probably the most applicable definition, as it incorporates all possible genres and forms. Occupied with the problems of the world he lived in and susceptible to its peculiarities and issues, Vonnegut created an admirable literary heritage that can be both fit and unfit for any labeling. It can even be described as follows: “Like other examples of postmodern art, such as Andy Warhol’s paintings of soup cans, Vonnegut’s writings blur the line between high and low culture” (Farrell 9). The one thing that many agree on and that will remain unchanged is that Vonnegut earned his reputation of one of the most important novelists in world literature.

Although Vonnegut used some conventions of science fiction, he did this not out of a plain interest in technology and gadgets, but rather to compel his reader to think beyond common reality. Vonnegut belongs to a tradition of satire that reaches back to the ancient Greeks (Marvin 14). He imagined aliens and space, time travel and other worlds in a mere desire to point out the flaws of our ‘real’ society. He also aimed at creating anti-art, anti-system, and he developed a new way of talking about the absurd reality of war, in which the principle of power and violence could be eliminated.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a mosaic composed of episodes separated from each other by gaps and offered in a non-chronological order. These fragments seem to be unconnected and they can often be read as finished texts, as if Vonnegut started the novel anew with each episode. A depleted episode, constrained to conform to the general laws of the structure, is contrasted with an episode taken in its singularity, detached from any connections. A fragment of reality is given back its initial freedom and equality with other fragments as well as its independence from a human being. In this world, there is nothing else behind the surface of things. This space is flat and resembles theatrical scenery. The reader’s eye touches the surface of things and stops. The objects, events, or characters alternate on a background of emptiness, which creates a feeling of a gap or of non-existence. They are just shells of absurdity. Having recognized it, the reader becomes terrified.

In Vonnegut’s world, everything that happens refers to either past or future. The present is replaced by emptiness. By contrast, the Tralfamadorian world is a permanent, eternal present. There is no future or past. Everything is happening here and now. In the
aliens’ understanding, a war is a failed episode in history, a condition that is uncommon in the universe and that can be neglected. Tralfamadorians search for a word that could reflect the illusion of presence. By contrast, Vonnegut needs to express war, emptiness, and death. There is no way to talk or write about it directly, because if the absurd, the war, is signified somehow, if it is given a particular expression, it will be conceptualized and spared its emptiness. The only way to write about it is to omit it. In Slaughterhouse-Five, there is a gap instead of war. The readers do not see direct armed confrontations, mass battle scenes, the losses of enemies, or the glory of the victory. Vonnegut does not even show the bombing of Dresden itself. They see what happens before it and after it. But the very episode of the bombing which, as the author claims in the first chapter, should have become the core event of the novel, is not there. The emptiness remains emptiness. The only possible equivalent for it might be the incomprehensible bird word, “Poo-tee-weet”.

All this leads to the conclusion that this ‘Dresden book’ is not about Dresden itself and not about a particular war, but about human nature in general, in a global meaning of human existence in time and space. It is “…a moving meditation on the relationship between history and dreaming cast in an appropriately factual/fictional mode” (Tanner 195). This also regards Tristram Shandy, which is not a one person’s biography but an encyclopedia of thought, tragedy, and comedy, a set of random fragments of knowledge and disconnected reflections – whatever it may seem to each reader who interprets the train of ideas in their own way.

It is inevitable to draw resemblance between Vonnegut’s and Sterne’s intentions and techniques. There is no better way to express the absurdity and chaos, as well as the incredible richness of ones’ reality than via the device of digression in its various manifestations. As William Allen aptly noted, “… in creating this cosmic, nonlinear narrative Vonnegut uses fragments of all sorts of traditional narrative forms, much as a bird might use twigs, bits of string, and its own feathers to construct a nest, something very different from the sum of its parts” (7). In doing this, Vonnegut largely resembles Sterne and his Tristram Shandy, carefully constructed with digressions of various sorts.

1.5 The Technique of Digression in Tristram Shandy and Slaughterhouse-Five

Analyzing the technique of digression in the novel The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman by Laurence Sterne, and Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Slaughterhouse-Five, I
will consider the way in which digressions form the structure of the novels, provide information about the characters and background for the plot, deliver the themes, add a metafictional dimension, create intertextuality and supply irony and satire to the texts.

1.5.1 Digression in Forming the Structure and Providing Background for the Plot

Both novels have a non-linear structure without a climax and a disrupted time scheme. This is achieved through the use of digressive elements, such as time and space travel, intertextual inserts and descriptions, and associative derivations.

It is quite difficult to determine whether *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a plot at all. The author himself defines his novel in the first chapter as “…jumbled and jangled … because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (Vonnegut 16). Reading the novel, “…one is left with something approaching the impression of seeing all the marvelous and horrific moments, all at the same time” (Tanner 197). However, it is crucial to define the plot of the novel in order to consider the digressions from that plot, so I will discuss some episodes in a more or less chronological order.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* can be considered to have three plots where Billy Pilgrim as the protagonist. The first one is where Billy Pilgrim is an optometrist who lives in Ilium, New York, has a wife and two children, survives an airplane crash, loses his wife and loses his mind and begins raving about his experience of time travel, about his being kidnapped by aliens on a flying saucer and about the circumstances and the exact date of his own death. The second plot may be about Billy Pilgrim, a miserable and ridiculous young soldier who witnesses the atrocity of war and survives the bombing of Dresden. And, finally, the third plot may be about Billy Pilgrim, a human being from planet Earth who was kidnapped by Tralfamadorians and lives naked in a transparent zoo together with another kidnapped human being, a movie actress, who becomes pregnant from Billy. This Billy studies Tralfamadorian philosophy and reads their novels. These three plots are developed simultaneously, which is made possible by the use of digression. The storylines where Billy is not at war have neither a beginning nor an end, to say nothing about the climax, but the war plot may be considered more or less linear (Nitta). It begins when Billy is assigned to the European theater, continues with his prison experiences and dispatch to Dresden, his days there, and the bombing, and ends with the rescue of those who survived. Regarding this plot as the most linear and regarding the author’s self-stated intent to write a novel about Dresden, I will consider the ‘non-war’ episodes as digressions from the main ‘war plot’. It is worth mentioning that if the non-war episodes were not digressions, Vonnegut would not be able to show the centrality of
the war plot. Thus, Billy’s non-war life is a mere set of digressions from his war experience, like an “ascending, widening spiral that circles over the same territory yet does so from ever higher and wider perspective” (Allen 7). If the novel was constructed in a linear order, that plot would have become just one of the episodes in his life, but not the key period that defined all the other episodes. The digressions into Billy’s non-war life create a feeling that everything else in the life of a person who witnessed war, past or future, is concentrated around that memory. This person will never overcome that memory and will never leave it in the past, but is doomed to always come back to it.

The novel consists of ten chapters. The first one feels like a preface where the author provides an excursus into the roots and reasons for his decision to write about the Dresden bombing. The readers are provided with fragmented knowledge about the author’s Dresden experience, about his life and the events, talks, research, observations, and findings that eventually defined his book. They get quotes from poetry, limericks, carols, and excerpts from the historical works that nurtured the author’s vision. Billy Pilgrim’s life begins in the second chapter, and they are told upfront how it will end. After they are provided with the chronology of Billy’s life, they are taken on a time-travel adventure. In a way, the readers too become ‘unstuck in time’ when they travel with Billy, and if they try to put all the compressed fragments and messages that construct the novel in sequence, they inevitably gain the impression of “arrested moments suspended in time” (Tanner 197). The readers follow Billy, who experiences irregular and random jumps in time, they receive insight into the details of the objects, people, and events that Billy encounters, and they are given quotations from ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ works of fiction and philosophical concepts, as well as jokes, anecdotes, and songs that Billy hears and reads. This collecting of knowledge resembles that of Tristram Shandy, although Vonnegut has made his character a mere perceiver of that knowledge, whereas Tristram himself passes it on to his readers.

Reading Slaughterhouse-Five is like entering a seemingly empty room: we make a step and we stumble into an invisible object which becomes visible as soon as we touch it. We stop for a moment, surprised by our discovery, we examine the object, we take one step back to see it fully and we stumble into another object that becomes visible right away. Shocked, we throw our hand to the right and suddenly touch another object, attached to the first one. We discover all the things in the room in our chaotic movement. We do not know the right way to explore them, so we just grab the air randomly, just as Billy is moved randomly through his life. As Allen defines, “Slaughterhouse-Five’ narrative mode is allied with the stream of consciousness technique … seeks to reproduce the mind’s simultaneous
blending of the past through memory, the present through perception, and the future through anticipation” (7). This statement leads again to Tristram Shandy. Vonnegut exposes Billy’s life to his readers just like Sterne does with Tristram’s: drops of the present are mixed up with the streams of the past, sprinkled with some droplets of the future, spilled on a flat surface in front of them and flowing in different directions.

There is no suspense in Slaughterhouse-Five. There is only a piling up of episodes that Billy has experienced, is experiencing and will be experiencing throughout his life. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut intentionally reveals the outcomes of the conflicts he creates. Vonnegut had a remarkable ability to use the disrupted composition of the novel in an efficient, self-conscious manner, “… to underline a postmodernist trauma, and to render the post-war Western world, a world where nothingness prevails; a world bereft of design” (Diwany 87). The structure of Slaughterhouse-Five, which does not have a beginning, a middle or an end as a traditionally told story does, is a formal manifestation of his message: life is illogical, there is no cause and effect, and people do not make choices or decide anything; everything is just happening, infinitely and randomly. One gets a feeling for the incomprehensibility of reality and time, of war and death.

The structure of Tristram Shandy, like the structure of Slaughterhouse-Five, delivers the message of its author, though it is not as pessimistic as Vonnegut’s message. Tristram occasionally laments: “O ye Powers! ...which enable mortal man to tell a story worth the hearing, – that kindly shew him, where he is to begin it, – and where he is to end it, – what he is to put into it, – and what he is to leave out, – how much of it he is to cast into shade, – and whereabouts he is to throw his light” (Sterne 187). Obviously, reality is too complex, too chaotic to build it into a linear plot, and life happens too fast to keep up with writing about it.

There is time travel in Tristram Shandy as well. These are digressions from the main plot where Tristram tries to write about his life and opinions while simultaneously experiencing them. However, unlike Billy, who is thrown in time and space by transcendental powers, Tristram willfully embarks on a journey to different periods of his life and the lives of his family members, even to those periods that he did not witness. He finishes his novel with a description of the events that happened five years before his birth. Vonnegut adopted the disrupted time scheme from Sterne to provide his digressions in the same non-chronological way. Like Tristram, Billy even jumps to the time before he was born.

The way in which characters may be suspended in time and space while the narrator diverts into another subject is common both novels and in this way, Slaughterhouse-Five alludes to Tristram. Tristram always returns to the point of his story where he left, and Billy
always returns to the moments when he ‘comes unstuck in time’ at war, no matter how far into the other episodes of his life he has traveled.

Like in *Tristram Shandy*, the digressions in *Slaughterhouse-Five* containing actual information about real events, places, and personalities serve the purpose of blurring the line between history and fiction. The magical realism that is created on this edge where the readers are given fictional descriptions of the actual historical events and real-life issues helps to establish interest and to keep them engaged in both fantasy and boring reality. “Vonnegut’s famously heterodox narrative techniques – employing collage, temporal slippages, drawings, authorial interventions, and the mixture of fiction and non-fiction…” (Tally 12) are in my opinion widely used in *Tristram Shandy*. Digressions in both novels disrupt the linear structure, deliver the authors’ messages and create a mixture of genres.

1.5.2 Providing Information about the Characters by Means of Digression

Neither the characters of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, nor the characters in *Tristram Shandy*, except Tristram, evolve. There is none of the customary conflict between protagonist and antagonist in either novel.

Billy Pilgrim is an example of an anti-hero in contemporary literature: he is an embodiment of the notion that reality is no longer understandable and that history has been constructed by somebody, just like fiction. Billy experiences a real historical event, World War II, in a way which makes his attitude “… more mundane than the grandiloquence some history books might suggest …” (Simmons 3). Billy is passive; one does not see any of his convictions or the values that may influence the choices he makes. He actually does not make any choices. “Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future” (Vonnegut 50). The character of Billy is naturally determined in a world where there is no free will and everything is predetermined. Vonnegut is thus demonstrating that no character could possibly make choices, because there is just no point in it.

Even before his first journey in time and before he becomes acquainted with Tralfamadorean philosophy, Billy is a weak and passive person. He looks ridiculous as a soldier, he does not make any effort to save himself, he is ready to die any moment in war, and he never does anything to change the world or himself. “Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam-, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do. He was simply having lunch…” (Vonnegut 49). He neither succeeds nor fails, he neither struggles nor grows. He becomes an optometrist because his father-in-law arranges everything. He becomes rich because the city of Ilium has a factory where the
workers need glasses, so his work is in high demand. Billy does not mind being displayed naked to the Tralfamadorians in a transparent zoo, he does not get excited about being there together with a naked movie actress, and he does not mind making her pregnant. He does not feel happiness and does not feel grief. He does not have any emotions or ambitions. He is a natural product of a senseless world. The only choice Billy makes is to reveal his experiences to the public, but even then he is ridiculed and considered to be insane. Throughout the novel, he is called Billy and never William, which also reveals that he is like a helpless child who never manages to become a man.

Billy is not a bad guy and not a good guy, he does not possess any virtues or flaws; he is the most ordinary guy. When he asks the Tralfamadorians why they picked him, they say there is not any. “Vonnegut’s characters tend to be helpless, often bewildered, and lonely people who are victims of fateful circumstances beyond their control” (Farrell 9). Billy’s character serves as a conductor for the author’s message. The digressions that construct the novel convey different episodes from Billy’s life and fragments of his knowledge, but all these elements are provided to stage the picture of the world that the author draws and to outline the character as a furnishing item of that world. The readers do get to know him, they do see how strikingly awkward he is and how he does not fit into the war situation, they do know that he is a peaceful ordinary guy – in that way he is a well-shaped character. But Billy is as hopeless in the last chapter as he is when they first meet him.

In his static mode, Billy Pilgrim is very similar to Uncle Toby. Toby is a wounded veteran, but he is as harmless as Billy. He is the guy who “had scarce a heart to retaliate upon a fly” (Sterne 100). One may wonder how he would have been able to act at war if he is so peaceful, and he does not fit into the war scenery any more than Billy. They are both aliens of some sort. The readers find out a lot about Uncle Toby from Tristram’s numerous digressions and from Toby’s own speeches and reactions and, unlike Billy, Toby is a decent man with lots of virtues. But like Billy, he is static. Nothing that happens to him changes him. Like Billy, he does not make any choices and does not fight. He does not even argue when he does not agree with his brother’s statements – he just whistles Lillabullero. When his courting of the Widow Wadman fails because of her inappropriate supposition about his potency, he does not do anything to defend himself; instead, he just leaves that undertaking. He may be physically capable of being with a woman, but his obsession with fortifications and military affairs makes him emotionally incapable of love and sexual pursuit. This is Toby’s substitution of a woman by a hobby-horse. As Towers puts it, “So intense has the displacement been that all his fire and energy and passion had been drained away, as it were,
from the pursuit of a real woman and channeled into the substitute drive” (23). Toby’s story, as well as Billy’s, is told gradually, by piling up the fragments, and the readers learn more about him as they turn the pages. But everything they find out about both these characters is just a collection of facts from different perspectives; there is no development.

Vonnegut makes Billy comical and even grotesque, just as Sterne’s Tristram is comical. Billy, like Tristram, is damaged in some way – psychologically and physically. Both Tristram’s and Billy’s personality disorders are rooted in their childhood misfortunes: Tristram’s conception, wrong name, damaged nose and accidental circumcision, and Billy’s childhood fears: when his father tried to teach him to swim by “sink or swim method”, when he was afraid of falling into the Grand Canyon and of darkness in the Carlsbad Caverns. These early fears have caused Billy’s future inefficiency as a soldier and as a strong-willed personality in the traditional, common understanding of these terms. But unlike Billy and Toby, Tristram’s character evolves, even though his development is shown very slowly and digressively. There is no climax in his development, and he does not go through conflict or struggle. He evolves through his opinions as he writes and his views on writing and reality have changed by the end of the novel.

Vonnegut’s novel is centered on Billy’s character like Sterne’s novel is centered on his characters, but there is no traditional protagonist vs. antagonist conflict in either novel. Due to the numerous digressions, the readers would have hardly been able to see such a conflict if it had been there. Just like Sterne, Vonnegut provides a large-scale view and at the same time detailed knowledge on various subjects by using the characters as conductors.

1.5.3 Delivering the Themes of the Novels through Digressions

Among the themes common for Slaughterhouse-Five and Tristram Shandy, delivered by different digressions, are the relations between free will and predestination, and between time and death.

Free Will and Predestination

The theme of free will and predestination permeates Slaughterhouse-Five and various episodes of Billy’s life, as well as Billy himself, serve as an illustration of this theme. The readers receive the first clue in the first chapter, even before they meet Billy. There is a moment when the author tells about the Dresden driver, Gerhard Müller, one of the two people to whom the book is dedicated. Müller had sent a Christmas postcard to Vonnegut’s friend O’Hare in which he expressed the hope to meet again “… in a world of peace and freedom in the taxi cab if the accident will” (Vonnegut 2). The author says he likes this “if
the accident will”. When one returns to the first chapter for a rereading, this small
digressional notion may seem like an introductory cue to one of the biggest themes of the
novel. People do entrust themselves to ‘accident’, ‘destiny’, ‘fate’ or other variations on that
theme, something that governs them aside from their free will. Maybe Müller’s words gave
Vonnegut a clue about the composition and the message of his future Dresden novel.

Billy becomes acquainted with the concept of predestination while he lives on
Tralfamadore. The readers become acquainted with this concept through a number of
digressions about Billy’s life on Tralfamadore and about the different events that he is
engaged in on Earth, such as when the airplane crashed when he and other optometrists,
including Valencia’s father, were heading to a convention. He knew that all of them, except
himself and the copilot, would die, and still he did not stop any of them from boarding that
plane, because this is how the future is designed and nobody can change that. Billy does not
stop anyone from taking steps to death, like the Tralfamadorians do not do anything to
prevent the end of the universe, which will happen because one of them will experiment with
a flying saucer. The only cause is a universal predestination, and each creature is just
“…trapped in the amber of this moment” (Vonnegut 63). There is no why and there is no
because, so there is no way to control things that happen and there is no free will.

A demonstration of the concept of predestination is given when Billy watches the
World War II movie backward: when he knows the outcomes, it does not matter how it all
happened and how it began. The weapon in this film disintegrates into minerals again, and all
that humans would need to do is to keep those minerals as they are and not let them kill
anybody. But humans never do that, they always produce the weapon and start the war. Billy
gets a visual experience of predestination. In the same way, the author allows the readers to
experience it as well when he unveils upfront what will happen with Billy. He kills the
suspense. When one knows what happens in the end, it does not really matter how one gets
there – via the linear or digressional path. There is no cause and no result, no logic of the
events. The moments just happen. In the same way, this novel just ‘happens’, piece by piece,
randomly.

When the Tralfamadorians tell Billy that the end of the universe has nothing to do
with the atrocity and the foolishness that take place on Earth, he understands once again that
everything is predesigned and that free will does not exist. There is ‘no why’ for Billy to be
chosen by Tralfamadorians and there is ‘no why’ for him to survive effortlessly during the
bombing of Dresden. He was destined to survive the war, as he was destined to survive the
airplane crash, be kidnapped by aliens and be shot by an assassin while giving his speech at a
conference. It is strange for him to ask if there is free will, since he has never possessed it himself. His very life and personality clearly demonstrate the concept of predestination and the absence of free will. And it is, probably, very strange that humans are the only population that talks about free will and yet keeps practicing violence and destruction.

The pattern in which omniscient forces move Billy through time and space resembles the pattern in which Tristram manipulates the people in his story, moving them here and there, suspending them in the middle of their way downstairs or interrupting them in the middle of the sentence. However, there is no free will in Tristram’s reality either. Tristram acknowledges that he himself is subject to predestination. He laments that he was “… brought forth into this scurvy and disastrous world of ours. – I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets … for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them … than it has in this vile, dirty planet of ours…” (Sterne 10). Tristram’s active attitude of blaming fate for all his misfortunes differs from Billy’s attitude as a passive observer. Billy does not try to change anything or blame fate because he knows the limitations of his life and the universe in general. The scene with the World War II movie where “he came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late the movie backwards, then forwards again” (Vonnegut 60), also mirrors how he is able to view his own life. Tristram does not know how and when his life will end and he lives it the way he is ‘supposed to’, but he is convinced that his misfortunes, including his dysfunctional conception, were predetermined for him, and that there is nothing he can do to change his life or who he is, although he wishes things were different:

I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune; and though I will not wrong her by saying, She has ever made me feel the weight of any great or signal evil; yet with all the good temper in the world, I affirm it of her, That in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious Duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small Hero sustain (Sterne 15).

The readers are not able to analyze Tristram and decide what kind of character he is, because he has already defined himself as a victim of fate and all they can do is accept that, like the opinions he shares with them.

It is interesting that while acknowledging his helplessness in ‘real’ life, he is the author of his autobiography and he tells it in his own way. It is only in this written world that he creates that he is able to make some choices about what, when and how to tell, and he tells it according to the pattern of cause and effect. Unlike the events in the real world, each of his
digressions has its own reason and purpose. He constantly seeks a rational explanation for the events and phenomena but he never makes an attempt to change anything, no matter how absurd or futile things may be. The hobby-horses that each male character of the novel has may seem to be the areas where the characters make some choices or decisions, or imitate an active engagement, but in reality their activities are futile, and everything in their lives is beyond their control. The hobby-horses are a mere “… diversion from the more painful aspects of life and particularly from the possibility that one's life might be little more than a mechanized, meaningless duration” (Davidson 18). The cause-and-effect order of events is possible in a novel, but not in the real life.

**Time and Death**

The theme of time permeates *Slaughterhouse-Five* and it is closely connected with the theme of predestination. In the first chapter, when the author explains his reasons for writing the novel, he digresses from time to time to tell about different events and issues, and there are three particular notions that symbolize the flow of time and the author’s attitude to time. First, he mentions that his wife always needs to know the time and frequently asks him about it. But for him, time is not that important and he does not always know the answer to her question. Next, there is an episode when the author takes his daughter and her friend to visit O’Hare and on their way, they see the Hudson River and the waterfalls falling down from the cliffs. The water, flowing in the river and falling down in the waterfalls, symbolizes the incessant flow of time in human perception: “…it was time to go, always time to go” (Vonnegut 10). And the third notion is where the author felt that time would not pass and that it felt like somebody was playing with the clocks, that he could not even follow or acknowledge the flow of time: “There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said – and calendars” (Vonnegut 17). In these episodes, the author shows the humans’ chronological concept of time and prepares the readers for the contrasting Tralfamadorian concept of time that will follow.

Tralfamadorians are far more sagacious creatures than humans. On Earth, time is linear and moments follow each other “like beads on a string”, and when a moment is gone it is gone forever (Vonnegut 22). It is an illusion that people live in, and this illusion is incorporated into all aspects of human life, including literature. Traditional human novels follow the linear time scheme and the plot there is developed gradually, through long sentences, chapters, volumes and so on. But Tralfamadorian texts are just knots of symbols, short and precise bits of information that can be read all at once. It reflects the time concept
of Tralfamadorians: time is not a sequence but a set of episodes that can be viewed simultaneously and not chronologically.

Vonnegut uses the same time scheme to construct his novel: he provides a complete overview of Billy’s life by constant digressions, tearing the string and ‘letting the beads spill’. Vonnegut simply cancels the usual flow of time. “Time, in this sense, is just an invention imposed by the author to help the story make sense. No pages of text inherently contain the motion of time in their content. It is the human being that imposes the order of chronological time to things that we read” (Ferguson 27). Even though the readers try to structure the main war plot in a linear sequence, they are not able to do so until they have finished reading the novel, because they are constantly distracted by Billy’s travels to other parts of his life. On one page they may ‘see’ Billy in Dresden, in Ilium and on Tralfamadore. They see his life as a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, as a culmination of all events at once. Here, one explicitly sees that the device that Vonnegut uses cannot be called flashback or flashforward, or even time travel in his readers’ common understanding of the term, because he does not actually move Billy back or forward but rather digresses to the left or right on some kind of ‘flat board of time’ with Dresden episodes in the center and everything else around them.

The limitation of human three-dimensional vision explains the fear of death. As humans believe that life events follow each other and cease to exist, death means that there will be no more events and that life is over, the person is gone and no longer exists anywhere. But according to the Tralfamadorians, death is just one of the conditions of existence of a person in the universe. Along with being at war, Billy travels to other episodes of his life and becomes acquainted with Transfalmadorian philosophy. That is why Billy did not feel grief for the thousands of people who died in Dresden: he knew that they would die when he first saw them and he knew that in another place of time those people would be alive. “… when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (Vonnegut 22). There is no reason to try to save anybody from death, as their death has already happened in another episode.

The images of clocks in Tristram Shandy and in Slaughterhouse-Five create an interesting resemblance. In the middle of the process of Tristram’s conception, Mrs. Shandy

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5 In his essay, Colin Ferguson discusses the concept of time in Timequake, but I may fully apply his statement to Slaughterhouse-Five as well, as the linear time scheme in both novels is disrupted.
asks Mr. Shandy if he had not forgotten to wind up the clock. The readers never find out if he did, as Tristram never gets back to that question, but maybe the irritation in Walter caused by that question was the reason for and the first hint of the disturbed time scheme in Tristram’s narrative. The clocks at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may give the same hint: “Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too” (Vonnegut 17). In both novels, something is wrong with time from the very beginning and one later experiences that disruption through numerous deviations, interruptions, and digressions.

Tristram cannot keep up with time trying to simultaneously tell about what is going on in his life. Reality is so big and so complex, and the past has so much influence on the present that he cannot afford to omit it, so he is forced to constantly digress and tell about the episodes that happened before he was even conceived. He encircles his birth with a wider perspective, just as Vonnegut encircles Billy’s war episodes. Thus, Sterne has constructed a kind of canvas of non-chronological episodes for the ‘Rocky Mountains perspective’ that the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* would someday call the Tralfamadorian concept of time.

As mentioned above, there is no beginning and no end in the traditional understanding of the terms in either novel. The readers are thrown into the middle of the story and then, when they begin to look around, they see the events that surround this point, like concentric circles. The clock never shows the right time, so there is no need to follow a straight timeline. Both Sterne and Vonnegut provide some time identifiers, but they both neglect the sequence. Another broken clock that they see closer to the end of *Tristram Shandy* tells them that the time scheme has never been fixed: “That Lippius's great clock was all out of joints, and had not gone for some years” (Sterne 479). The same happens in one of the last digressions in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: “‘They're playing with the clocks again,’ said Montana ... She meant that their keepers were making the electric clocks in the dome go fast, then slow, then fast again, and watching the little Earthling family through peepholes” (Vonnegut 171). When Tristram reaches the seventh volume of his book, he suddenly takes his readers with him on a trip to Europe trying to escape death. During his escape, all his family members are already dead and at the same time, they exist in his digression about another trip to Europe that they had together when Tristram was young. It resembles the Tralfamadorian concept of time, where all episodes exist simultaneously. When Tristram successfully leaves death behind, the members of the Shandy family are resurrected in his following description of the episodes that happened five years before his birth. The book ends there.
Both Sterne and Vonnegut approach the issues of time and death freely, as a means to
deliver the incoprehensibility of these terms and to show a human inability to answer the
transcendental questions and to explain the illogical and destructive events and processes that
are going on in the world. For Vonnegut, the fragmented and disrupted time scheme and the
Tralfamadorian concept were the formal means to cope with the atrocity of war and death,
and for Sterne, the fragmentation of his narrative was a means to deliver the inscrutability of
life and reality in general.

1.5.4 Digression as a Means of Metafiction
Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a deliberate work of metafiction where the text
itself poses as an artifact and where the whole meaning of that text relies greatly on the
narrator’s self-conscious reflection on it. Ferguson claims that “For Vonnegut and Sterne,
metafiction most often comes in the form of breaking the fourth wall” (27). Both writers
indeed refer to the reader in their attempts to explain themselves and in aspiration to be
acclaimed. This section will aim at elucidating the metafictional resemblance of both novels.

Vonnegut ‘breaks the fourth wall’ right from the very beginning. He starts his novel
with a well-known and meaningful phrase: “All this happened, more or less” (Vonnegut 1).
This phrase alone establishes the full metafictional context for the whole text that follows.
Here, the author presents two major metafictional issues: the relation between fiction and
reality in the text and the narrator’s role. With the use of this phrase, truth and fiction are
already mixed and the narrator is already seen as omniscient, because he knows everything
that really happened and what did not really happen. It is clear evidence for Farrell’s
statement that Vonnegut “… frequently used the technique of metafiction … to examine
questions of narrative and the relationship between art and reality” (9). The line between
history and fiction is blurred right from the first sentence. The author describes his text at the
beginning and right away he obscures the line between the fictional and the true events that
he is about to tell.

By making his preface part of the novel, Vonnegut intentionally makes himself a
fictional narrator, one of the characters in the novel. This inclusive position expands
Vonnegut’s ability to deliver his message fully and adds credibility to this voice. Vonnegut,
who witnessed the events of the Dresden bombing himself, functions here as a realistic and
trustworthy narrator. He talks about real events that happened in the real world. The details of
the horrors of war which are seen through Billy’s eyes are most probably true, no matter how
horrible and absurd they may seem to a rational mind. This narrator talks to his readers in the
first and in the last chapters, and he constantly reminds them about his witnessing the episodes that Billy finds himself in: “Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, “Oz.” That was I. That was me” (Vonnegut 122). But Vonnegut cannot know about Billy’s life outside war, his personal emotions and experiences, his travel to Tralfamadore, and this is where the other face of the fictional omniscient narrator is revealed. He remains unprejudiced, however, and in providing the Tralfamadorian concept of time, he intentionally dissociates himself from Billy, remaining an Earthling together with the readers, and alienating Billy from them all. He makes himself a part of the audience, simply recounting what Billy says. He does not convince the readers of the truthfulness of Billy’s words and does not claim that Billy is insane – he leaves that judgment to them. The narrator is as confused and abashed by the world that he lives in, and therefore he remains an Earthling and extrapolates his search for an explanation from ex-Earthling Billy. As Waugh explains, “It reveals Vonnegut’s own despairing recognition of the sheer impossibility of providing a critique of commonly accepted cultural forms of representation from within those very modes of representation” (8). In order to be objective in judgment about the issues that concern him most, he distances himself from those issues, as if he does not really care.

Vonnegut uses our common historical reality to deliver his fictional ideas. *Slaughterhouse-Five* can probably be called what Linda Hutcheon defines as “historiographic metafiction” due to Vonnegut’s “specific and general recollections of the forms and contents of history[,] writing[,] and work to familiarize the unfamiliar through (very familiar) narrative structures …” (10). He recreates the events from the historical past with the help of common and accessible historiographic works and weaves the details of his fictional world into his realistic narrative. Thus, one can equally believe in both the real historical events as they are described by him and in the fictional events that he has created. By means of historiographic metafiction, “Vonnegut shatters the continuum of history, the temporal and epistemological structures to recreate a long lasting sense of the human” (Diwany 83). On a factual level, everything fits the vision of war and of Dresden after the bombing that the readers may have received from other historical and reliable sources: the conditions of the prisoner camps and the boxcar experience, the total destruction of the city, the ‘corpse mining’ etc. All the political and social factors are in place here, even though they are not told directly. But in the artistic manifestations of those events, there is a shift of almost all factors of the internal content of an event and their transference to a larger scale, beyond history. With these extractions from a particular historical moment, Vonnegut also supply his novel with psychological sensations and reflections that usually coincides with warfare.
In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author tells a lot about his intention to write a “book about Dresden”, about the structure and the plot he has planned to create, about the pains and troubles that this book has caused him during the 23 years that he lived with the intention to write it. He planned “… climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations…” (Vonnegut 4) and he drew a scheme of them on a piece of wallpaper with his daughter’s crayons. Billy is here firmly constructing his narrative with a traditional linear structure with all necessary elements:

One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side (Vonnegut 5).

As the readers will have noticed by the time they reach the last pages of the novel, is that Billy failed in maintaining this structure, perhaps because it is impossible to create a linear plot based on a disrupted life.

In his self-conscious and detailed explanation of his future book, as well as in his reflection on the process of writing it, Vonnegut’s narrator resembles Tristram. They both planned to write in a certain way, and they both failed. The narrator in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is as frustrated with his “jumbled and jangled” narrative as Tristram is frustrated with his distractions. Here, Vonnegut plays the same game with the reader as Sterne: both novels are, of course, exactly as their authors had planned. Having fictional narrators who “admit” their failure is a means of playing that game.

There is a lot more direct address to the reader in *Tristram Shandy* and the style of this address is different, as it was defined by the 18th century and the society that Sterne mocked. Tristram constantly appeals to his male and female readers, explaining his process and convincing the reader to take over his ideas. He clearly explains the causation for each step of his “digressive-progressive” style: “Tis for an episode hereafter; and every circumstance relating to it in its proper place, shall be faithfully laid before you” (Sterne 60). It seems as if the narrator is peeking out from the pages of the book and answers the questions that the readers have just asked themselves. These metafictional comments both remind them that they are reading a work of fiction, but the comments also make them feel like co-narrators who are aware of the narrative process. Exposing himself as a narrator,
Tristram claims that he has a chance to write the Preface while his characters are sleeping. He delivers a chapter on chapters, questioning if it is wrong to make two chapters of what happened during the time that it took Walter and Toby to walk one set of stairs. Omitting a chapter, Tristram defends his right for doing that – otherwise, he would ruin the story. He explains in detail what could have been written in that chapter, and then he returns to the point where he left with his explanatory digression. He calls on some almighty powers to set a signpost for him so that he may know how to proceed with the story.

‘Breaking the fourth wall’, making the narrator a character and providing a detailed self-reflexive description of his own writing process are the metafictional aspects of Slaughterhouse-Five that find a technical resemblance in Tristram Shandy. Digression is one of the means in which those aspects are delivered in both novels. According to Waugh, “Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and laying bare of that illusion” (6). Vonnegut lays that illusion bare from the first sentence, and Sterne does so throughout the novel.

1.5.5 Creating Intertextuality by Means of Digression

Slaughterhouse-Five, as well as Tristram Shandy, is a motley canvas permeated with intertextual allusions, references, and quotations. And while there may be arguments among critics regarding the ethics of ‘borrowing’ someone’s texts and ideas and regarding the originality of each text and whether a work of fiction should be based on mere creativity, I agree with Hutcheon that “…The formal linking of history and fiction through the common denominators of intertextuality and narrativity is usually offered not as a reduction, as a shrinking of the scope and value of fiction, but rather as an expansion of these” (11). The more associations one derives from what is told, the more one is inclined to believe it.

Vonnegut quotes a carol and limericks, and refers to real and fictional novels, poetry, and historical works. Each of these references serves its particular purpose, such as creating the atmosphere and the web of images and associations for the novel, expanding its perspective beyond literature and beyond World War II, blurring the line between history and fiction.

Vonnegut makes most of his intertextual digressions in the first chapter, and by those references and inserts he sets up a certain basis for the future episodes of Billy’s life. Considering that, one may say that “… intertextual space of the autobiographical narrative operates as a frame of reference to the fictional narrative” (Jadwe 35). The readers perceive
the meaning of allusions to the literary works mentioned in the first chapter throughout all the following chapters. The very first allusion they see as a quote in the epigraph:

The cattle are lowing,
The Baby awakes.
But the little Lord Jesus
No crying He makes (Vonnegut IV).

It is an excerpt from an old and well-known Christmas carol, the first carol that many children are taught. The little Jesus does not cry even though there is something around him that makes other babies cry. The narrator explains the meaning of this quatrain in the ninth chapter: Billy does not cry much, even when he sees things worth crying about, and in this regard he resembles the little Christ. There is simply not much of Billy’s tears in the entire book. But one should recall the last quatrain of the Carol:

Bless all the dear children
In Thy tender care
And take us to heaven
To live with Thee there.

Reading this, one may suggest that this allusion given at the beginning might also serve as some kind of a soothing blessing throughout the novel for all those children-crusaders who never came home.

The endless and senseless repetition of the lines in the song about Yon Yonson (Vonnegut 3) reflects Billy’s illogical and endless jumping around the episodes of his life to always come back to the core of his trap – Dresden. It is an absurd answer to all the questions that cannot be answered, and mainly: Why? The answer to this question is ‘My name is Yon Yonson.’ This cyclic repetition of the meaningless lines probably represents the trap that Vonnegut found himself in when he came back from war and decided to write a book about Dresden. He was trapped for many years, unable to get out of the memories and unable to give an aesthetic shape to them through writing, repeating that he was writing a book about Dresden, like Yon Yonson repeated his name.

Another function of the intertextual references in Slaughterhouse-Five is to expand its historical and psychological perspective from one event, the bombing of Dresden, and to distance it from the consciousness of a single person, to make the problem global. The passage where Billy’s friend O’Hare reads about the Children’s Crusade in 1213 from Charles Mackay's book Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of the Crowds (Vonnegut 13), is one example. Such digressional fragments of external knowledge link
Slaughterhouse-Five to events and issues that are not directly connected with World War II and Dresden, and those allusions make the topic even bigger and heavier, showing not just the atrocity of war, but different manifestations of the same illogical powers that have been ruining the world.

Continuing to create a scenery of images and associations for his future novel’s ‘stage production, Vonnegut provides an excerpt from Mary Endell's book Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery. The text tells about how the city full of artistic masterpieces was destroyed by the Prussian siege in 1760. The readers may recall this abstract when they see Billy walking into the beautiful city of Dresden and seeing the ‘moon landscape’ of the ruins after the bombing. This shows the cyclic character of the mass destruction of beauty and life that wars have always caused. By referencing such historical works, Vonnegut demonstrates that history has been constructed by a few vicious men; it is as fictional as a novel, and a novel can be constructed in the same manner as history.

One of the books that the author took to read on a trip to Dresden was Theodore Roethke's poems. The quote from The Waking that he chose to insert in his ‘non-preface’ clearly reflects the concept of predestination and helplessness:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear
I learn by going where I have to go (Vonnegut 17).

There is no point in fear or in trying to escape fate, and it can sometimes be hard to discern reality from sleep. Billy’s character is just like that, a waking somnambulist who does not have fear or grief or any other emotion.

Billy performs a ‘duty-dance with death’, like many other soldiers who were sent to war. Billy does not sleep, he travels to the other places of his life in his breaks from that dance. By the insertion of a brief excerpt from Erika Ostrovsky's Céline and His Vision, the readers are reminded that the French novelist also performed that “duty dance” during World War I and that later in his novels he tried to fight death. He “…danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around ... decorated it with streamers, titillated it...” (Vonnegut 17). Céline tried to deal with death through art, he saw the truth in it and he thought that no art was possible without death. Similarly, Vonnegut tried to deal with his terrifying memories about all the deaths that he had seen by giving these memories an artistic expression. By this reference to Céline, the second subtitle to the novel is introduced, A Duty-Dance with Death. Only through art we can somehow transcend death and “play” with it, deal with it and look at it as just one of the episodes of life. As Jadwe noted regarding the dance with death in
Slaughterhouse-Five, “It is only through the transcendence of art and creativity that the death could be atrophied” (41). It was Céline’s method and it was Vonnegut’s method too, and through their attempts, we can also experience the atrophy of death, albeit passively. The extent to which someone succeeds in this is deeply personal.

The “dance with death” was obligatory for the ‘children’ that were sent to war, no matter how inexperienced, unprepared, unequipped and mentally and physically unprepared they were, like Billy Pilgrim. It was either “dance with death” or punishment by death for those who refused to go. In one of his travels, Billy finds the book The Execution of Private Slovik by William Bradford Huie. In a short reference, the author provides the necessary knowledge: Slovik was the only American soldier since the Civil War who was executed by the Americans for desertion. The judge’s reasoning for Slovik’s death penalty was that it was a necessary measure “… to maintain that discipline upon which alone an army can succeed against the enemy” (Vonnegut 37). This excerpt appears right after Billy has been thrown to the battlefield, unarmed, unfit and unwilling to survive:

Billy was Preposterous-six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon and no boots. On his feet were cheap, low-cut civilian shoes which he had bought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down. The involuntary dancing up and down, up and down, made his hip joints sore (Vonnegut 26-27).

He was made to perform that very duty-dance, and there could not be a more awkward dancer than he was. Through the juxtaposition of the excerpt about Slovik with the episode about Billy’s pathetic ‘introduction’ to war, Vonnegut shows the full absurdity of militarism.

The references to science-fiction novels by fictional author Kilgore Trout appear for the first time in the fifth chapter of the novel and serve a number of purposes. First, they were a means to cope with the absurdity of life and the horrors of war. Billy and his hospital ward-mate Eliot Rosewater, were trying to “…re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (Vonnegut 82). Second, most of Trout’s novels dealt with time, and references such as the one made to Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension support the premise of the insufficiency and fallacy of human time perception. There are many things in the fourth dimension that humans are simply unable to access. Intertextual references to Trout’s novels also work as a means of black humor and irony which is discussed below in the corresponding section of this work.
Both Tristram Shandy and the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* establish a frame of reference for their audience and create a larger context for their own opinions through their numerous literary and historical allusions, so that they can sound truer and more consistent. However, most of Tristram’s messages are not delivered directly, but are encoded into seemingly entertaining passages. The tale about the noses, for example, by fictional author Slawkenbergius, which Tristram offers to the reader in full, mimics the style of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and, similar to Vonnegut’s science-fiction novels by Kilgore Trout, serves the purpose of delivering the author’s message about social narrow-mindedness and folly.

The phrase “Alas, poor Yorick!” (Sterne 30) which appears on the grave of parson Yorick, inevitably alludes to Shakespeare, and Tristram himself claims that the parson was a descendant of the same Yorick from Denmark. Like Yorick in *Hamlet*, Yorick in *Tristram Shandy* was a kind man who loved to make jokes and did not mind to be the object of jokes either. But because he made fun of serious people, he made enemies, and their hatred led him to an early death. There is a resemblance between Sterne’s Yorick and Vonnegut’s Edgar Derby. Edgar was not a jester but he was a good and kind man who also died early and fatuously because of human malice. The same words could have been engraved on his tombstone: “Alas, poor Edgar!”

*Tristram Shandy* is a varied and comprehensive piece of knowledge and contemplation on a large variety of issues. However, some thoughts may be disputable and some fragments of knowledge may be fictional. At the beginning of his autobiography, Tristram states: “As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the Pilgrim’s Progress itself …” (Sterne 8). This allusion to one of the fundamental works of English literature touches on two main ideas: the importance of travel and reading to obtain knowledge. Tristram constantly alludes to literary works that the reader is expected to know, and reading is one of the main motifs in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Tristram “travels” through the episodes of his life and through the lives of other people as Billy travels around the episodes of his life and through time and space. Tristram’s life-travel and the actual journey to Europe where he eventually perceives his identities can be regarded as a pilgrimage as per the *Pilgrim’s Progress*: the advancement of knowledge and spirit along with geographical advancement. Billy Pilgrim’s pilgrimage is obvious and it leads him – and the readers – to the understanding of existential truths in Vonnegut’s view.
1.5.6 Digression as a Means of Irony and Satire

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, like *Tristram Shandy*, is thoroughly soaked with irony, black humor, and satire. Towers aptly wrote about Sterne’s “cock and bull story”: “His comedy leaps out from the mad juxtaposition, the sudden antic, the sublime incongruities of thought and word and posture and situation, just as it lurks in the double entendre, the equivocal meaning” (19). These words can be directly applied to Vonnegut. Both authors employ that “mad juxtaposition”, grotesque images, and unabashed comparisons, to satirize the issues of 18th-century society and those of the 20th century, and to laugh at the issues that cannot be ever understood by a human being, such as death and the absurdity of the world.

Vonnegut largely employs the technique of black humor, as he shows the ruthless details of war. He uses “…gallows humor, to help the reader swallow his bitter pill” (Davis 245). His irony is complex and revealed in different ways, such as the application of common images in inappropriate situations, the juxtaposition of grotesque images and death, a sarcastic reinvention of Christian dogma, or as bitter jokes of fate. Here, I discuss only those manifestations of irony that, in my opinion, are delivered by digressions.

The image of *The Three Musketeers* appears in different digressive episodes throughout the novel: as a Three Musketeers Candy Bar in the first chapter, where a cynical girl working with the author casually talks about the young veteran who was smashed by the elevator; at war, where Roland Weary calls himself and the two scouts The Three Musketeers; and later, when Billy’s wife Valencia eats a Three Musketeers Candy Bar in hospital. The bravery and valor implied by the word ‘musketeer’ and idolized by Weary are leveled by the mordant connection to chocolates eaten by a tactless and silly women. Bravery and valor are objectified, eaten and digested. They are not high and eternal values, but mere products to be consumed without any notice. The very meaning of the heroism and bravery of a warrior as an enthusiastic participant of war is satirized and indirectly called a folly, and Davis claims that “as his generation’s supreme moralist, Vonnegut has a legacy as an American novelist that might best be characterized by his persistent belief in the best humanity might aspire to, while laughing at the ridiculousness of such a thought. His use of metatextual and metafictional techniques afforded him this dual vision …” (248). Vonnegut definitely had both the right and the ability to laugh at those issues in a way that can make his readers cry.

There is a large digressive fragment in the fifth chapter in which one of Kilgore Trout’s novels, *The Gospel from Outer Space*, is outlined. In this novel, Trout makes digs deep into the roots of human cruelty and goes far back in time, ultimately reaching the story...
of Christ. Trout’s idea is that the origins of Christian cruelty are concealed in the Gospels. The Gospels, in fact, do not teach people to be merciful to each living being. Rather, they teach: “Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected” (Vonnegut 89). In Trout’s novel, a visitor from the outer space understands the true meaning of the Gospels and gives humans a new Gospel. He makes it clearer, so that no one else can ever misunderstand it. In it, Jesus Christ is a nobody and people crucify him without a second thought. But suddenly, God tells the humans that he is adopting this ‘nobody’ that they killed and that from this moment on He will horribly punish anyone who tortures “a bum who has no connections” (Vonnegut 90). Maybe if faithful Christians on Earth followed this new Gospel like they follow the old ones, there would not be so much cruelty in the world.

Piece by piece, the readers gather an image of Edgar Derby as a personification of a bitter joke of fate. In his civil life, Derby taught the subject Contemporary Problems in Western Civilization at school. He was a tennis player and kept himself in a good physical shape. His son served in the army, and because of his age, Derby used his political connections to go to war himself, which actually is one of the biggest problems of Western Civilization. At war, when he finds out that he will be transported to Dresden, he writes to his wife that she has nothing to worry about because Dresden will never be bombed. Eventually, he survives the bombing of Dresden and is executed for taking a German teapot at the very end of the war. His son gets back home safe and sound and Edgar dies. Derby’s death and the sad irony of his life are not a surprise, because the author had already mentioned it in the very beginning of his book: “The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad” (Vonnegut 4). It could be a really good climax in a novel with a linear plot. But not in this one.

The character of Roland Weary is less decent than Edgar Derby, but his life and death are also ironic. Weary is a satirical embodiment of mindless and uncontrollable anger and cruelty, who seeks glory and can do something good only if it comes with a reward. When Weary at first appears in the story, the author digresses a little to tell about the hobby of Weary’s father who collects instruments of torture. Weary knows everything about torture and is proud of it. He becomes excited when he imagines the agony of tortured people. The irony of Weary is that very soon he gets caught by two German teens and two “… ramshackle old droolers as toothless as carp … armed and clothed fragmentarily with junk taken from real soldiers who were newly dead” (Vonnegut 43). Later, Weary himself would
experience the agony and cry, because the Germans took his boots and gave him the hinged clogs that “… were transforming his feet into blood puddings” (Vonnegut 53). Weary soon dies of gangrene on his feet.

The comedy that Vonnegut creates by means of black humor would not be possible without Billy’s emotional distancing from the horrible situations that he ends up in. Instead of lamenting and portraying the sorrow and grief, Vonnegut offers an unemotional view through the eyes of clown-like Billy Pilgrim. It is very similar to Sterne’s method of laughing at his characters’ misfortunes through Tristram’s seemingly irrelevant digressions: “Instead of a microscopic study of a few tormented minds … we have a panoramic survey of a whole world of Shandean. The result is the artistic distancing that comedy requires” (Davidson 19). It is a way of laughing at something that should be cried about.

Vonnegut satirizes militarism, as Sterne did it. Here, too, the resemblance between Uncle Toby and Billy should be noted, this time in their lack of fitness for the army. Toby is as virtuous and kind as he is narrow-minded in his military obsession. He is as tragic as he is comic. Any conversation he becomes involved in takes him off to battles and military themes, any affair he engages in is perceived by him as a military campaign, even his courting of the Widow Wadman. A military man, inexperienced in love, he takes the breaking blister that he got while riding a horse in an uneasy saddle as a sign of passion: “… my uncle Toby was presently convinced, that his wound was not a skin-deep-wound——but that it had gone to his heart” (Sterne 526). As sincere and decent as Toby is, he is the embodiment of the bluntness of militarism that Sterne unabashedly ridicules. Army and war break a man’s life and make him an outcast in society. Billy Pilgrim is doomed to return to his war experiences, because they will never let him go. In the same way, Toby is doomed to live within his own mental fortifications and re-live his siege over and over again. A tragedy presented in a grotesque entourage, as is the case with many episodes of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Tristram Shandy*, shows the absurdity of war.

Through his digressive-progressive style, Tristram also makes fun of the way in which traditional stories are told. Like the narrator in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he wanders around fragments of the story, but it ends without a climax. As I have already mentioned, this kind of structure resembles the way our life and thought unfold. By associations, our mind may move from idea to idea and we cannot always control it. We surely cannot control the situations we end up in. The last sentences in both novels may seem as mere absurd jokes: “L–d! said my mother, what is all this story about? – A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick – And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard” (Sterne 588) and “Birds were talking. One bird
said to Billy Pilgrim, ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (Vonnegut 177). A reader may get upset by such endings. Where is the ‘happy ending’? Where are the answers? But there are no answers. With such irritating, irrational endings, and in the very compositions of their novels, both Sterne and Vonnegut laugh at life and death, at the misfortunes that each person encounters, unable to explain why. Fate, predestination or nature defines who we are and what we are supposed to go through, and all we can do is deal with it. All people can do to cope with the misery and horror and the absurdity of life is to laugh at it.

1.6 Conclusion to Chapter 2
In Slaughterhouse-Five, as in Tristram Shandy, the plot is untraditional and the narrative structure is non-linear. The actual history and reality can hardly be disconnected from fiction. The connecting threads between the fragments of the story and fragments of knowledge are sometimes lost. The themes and the messages are hidden in the piles of entertaining digressions of all sorts.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut uses the trope of time travel and aliens, but the novel is not to be placed in the category of science fiction. The main background of the novel is war, but it is not a novel about war. It does not glorify willpower and life, but it laughs at fate and death. Vonnegut used digression and told the story in fragments, because this story does not have a beginning or an end. It has happened, it is happening, and it will be happening. Time is not linear, but flat and digressional. A person who has survived a war is doomed to never live a linear life, but to experience a series of flashbacks till the end of their life – and their life never ends.

Sterne used digression rather than linear order, because the reality is too complex, and too sophisticated to squeeze into the life story of a single man. There are many factors that enrich and enlarge our lives and expand them rather than moving them forward.

When people try to explain the irrational things, they cannot think straight but are forced to digress here and there. Fragments of knowledge, debris of memories, spontaneous ideas, and associations constantly appear out of nowhere and ruin our logic. This is the way our thought and life unfold. We live digressively and we think digressively. There is no straight line of thinking about irrational and complex reality, so there should not be a linear plot in writing about it. The common purposes of both novels define the similarity of their structures and techniques. Vonnegut derived his digressional method from Sterne and saturated it with the issues of his reality, to depict the themes that occupied Sterne as well –
life and death, free will and predestination – and to satirize social inadequacies and expand the perspective and the meaning of the stories told.
CHAPTER 3: HOUSE OF LEAVES

1.7 Mark Z. Danielewski and the Rehabilitation of the Novel

When House of Leaves was first published in 2000, it had such a resonance among the readers and caused such exaltation among the critics, that it was believed to have resurrected the novel which many had considered to be dead or dying. In the age of digital media proliferation, Mark Danielewski managed to give the reading public something they could not have expected or dreamed about: a novel that was a “paper-based interpretation of online culture” (Hemmingson 276). With its parallel stories told in different fonts on one page, the hypertextuality created by a footnoted narrative, the colored and strikethrough text, text that jumps and dances, and escapes from the eye, with its numerous collages, pictures, appendices, and even its playful index, House of Leaves has become a “… 709-page ride through lexical playfields that would leave many readers exhilarated if ultimately perplexed” (Belletto 99). The novel responded to a new habit of reading acquired from digital texts: reading a text in chunks, following links to other texts, the eye no longer moving from left to right in a consequent and consistent manner to follow one coherent thought, but grasping fragmented knowledge in a piecemeal manner, gathering different meanings from various sources simultaneously into a motley collage.

Speaking of the genre and school of House of Leaves, Catherine Spooner proves it to be a Contemporary Gothic novel because it collects and rearranges the clichés and conventions of Gothic narratives in a thrilling order (41). Hemmingson places House of Leaves among the literature of the “Avant-Pop” school, where “examples of mass consumerism and mass media…blend in with ‘radical formal innovation’ via a multitude of footnotes, colored words, fictitious sources, and blank pages – all anticomponents of what is considered commercial fiction suitable for a corporate publishing entity” (275-276). It is both Gothic, because of the ‘haunted-house story’ and Avant-Pop, because it is experimental in its form. But it is also a realist novel, because it deals with psychological, social and mental issues, and with everyday experiences that people have in the real world. Johnny’s life as he and his mother describe it is nothing but the realism of a troubled young man who survived disasters in his childhood and became entangled in the club, drug and sex net of LA, trying to find his way out. The Navidsons are dealing with typical family issues of alienation in a typical way – by moving into a new house and trying to restore their relationship. Were it not for the enigmatic labyrinth, this would be a traditional realism plot. But the self-conscious,
subjective representation of these stories, their disruptive structure, the typographical play, the hypertextuality, the sophisticated employment of academic conventions in the service of fiction, the novel’s metatextual and intertextual aspects make it surreal, ambiguous, and fragmented – just what postmodern fiction aims at.

*House of Leaves* is an experimental novel and the experiment turned out well for both the author and the readers who constantly crave something new. But the success of the novel probably does not lie in its innovation, but in a masterful compilation of the best practices that literary and cinematic tradition contains. As Danielewski himself admits, “Anyone with a grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation. The so-called ‘originality’ claimed by my commentators must be limited to my decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarmé, Sterne, B.S. Johnson, Cummings, Hollander, etc, etc….” (McCaffery 106). In my reading, I explore the ways in which Danielewski enjoys the wonderful technique of digression borrowed by him from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.

1.8 The Technique of Digression in *Tristram Shandy* and *House of Leaves*

Analyzing the technique of digression in the novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, and Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves*, I will consider the way in which digressions form the structure of the novels, provide information about the characters and background for the plot, deliver the themes, add a metafictional dimension and create intertextuality in the novels.

1.8.1 Digression in Forming the Structure and Providing Background for the Plot

*House of Leaves* consists of a Foreword, an Introduction, a commentary to the documentary film *The Navidson Record*, footnotes, three appendices and an Index. Despite their formal presentation, all these parts are the fictional elements of the novel. They are provided by several narrators with a particular style and font. It is hard to differentiate a plot for the entire novel, because several narratives are told simultaneously, and each of them is equally engaging and important. There are three plots, told in fragments and with numerous interruptions, but if the fragments of each plot were to be taken out of the frame and put together, they would form quite linear, traditionally built plots. As Josh Toth notes: “The novel, after all, employs very traditional and thus engaging plot devices, devices that tend to
provide us with the illusion of representational accuracy” (183). The illusion is broken by the self-reflective denouncement of each narrative.

Danielewski’s use of the footnote as a structural element of the novel serves many purposes. As Hemmingson claims, “The footnotes employ a scholarly framework that is illusory yet imitates (remediates) a serious façade” (276). Yet, Danielewski does not apply footnotes only to make fun of scholarly work, but they also create a feeling of simultaneity when reading multiple narratives. They also blur the line between fiction and reality and between the various plots within the novel. Truant’s footnotes have their own structure, dialogue and suspense, and they supply emotions, not bare information. As Belletto notes, this play with academic conventions is not new in the 20th century. The first footnoted novels may be found as early as the 18th century, in *Tristram Shandy* (100). Hemmingson agrees, noting that “… the healthy, mature footnote has migrated from the bowels of historical London to the contemporary Los Angeles underground in *House of Leaves*” (277). Sterne’s use of the footnote as a part of the narrative is less extensive compared to Danielewski’s use, however, it was definitely prominent in his time, regarding that printing of footnotes was technically difficult. “The eighteenth-century footnote was an exercise for the intellectual elite, never meant for the common citizen; in contemporary fiction, the footnote is a textual device that has moved from the mechanics of the beleaguered scholar to the artistic endeavors of the writer with Microsoft Word at one’s disposal and metatextual aspirations in the heart” (Hemmingson 277). Below, I will return to the metatextual aspect of the novels that is created by the footnotes.

The structure of *House of Leaves* reminds one of a Russian nesting doll: as the readers leaf through the pages, they discover more stories and narrators than they had initially expected. This nesting of layers of narrative within a recursive structure creates an effect of “interrupting and complicating the ontological ‘horizon’ of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction,” as McHale notes (112). An “ontological horizon” in McHale’s terms means the mode of existence of objects, or, to put it simpler, how things are.

Thus, the “smallest doll” is the documentary made by Pulitzer-prize-winning photojournalist Will Navidson, *The Navidson Record*. The “larger doll” that incorporates this film is the analytical commentary on the film made by an old man called Zampanò. Next,

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6 In his essay, Belletto also discusses the resemblance of *House of Leaves* and *Pale Fire* in terms of the structure (101) and the difference between them in terms of the indicators of their interpretation (106).
Zampanò’s fragmented commentary made on “… old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp…” is gathered and transformed into a book by Johnny Truant, a Los Angeles tattoo parlor apprentice (Danielewski xxvi). He writes the Introduction to the entire book, makes explanatory footnotes to Zampanò’s work, and attaches the Appendix to Zampanò’s text. The last and the largest ‘doll’ that incorporates all the mentioned narratives is a frame made by unnamed Editors. In their footnotes, the Editors make comments on Zampanò’s and Truant’s texts and they provide the Foreword, the Appendix to Truant’s work, and the Index. The structure of the novel is thus intricate and complex. Geoff Hamilton and Brian Jones define it as follows: “… a series of concentric narrative frames, each of which encloses and contextualizes those within” (191). Inside each of these frames, worlds, dimensions, or layers of narrative are many digressions, manifested as contemplations, quotations, abstracts from other literary works, documents, various survey materials, scientific passages, letters, scripts, transcriptions, and interviews. The Appendices themselves represent large digressional parts, essential for understanding the stories told in the main section. As Danielewski himself notes, “… there are many ways to enter House of Leaves” (McCaffery 111). The Appendices may be one of those entrances.

The Navidson Record, from which the entire novel flows, is a documentary about Will Navidson, his wife Karen Green and their two children moving into a new house, and about the mysterious and horrible things that they encounter in that house. The very existence of this film is uncertain, as is the existence of the house, which brings the readers to the theme of reality and consciousness which I discuss below in Consciousness and Reality. The events that are ‘documented’ by this film evolve in a fairly chronological way, but they are accompanied by the digressions with which Zampanò now and then interrupts his description of the film. But since he is the reader’s only guide through the film, they have to follow him.

Zampanò’s commentary does not only describe what was ostensibly filmed by Will Navidson, but it also provides in-depth research and presents different perspectives on the subject. This is based on the various materials created about the documentary as the latter had been released by the movie studio and widely seen. Zampanò also provides analysis and explanations for the phenomenon of the house as he ‘sees’ it and he provides an insight into the personalities of the main characters. Thus, Zampanò’s monograph is greatly augmented by his own contemplations and interpretations, which are supported by or contradictory to excerpts that are provided from various reviews, critiques, studies, interviews, survey results, and other materials allegedly created by other authors on The Navidson Record. Zampanò’s Appendix, provided by Johnny Truant, also comprises a large digressional part from the main
commentary. The Appendix, Truant says, “… sheds a little more light on his work as well as his personality” (Danielewski 537). It consists of outlines and draft notes, bits of his thoughts, pieces of documents, poems, and a letter to an editor.

Zampanò’s interruptions in the course of the plot development in the Record are irritating and they often take the readers far away from the action into a theoretical thicket. But they also supply a great deal of suspense and create a holistic depiction of the events and the characters of The Navidson Record. In the beginning of the fourth chapter, Zampanò discusses the meaning of the word ‘uncanny’ that was ostensibly used mostly to describe the terrifying changes in the house discovered by the Navidsons when they came back from a trip to Seattle. Before the readers find out exactly what has changed, they become frightened by the very meaning of the word “uncanny” as “not-being-at-home” (Danielewski 25). Something really mystical has happened, and they are smoothly immersed into it by digressional tales. Zampanò begins the fifth chapter with a lengthy digression about echo, as “it is impossible to appreciate the importance of space in The Navidson Record without first taking into account the significance of echoes” (Danielewski 41). Thus, he takes the readers on a long tour into the mythological and scientific determinations of echo, all the way back to the ancient Greeks, quoting Ovid, John Hollander, John Milton and others, and providing the formulas of resonance frequencies and other acoustic terms. This long etymological excursus is in turn interrupted by Truant’s irrelevant comments describing episodes from his own life, not yet in the slightest connected to the mystery of the Navidsons’ house. After all these deviations, the readers may have lost the thread of where they left the Navidsons, but as soon as they come to the moment where Will and Karen hear the echoes of their children in a house where no room exceeds a length of twenty-five feet, they suddenly feel the whole weight of the ‘echo excursus’ falling upon them, and they become horrified. They would probably have been significantly less horrified if they had not previously been taken on the echo excursus. By this time, they know that in order for echo to emerge, a reflective surface must be at least 56½ ft. away. This house just cannot allow echo. But it does. All the previously provided knowledge comes back immediately and the mythological allusions add to the creepy sensations as the readers understand that the issue is not a mere scientific riddle or a measurement deviation, but something mystical and horrible.

Unlike Zampanò’s digressions, Truant’s footnotes are only minimally concerned with The Navidson Record and they do not always provide a relevant and consistent explanation of Zampanò’s comments. Instead, Johnny uses the old man’s monograph to reveal his own story. He provides a footnote for the water heater in the Navidsons’ house, for instance, to
recount his own troubles with the hot water. Then he becomes distracted by telling about an adventure with one of his occasional girls. But gradually, from the random stories about his life, he takes the readers with him on the path of his self-discovery which takes place in parallel with that of Will Navidson. His footnotes often span pages and gradually suck the readers into the invisible horrors Johnny suffers while editing Zampanò’s work. Toth suggests that Truant’s lengthy interruptions are the very “leaves” of the house (183). Johnny’s Appendix, attached by the Editors ostensibly with Johnny’s consent, consists of “Sketches and Polaroids”, poems, collages, Johnny’s father’s obituary, his mother’s letters, and various quotes. These fragments of information provide a large part of the background to Johnny’s story and the answers to a lot of questions the readers encounter during reading the main part.

As they will notice, House of Leaves is checkered with digressions. As Toth puts it, the novel is “… a complex ebb and flow of interruptive gestures” (183). Digressions construct many levels within the novel – the house, the labyrinth, the personal history and identity, and the manufacturing of the novel itself. As has already been noted, it is difficult to determine the plot of the novel, but one can clearly determine the plot of each narrative. The most developed narratives are the story of Will Navidson and the story of Johnny Truant. It can be difficult to ascertain which of these plots is the main plot, and which is the digression. It is not always clear whether this is a book about the Navidsons and their enigmatic house or about Truant. As Alison Gibbons notes, the novel’s “… recursive narrative structure composed of embedded or nested worlds” (46) confuses and at the same time fascinates. I would argue, however, that the core of the novel is The Navidson Record. No superstructures that are built upon it would exist without the film. The second most coherent and self-sufficient layer is Zampanò’s manuscript – it could exist without the next layers. Truant’s story on the other hand is developed throughout the novel, beginning at the Introduction and continuing all the way through to his Appendix. It would probably not have existed without Zampanò’s manuscript, because Truant’s story flows from it. Thus, apart from the digressions that both Zampanò and Truant make within their narratives that are not related to the parallel stories, Johnny’s storyline is developed in digressions from the more linear plot of The Navidson Record.

The structure of House of Leaves is like a house with an endless labyrinth that constantly shifts and changes its dimensions. When the readers open the book they enter this labyrinth and immediately become consumed by it. According to Katharine Cox, “The process of reading the book is threatened by the snarled discourses and also by the lacunae
the novel encourages.” These issues create an impression that the text is “… on the verge of disintegration and the reader-imposed meanings will be lost” (8). However, these “snarled discourses” are quite logical, the stories are subtly connected and intertwined in such a way that they do not hinder each other, but evolve simultaneously, taking the readers deeper and infinitely further, even though the outer dimensions of the book remain unchanged.

The trope of the labyrinth inevitably brings us to Borges, but Laurence Sterne’s heritage is so capacious that it is likely that any postmodern work bears a resemblance to *Tristram Shandy* in many aspects. The stoppages, deviations, derivations, and confusion that the labyrinth creates can be compared to Sterne’s digressional labyrinth where the plot is constantly twisted and the action delayed, and each turn brings a digression and each digression turns into a new one. Towers aptly defines Tristram’s style: “Tristram’s way of telling his story is as scattered, as accident-prone, as full of cross-purposes as his life itself. It is an art of self-interruption” (18). He runs and drags and jumps and hovers over different subjects. He remembers something in the middle of his narrative, then something reminds him of something else, and so on. But the most notable thing is that he always brings his readers back to the point from which they were thrown away, and all these associations of ideas cannot be called a simple stream of consciousness or a simple conglomeration of irrelevant excerpts. They are masterfully woven into the novel’s motley tapestry. Like Zampanò’s, Tristram’s digressions are in many ways contingent. They are organized in the cause-and-effect order, and they create the context, offer explanation or provide background to the future events. The long story about Yorick and the midwife’s license is not simply told on the narrator’s whim, nor is the long excursus on the term ‘echo’ without reason. When the readers get to the point where this knowledge is applied, they become amazed at how logical and essential those labyrinthine ‘dead ends’ were.

The novel also has its own, clearly noticeable, texture, created by the playful use of typographical devices. The text appears in different fonts; it may be blue, red, or strikethrough; it may be organized in boxes and placed in various parts of the page to resemble windows or rooms; it may be shaped as a keyhole when it says about the keyhole. The words may be scattered around the page; they may comprise a staircase when the readers are told about an ascent; the words may create a widening circle when they are told about the widening space in the house; and the text may be shaped in a narrow box when the space shrinks. The text may seem to vanish when they are told about the vanishing walls and doorways; it may even be printed upside down or across the page, and some pieces of it can
be read only with the use of a mirror. In this way, the shape of the text itself becomes a part of the narrative structure.

Various typographical inventions in *Tristram Shandy*, like the colored pages, empty pages, or pages with a few scribbles, are strikingly resonant with those of *House of Leaves*. And although Danielewski employs this playful texture more extensively in his novel, Sterne’s unabashed ideas were definitely the source for the textual perversions in *House of Leaves*. As Tatiani Rapatzikou claims, comparing *Tristram Shandy* and *House of Leaves*, “The alternative pictorial and narrative patterns that these narrative examples employ rely on interactivity with the reader and immersion within the narrative without negating the corporeal nature of the artwork itself” (146). Not only do the readers stumble into distracted fragments of knowledge, wandering in the mazes of both novels, but they also face these typographical issues that make them stop and consider their meaning, leafing back and returning to the point where they were interrupted. In this way, not only the structure of the novels but the texture itself serves the purpose of confusing the readers, shifting the center of perception, blurring the plot, and at the same time expanding their perspective and enhancing their emotions about the texts.

1.8.2 Providing Information about the Characters by Means of Digression

One gathers fragments about the characters in both *House of Leaves* and *Tristram Shandy* from the very first to the last pages, through the characters’ self-descriptions, the notions about them provided by others, and their digressive opinions. The readers get to know more of who Tristram is through his stories about his family and his thoughts on various subjects. In *House of Leaves*, Zampanò describes Karen and Will and Truant describes Zampanò, based on his alleged conversations with people who knew him, mostly his readers. And, of course, Truant talks extensively about himself.

From the very beginning of his commentary, Zampanò describes the episodes of *The Navidson Record* and draws the readers’ attention to the crumbling relationship of Will and Karen. The very move was made in an attempt to revive that relationship, which is revealed from Navidson’s tape. However, the relationship trouble becomes even worse in the new place. According to Zampanò, the hallway that expands inside the house is a metaphor of Will and Karen’s alienation from each other. The hallway is at the same time the cause and the physical manifestation of their drifting apart. Connecting the phenomenon of the labyrinth in the house with the characters that inhabit it, Zampanò in his numerous digressions delves into the pathology of their relationship and researches each of them. He provides various
pieces of information on Karen and Will – their interviews, articles allegedly written about them by different authors, and his own analysis of them based on what is shown in the film. Due to Zampanò’s digressional inserts about Will and Karen’s past, the readers obtain a deeper understanding of what is going on between them and what drives each of them, and the readers may predict the future conflicts. The characters are developed gradually, and the tension that grows with the expansion of the labyrinth is naturally accompanied by the darker and more problematic truths about their past that is discovered through Zampanò’s digressions. He discusses their troubled personalities when the first signs of the irrationality of the house appear, and by the time the labyrinth reveals all its horrors, the readers already know their darkest secrets and pains. Due to the research into the characters provided in Zampanò’s digressions, *House of Leaves* becomes not just a thrilling horror but a psychological and existential drama.

Navidson’s damage stems from his childhood: “Because the enormous narcissism of their parents deprived Will and Tom of suitable role models, both brothers learned to identify with absence… Perhaps one reason Navidson became so enamored with photography was the way it gave permanence to moments that were often so fleeting” (Danielewski 22). Zampanò provides the abstract from the book ostensibly written about Karen in one of his deviations into the research: “To behold Karen as a child is nearly as ghostly an experience as the house itself” (Danielewski 58). Karen had been a totally different child until she turned fifteen. Then, something horrible happened, and she changed completely. She has become the person she is portrayed as in the film – cold, closed, and fearful. On the next page, Zampanò provides the results of a psychological study into claustrophobia that Karen allegedly took part in. This is where one begins to realize how full of darkness and emptiness the characters are, and how their personalities resemble the widening darkness inside the house. The digressions allow the readers to get to the roots of the characters’ issues while simultaneously observing the developing labyrinth. These digressions take the form of scholarly works, survey materials, and interviews that make the information seem true, even if all those materials are fabricated, and the characters seem more alive, despite the suggestion that they may be fictional.

From the Introduction, and throughout his digressive comments that at first have little to do with *The Navidson Record*, Truant reveals what kind of person he is. The readers learn about his friend Lude, about their friendship, and about Truant’s ‘whole bunch’ of fictional stories that he uses to entertain girls. He likes to make things up, which is probably why he started working on Zampanò’s material. He was a troubled youth who grew up in foster
families and he has become a messy adult who wanders aimlessly through his life in the labyrinth of his own stories, but it seems as he is aware of his own situation: “As a counselor once told me – a Counselor For Disaffected Youth, I might add: ‘You like that crap because it reminds you of you’” (Danielewski 21). But just as the Navidsons’ personalities become exposed to their core as they explore the widening maze, so Truant’s painful past also reveals itself as he works on the monograph. Each of his digressions, no matter how irrelevant or entertaining they may seem, reveals his personality and shows the development of his character, up until the Appendix where his mother’s letters addressed to him from the mental house are exposed, and his father’s obituary. These materials, attached in the very end, give the final and complete understanding of who Johnny Truant is, and why he became absorbed by the labyrinth.

The character of Zampanò does not evolve like that of Navidson and Truant but it is clearly depicted in Johnny’s digressions. One becomes acquainted with him in the Introduction and right away are told that the man was “blind as a bat” (Danielewski xxi). He was blind and lonely, and Truant also discusses the extent to which his loneliness reached: “Zampanò himself probably would of insisted on corrections and edits, he was his own harshest critic, but I’ve come to believe errors, especially written errors, are often the only markers left by a solitary life: to sacrifice them is to lose the angles of personality, the riddle of a soul. In this case a very old soul. A very old riddle” (Danielewski 31). As the stories progress, bits of Zampanò’s image come together in the process of Truant’s work on the old man’s riddles, and the readers receive further descriptions of him from the girls who used to read to him and whom Truant meets to obtain more information. Zampanò was not well educated. He was not clear about his family. One of the readers, Amber, corrects Johnny’s perception of Zampanò a little bit when she describes him as “imperceivable and alone, though not I think so lonely” (Danielewski 35). While he never talks about himself, his opinions on the characters of The Navidson Record are disclosed, and through them, just like through Tristram Shandy’s opinions and stories about other people, the readers also get to know Zampanò better. And, finally, in his Appendix, Zampanò’s personality is fully revealed by his ‘bits’ and ‘pieces’. Only through these digressions, added to the story by Truant, does he speak about himself, for example: “Is it possible to love something so much, you imagine it wants to destroy you only because it has denied you?” (Danielewski 544). This proves that Zampanò was as damaged as the other characters and had his own pains to deal with.

Truant’s woes originate from a psychological trauma that he received in early childhood when he was separated from his mother. He developed an ill perception of her and
demonized her, as well as himself, to such an extent that it almost drove him crazy. His father died prematurely, and Johnny grew up in foster families. He may blame his father for his unhappy childhood and his immaturity and incongruity as an adult. Similarly, Tristram’s misfortunes are also rooted in his childhood and are mainly the fault of his father, Walter Shandy. Unlike Johnny, Tristram acknowledges this from the very beginning, blaming his parents for his misconception, which was the beginning of all his future troubles. The propensity to digress and interrupt is literally in Tristram’s blood – the very process of his conception was interrupted by his mother, his father constantly engages in lengthy ruminations that lead nowhere, and his uncle Toby also has a tendency to interrupt others and speak his own thoughts. What else could have become of Tristram? His father laments about his future woes as soon as Tristram is born: “Unhappy Tristram! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent!” (Sterne 266). Tristram does not describe who he is but defines himself through his opinions and the digressive speeches of his characters that he comments on. His father is an embodiment of a “learned folly”, his intellect and erudition lead nowhere, they are utterly futile in everyday life and prevent him from communicating with others: “In addition to the perversity of the events, Walter Shandy also has to reckon with interruption, cross-purposes, disagreement, and simple incomprehension or indifference on the part of his hearers” (Towers 25). Walter Shandy did not die prematurely, like Johnny Truant’s father, but he did not support his son’s development either, being preoccupied with his theories and conceptions. Nevertheless, Walter’s character sheds light on Tristram’s personality. Though Tristram never claims it, through the progression of his digressions, one understands that he resembles his father in many ways.

The characters in both novels are depicted in digressions and wander through the labyrinths of their own preoccupations. Similar to the progressive-digressive advancement in *Tristram Shandy*, in *House of Leaves* “Characters encounter the ‘toil’ and negotiate the ‘wandering’ of their labyrinthine constructions by moving ahead but also thinking back” (Bida 47). Tristram’s character is represented not only by the overall structure of the novel, but also by his sentences. One can hardly find a sentence which is not interrupted, split by some associated or countering thought, some reminder or self-reflective comment. The particular style of each narrating character in *House of Leaves* also represents their personalities, and some divided features of Sterne’s Tristram are recognizable in Danielewski’s characters. Thus, Zampanò’s erudition and Johnny’s self-reflection seem to be derived from Tristram.
1.8.3 Delivering the Themes of the Novels through Digressions

Among the themes common for both *House of Leaves* and *Tristram Shandy* and delivered through differently manifested digressions are the theme of self-discovery and the theme of consciousness and reality.

**Self-Discovery**

All the characters in *House of Leaves*, even those who do not physically enter the mysterious labyrinth, wander in their own mazes of past pains, struggles, failures, fears and guiltiness. And those who enter it become lost in their own depths, twists, and turns, because the labyrinth reflects their personality. They all are, in a way, in the prisons of their selves. To get out of the labyrinth, whether mental or physical, they must acknowledge their own incongruities and accept them.

In his Introduction, Truant addresses the reader directly and promises what effect the offered text will have on them, in fact describing the effect it has already had on him:

> You’ll stand aside as great complexity intrudes. Tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. And then for better or for worse you’ll turn, unable to resist, though try to resist you still will. Fighting with everything you’ve got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are. The creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name (Danielewski xxiii).

Johnny’s work on Zampanò’s text allows him to embark on a painful remembrance journey of self-discovery and re-evaluation of his relationship with his mother. The investigation of his personal story and his reworking of the scattered materials of *The Navidson Record* become intertwined.

Truant’s mental and emotional wandering is a reflection of the physical maze of the Navidsons. Each character is traveling to the heart of the archetypical labyrinth in fear of the mythical beast, but there are no beasts other than the ones inside themselves. Truant’s self-discovery is paralleled with Navidson’s, and through this parallelism, the meaning of the labyrinth is expanded and enhanced. “… Johnny’s comprehensive immersion in ‘wandering’ through epistemological labyrinths and interrogating questions regarding humanity, worthiness, entitlement, and belonging offer an exploration of home that Navidson’s film or Zampanò’s manuscript alone cannot” (Bida 55). It should be stressed that this comprehensive immersion is happening simultaneously with Navidson’s explorations, and this simultaneity and depth are delivered by means of digressions.
Both Johnny and Navidson gradually face and acknowledge the sorrows, hurts, and faults that inhabit their past and find their way through the labyrinth of remembrance. The mysterious space inside the house is an embodiment of everything they cannot forget, or, in Johnny’s case, remember adequately, and cannot negotiate. This is not simply told to the readers, but shown through the complicated structure of the book. As Cox notes about Truant’s journey of remembrance, “The disintegration of the book, caused by the remembrance of his past, results in a personal metamorphosis that is hopeful, seemingly complete and utterly apposite for the spiritual notions of the labyrinth’s restorative powers” (Cox 14). Johnny’s Minotaur is his mother or, to be precise, a demonized image of her created by his painful memory. By the end of his work on The Navidson Record, Truant reaches the edge of insanity in fear of that monster. Only when he remembers her, when he again walks through those crucial five and a half minutes of his childhood, he begins to realize that she never tried to strangle him, but rather wiped the tears from his face. The moans that he has heard in his head were not the moans of a beast but the wailing of his mother who was taken away from her child. As soon as he remembers that, he finds the ‘exit’ from his maze of insanity: “And somehow I know it’s going to be okay. It’s going to be alright” (Danielewski 515). He was the only constructor of his maze, and he alone could save himself.

Navidson’s Minotaur is Delial, the girl on the verge of death of whom he took his best photo instead of rescuing her. To be more precise, the guilt of taking that photo is his Minotaur. This guilt, which he cannot confess to Karen, haunts him, alienates him from his family and builds the walls of his labyrinth. In his search for his self and, probably, for Delial’s forgiveness, Navidson goes back to the house. Before this, he writes a letter to Karen in which he finally confesses about Delial and faces the truth that has haunted him all those years: “… the real vulture was the guy with the camera preying on her for his … pulitzer prize…” (Danielewski 392). He eventually ruined his life because of that picture. He lost his brother and his family. Therefore, he decided to go to that horrible void again and try to find salvation: “… i miss delial i miss the man i thought i was before i met her the man who would have saved her… maybe hes the one im looking for or maybe im looking for all of them…” (Danielewski 393). Back in the labyrinth, he finds his own book, House of Leaves, reads it and burns it, just like Truant. It alters him and allows him to let go of the struggle to get out of the emptiness that he has been falling into. “Soon though he grows less concerned about where he is and becomes more consumed by who he once was” (Danielewski 473).
When Navidson realizes that he is going to die and accepts his own end, the house opens to Karen and lets her save him.

There is no straight way of self-exploration and finding one’s own identity, there is only inescapably digressional wandering through memory and knowledge. Just like the characters of House of Leaves, Tristram wanders through the labyrinth of his knowledge and memory until he gets to an actual, physical crossroads: he is on a trip to France and must choose one of three roads from Calais to Paris. He has undertaken this journey trying to escape from death. Of course, his rush is now and then interrupted by satirical digressions, like the travelogue about Calais or the descriptions of the characters of the French, their laws, customs, and other issues. As his trip continues, he remembers the other European tour he had with his family when he was young, and he is amazed by his memory’s ability to reproduce the episodes of that trip while he is undertaking this one. He marvels at the way he perceives himself:

…I have brought myself into such a situation, as no traveller ever stood before me; for I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner – and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces – and I am more over this moment in a handsome pavillon built by Pringello, upon the banks of the Garonne, which Mons. Slingeniac has lent me, and where I now sit rhapsodizing all these affairs (Sterne 465).

It looks like Tristram’s identity has tripled, or the three Tristrams – the child, the man who escapes death, and the writer who describes it all – have finally gathered in one mature and self-conscious person. Thus, it becomes clear how Truant’s and Navidson’s journeys of remembrance resemble Tristram’s journey.

**Consciousness and Reality**

House of Leaves consists of three layers of fictional reality: the reality of The Navidson Record, the reality of Zampanò and the reality of Johnny Truant. These three stories are successive: first, the film was made, then Zampanò developed his analytical monograph on it, and finally it entered into Johnny’s possession. But in the way the readers perceive them, they are all happening simultaneously due to the digressional architecture of the novel. And on each of these levels, their own authenticity is questioned. In the readers’ perception of the novel, the line between reality and fiction is blurred by Danielewski’s use of metafiction, but the line is also blurred in the perception of the novel’s characters. Danielewski plays with the readers’ consciousness in the same way he plays with his characters’ consciousness. As
Belletto claims, “… the real world of *House of Leaves* exists only in mediation and remediation” (101). In their judgment about what is real and what is not real within the fictional reality of the novel, the readers rely on interpretation upon interpretation – that of Zampanò, overlapped by Truant’s. This means that the readers are deprived of any legitimate indicator by which they can judge the reasonableness of any of the interpretations that they are offered.

The core story, *The Navidson Record*, should be considered at first. Will Navidson is ostensibly a celebrity. He has won the Pulitzer Prize, an award that actually exists. As the life of any other household, this one also looks perfectly normal from the outside. Navidson sets out to make a documentary – another very plausible, very common term – about nothing but the process of his family’s moving into a new house. In his interview, he says that he just wanted “to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it” (Danielewski 9). Instead, the Navidsons gradually realize – each in their own way – that there is something else that inhabits the house. Something irrational happens. The house appears to be bigger from the inside than it is from the outside. At this point, the reality of *The Navidson Record* shifts, and it shifts for the characters in the same way as it does for the readers. The rational, sane way in which Navidson, Tom and Reston try to figure it out – the numerous measurements with different devices – only enhances the seeming plausibility that all these characters and the house itself do exist: “Still, no matter how many times Reston wheels from the children’s bedroom to the master bedroom or how carefully he examines the strange closet space, the bookshelves, or the various tools Tom and will have been measuring the house with, he can provide no reasonable explanation for what he keeps referring to as ‘a goddamn special rape’” (Danielewski 55). Their bewilderment is so realistic and natural that it makes everything that is going on with them seem real to the readers.

Zampanò is definitely an enigmatic figure, but he nevertheless seems real. He was poor and he lived alone, but he has been seen by his readers, whom Johnny meets after the old man’s death. He was sane enough to question whether *The Navidson Record* was a hoax or whether it could be real, by providing different opinions:

*The Navidson Record* now stands as part of this country’s cultural experience and yet in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have seen it, the film continues to remain an enigma. Some insist it must be true, others believe it is a trick on par with the Orson Welles radio romp *The War of the worlds*. Others could care less, admitting that either way *The Navidson Record*
is a pretty good tale. Still many more have never even heard of it (Danielewski 7).

Zampanò writes that *The Navidson Record* was released by Miramax and shown in theaters throughout the country, that numerous books were written on it and that it has been included by many professors in their teaching programs, that many universities claim that dozens of students from different departments have completed their dissertations on the film. Reviews, critiques, and letters are still published by film periodicals (Danielewski 6). On Zampanò’s level, the documentary does exist, whereas Truant questions its very existence. He claims that he did the research and did not find any notice about *The Navidson Record*’s being shown in the theaters or any mention of the film in periodicals, nor did any of the celebrities who were ostensibly interviewed about the film remember it.

Johnny doubts that *The Navidson Record* ever existed, but the things described by the old man gradually penetrate his reality and begin to drive him insane as he works on the manuscript. Perhaps those things reveal something inside himself that drives him insane. His mental state deteriorates in parallel with the increasing horrors in the house. Johnny remembers the warning that Zampanò had given the reader of his papers and which he, Johnny, had not taken serious. He remembers the tracks of claws that he saw in Zampanò’s apartment, he thinks that the old man was killed by some beast that now is after him. He cannot sleep and he has terrible hallucinations. He hears a horrible roar and becomes afraid to leave his apartment. He puts extra locks and chains on the door. He even begins to feel that he is not real either:

… everything seems impossibly far and confused, my sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe … that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò’s work implies something that just can’t be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice … inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own … is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what’s worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò (Danielewski 326).

And here the readers finally reach the ultimate level of reality where everything – from *The Navidson Record* to Johnny Truant himself – may be mere fiction created by the Editors. Perhaps even the Editors are created by an invisible author.
In the same way, the fictional reality of *House of Leaves* itself consists of its own ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ levels, and the readers do not know where the boundary lies. It is a riddle for them, as the labyrinth is a riddle for the characters of the novel. As Zampanò cites one of his nonexistent sources, “Riddles: they either delight or torment. Their delight lies in their solutions” (Danielewski 33). Like the characters, the readers too are caught up between their *a priori* knowledge and their empirical perception. When something happens that contradicts our knowledge, our reality shifts, and our rational consciousness tries desperately to find an explanation, an answer to the riddle that must exist.

Through their struggle with the fictional invention, both Johnny and Navidson discover themselves and acquire the courage to face some very real issues from their past. It resembles Tristram Shandy who, in his attempt to escape a fictional personification of Death, comes to realize who he is, and how intricate his reality and memory are. “We live in a world beset on all sides by mysteries and riddles,” Tristram claims (Sterne 569). Through his entire autobiography he tries to find the key to the riddle of life. He plays with reality through his disrupted time scheme, he suspends reality and takes his readers back and forth, he becomes amazed by how the realities of his far and recent past and his present overlap. He tries to live and experience everything, simultaneously writing about it, and all he comes up with at the end is the ‘cock and bull story’.

1.8.4 Digression as a Means of Metafiction

Among the aspects of metafiction that are employed in *House of Leaves* and that have a resemblance to *Tristram Shandy* are the narrator’s role, the blurring of the line between fiction and reality, the narrators’ self-reflexivity and the interaction with the reader.

*House of Leaves* has multiple layers of narrative and several narrators with their particular styles, plots, and locations on the page. Zampanò’s subject is *The Navidson Record*, Johnny Truant’s subject is Zampanò’s text and his own story. The third narrator is someone called the Editors, and their subject is both Zampanò’s and Truant’s texts. “These three voices create a dialogue that is both scholarly and colloquial, learned and streetwise, truthful and deceiving” (Hemmingson 276). Each narrator has their own font, which makes it easier to follow their separate stories. The Editors explicitly address the reader at the beginning of the book, establishing their governing role in the novel: “In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant’s footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò’s will appear in Times. We also wish to note here that we have never actually met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone”
As portrayed in this footnote, the Editors immediately distance themselves from Truant, which is not necessary and not common for an editorial footnote. Obviously, in this way, they begin their own narrative and establish themselves as another narrator, on par with Truant and Zampanò. The presence of several narrators commenting on each other’s texts and discrediting each other compels the readers to make assumptions about the narrators’ credibility and the very fact of their existence.

In his attempt to be objective and to provide an extensive academic analysis of *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò honestly shares the public’s opposing views on the authenticity of the film. At first sight, his monograph looks consistent and formal. But Truant reveals too much controversial information to believe that Zampanò’s work may in any way be applicable to reality. First, the old man was blind, so how could he possibly have written a commentary about a film? Even if one assumes that he relied on what his readers read to him, he also discusses the visual details of the film extensively. Second, Zampanò refers to non-existent literary sources, on par with real ones, and he uses fictional interviews with celebrities who have never heard about *The Navidson Record*. All this information makes Zampanò an unreliable narrator and calls the very existence of the documentary into question. Zampanò could have made up the documentary and everything that refers to it. Thus, his whole monograph now looks like a work of fiction.

Truant even claims that Zampanò intended to create a work of fiction. What is “real” for both of them are the consequences: “See, the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (Danielewski xx). The fictionality of Zampanò’s manuscript does not bother Johnny, because he only uses it to attach his own text to it. Here, one may suggest that Truant has made up Zampanò’s entire commentary, as well as the film. He might even have written the Editors’ layer of the narrative to provide an unbiased frame and distance himself from both ‘internal’ narratives and thus confuse the reader even more about the true authorship of *House of Leaves*. This is supported by the fact that, at the end of the book, there is a Johnny who comes across the book *House of Leaves* by Zampanò with his, Johnny’s, notes and the Introduction. Here, he leaps out from his narrative layer, although he remains within his, rather than the Editors’, font and style.

There is also the fourth narrator’s voice at the very end of the novel, the voice of Johnny’s mother. Her letters are given in the Appendix and in this way they represent a lengthy digression from Truant’s footnoted story. On page 72, the Editors present the readers
with a choice to either continue following Johnny’s story in as told in the interruptions from Zampanò’s text, or to digress at this point and explore his background: “Those, however, who feel they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father’s obituary in Appendix II-D as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E” (Danielewski 72). Pelafina Lièvre’s letters have their own particular style and show an erudite but very troubled mind. What is written there is a self-contained, self-sufficient story, supplementing what is already unveiled about Truant and basically telling his life story in a more consecutive way than he has done before. The letters reflect Pelafina’s deteriorating mental state, and at the end of the Appendix, the readers see the letter from the Director of Whalestoe Clinic informing Johnny that his mother has killed herself. Although Pelafina’s letters are given separately at the end and do not have any connection to The Navidson Record, her character recalls Karen Green in, for instance, the way she “practiced [her] smile in a mirror, the way [she] did when [she] was a child” (Danielewski 615). The Whalestoe Letters thus do not only complement Johnny’s story and reveal his personality, but they also hint that it indeed might have been Johnny who made up Zampanò and his manuscript.

There are thus several alternatives for the authenticity of the narrative layers and the narrators within the fictional reality of House of Leaves. However, the main point is how the use of several narrators with their own styles and formal frames allows Danielewski to supply self-reflexivity to the entire text of the novel and to obscure the line between fiction and reality. Each narrative layer and each narrator tries to establish their own credibility while revealing the fictionality of the previous layer. The narrators also offer self-reflexive comments and other narrators respond to those comments, such as when Johnny says, “Perhaps when I’m finished I’ll remember what I’d hoped to say in the first place,” which is followed by the Editors’ note: “Mr. Truant declined to comment further on this particular passage” (Danielewski 54). The narrators pass the readers’ attention to each other or intercept it like a ball. “Given all of these interruptive layers, or leaves—leaves that function as, or necessitate, the various returns to the meaning of the mysterious ‘space’ at the heart of novel—by the time we reach the first moment of self-return we are primed to read it as just one more example of postmodern solipsism, a textual trick designed to remind us that reality is always only fiction…” (Toth 183). By the end of the book, one becomes so frustrated with the three voices, who may be separate but who are unified in their pursuit to confuse the readers, that one recalls Truant’s phrase from his Introduction: “… you’ll see why there’s suddenly a whole lot here not to take too seriously” (Danielewski xx). This seems like
Danielewski’s own voice through Truant, which provides the novel with another metafictional layer to make the fictive novel seem more real.

Johnny ‘breaks the fourth wall’ in his anti-dedication when he, to begin with, says that this story is not for the readers. The reader is supposed to become involved right away, either by turning the page or closing the book, but most readers will ignore his warning and enter the labyrinth. In his Introduction, Truant also warns about the implications of reading the following text by sharing his own horrible experience. He provides the mysterious note that Zampanò had left for the person who would find and publish his manuscript, with a wish to be mentioned, but with a hope that this text would never be revealed to the public: “They say truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test” (Danielewski xix). It is one of the rare occasions that Zampanò talks about his own text and not about The Navidson Record, at least, if Zampanò supposedly ever existed.

Unlike Zampanò, Truant talks about his work throughout the novel, as well as about the old man’s text. He explains his choices in the process of reworking Zampanò’s material, directly addressing the reader:

So you see from my perspective, having to decide between old man Z and his story is an artificial, maybe even dangerous choice, and one I’m obviously not comfortable making. The way I figure it, if there’s something you find irksome – go ahead and skip it. I couldn’t care less how you read any of this. His wandering passages are staying, along with all his oddly canted phrases and even some warped bits in the plot (Danielewski 31).

This small passage can be regarded, probably, as the quintessence of metafiction: Truant addresses the reader directly. He provides a critique of Zampanò’s style, argues for his own choice to leave it as it is, and reveals his attitude to the reader and the text itself. In this way, Truant’s text becomes a narrative that contains its own theory and critique. Raymond Federman calls this kind of narrative “critifiction” (1154). This ‘critifictional playfulness’ is found in Johnny’s footnotes throughout the novel, in which he makes many other critical comments about Zampanò’s style, as well as about his own. In another example, he refers to the audience with a reflection on his narrative, admits his digression and even argues with the wordless reader: “Now I am sure you’re wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampanò only wrote ‘heater’. The word ‘water’ back there – I added that. Now there is an admission, eh?” (Danielewski 16). Under the assumption that Johnny could be the sole author of the entire
book, the Editors’ explanatory notes could be regarded as another instance of his self-
reflection, as in the following example about his digressions: “Though Mr. Truant’s asides
may often seem impenetrable, they are not without rhyme or reason. The reader who wishes
to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note” (Danielewski 72). In this
way, the Editors’ layer of narrative adds to the ‘critifictional’ nature of *House of Leaves.*

Several critics have claimed that self-reflective fiction ended in the 1980s, but *House
of Leaves* shows that it did not (Federman 1142). Danielewski’s self-reflexivity has worked
well in the 2000s, and it is so explicit that it inevitably recalls Sterne. In his self-reflexivity,
Johnny Truant is a contemporary underground Los Angeles version of Tristram Shandy. His
ongoing reflection on his work and on the pains he goes through in the process of writing
resembles Tristram’s reflections. As Spooner states, in its self-reflexivity, *House of Leaves* is
an expressively postmodern text, standing in the tradition of “metatextual fictions” alongside
the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (47).

Countless times, Tristram appeals to “Madam” and “Sir” explaining his digressions,
promising new ones, and asking them to not judge him and let him tell his story the way he
sees fit. He explains the choices he makes, the helplessness he feels sometimes, being unable
to find the right way to cover everything he wants. He compels the reader to interact with
him, to approve his thoughts and to follow his arbitrary narrative, just like Truant entreats the
reader not to read his text.

Tristram often refers to a hypothetical critic, explaining and defending his approach:
“I write as a man of erudition; – that even my similies, my allusions, my illustrations, my
metaphors, are erudite, – and that I must sustain my character properly, and contrast it
properly too, – else what would become of me?” (Sterne 76). He says that he constructed his
“… main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so
complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within
another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going…” (Sterne 64). Where
there is a black page, Tristram explains that it is out of mourning for Yorick; when there is a
marbled page, it is a “motley emblem” of his work that only a knowledgeable reader can
understand (Sterne 204). Apparently, he mocks some writers and social attitudes about
‘cleanness of thought’ by inviting the audience to take a look at his laundry bill and judge for
themselves the ‘cleanliness’ of his writing: “when your honours and reverences would know
whether I writ clean and fit to be read, you will be able to judge full as well by looking into
my Laundress’s bill, as my book” (Sterne 561). Tristram claims he has several cleaning bills
as evidence for his clean thoughts, but that no one had ever seen them. In a similar way,
Danielewski offers a number of drafts, collages, pictures, photos and other materials in the appendices for the readers’ own interpretation and application to what they have just read. All those digressional inserts would mean nothing if the reader could not attach their own meaning to them in the course of their interaction with the author. According to Ferguson, “… importance is created by the audience and brought to the story. There is no such thing as inherent importance” (29). This is a truly metafictional aspect, and in this way, one can say that the value of the text can vary depending on the audience, and this value is something halfway between what the author offers and what the reader accepts.

The ‘critifictional’ nature of Tristram Shandy is also expressed in the footnotes by the editor who corrects or explains some of Tristram’s notions, like the following: “Mr. Tristram Shandy has been led into this error, either from seeing Lithopædus’s name of late in a catalogue of learned writers in Dr. ———, or by mistaking Lithopædus for Trinecavellius,— from the too great similitude of the names” (Sterne 133). Thus, one receives a second narrator’s voice that adds to the self-reflexivity of the entire novel. This voice is not as explicit as Tristram’s, nor as explicit as the voice of the Editors in House of Leaves. Tristram also uses footnotes occasionally to explain himself or to digress from his own digression and explain something even more extensively. But if Sterne’s use of the footnote was still quite shy and limited, Danielewski has expanded it to the level of a separate, digressive and self-reflexive narrative. As Hemmingson notes, “Danielewski’s footnotes invite the reader into a labyrinth of critifictional playfulness, inquiring what is true and what is a lie, what is fiction and what is fact” (276). If Truant is the main narrator in the novel, Danielewski emphasizes the text that is formally considered as secondary, by telling his story in the footnotes. He undermines the authority and credibility of the narrator, as Sterne undermines the authority of Tristram in his footnotes. It does not matter who is real and whether what happens to them is true. What matters for both Sterne and Danielewski is the text itself, the form in which the narrative may exist and be perceived by the reader. In this way, I may say that the text as a literary construct is exalted over its author in case of both Tristram Shandy and House of Leaves.

1.8.5 Creating Intertextuality by Means of Digression

If the self-reflexivity of House of Leaves is mostly delivered by Johnny Truant’s character, then the intertextuality of the novel is mostly Zampanò’s service. His entire text is built on references to other texts, real and fictional, and even if one supposes that many of those quoted texts were written by Zampanò or Truant, the intertextuality remains as a deceiving
form of presenting the narrative. In this way, Zampanò represents the second aspect of the
dual resemblance of Danielewski’s characters to Tristram Shandy.

Zampanò constantly interrupts his description of the film episodes with his
explanations of what is going on and why, and what that means. He refers to the researchers
who ostensibly wrote about The Navidson Record, or alludes to common scientific and
literary works by real and recognized authors. Sometimes Zampanò’s allusive digressions
span pages, and it may seem that he has gathered a heap of fragments of knowledge and uses
the film episodes to illustrate that knowledge, instead of vice versa, to explain the film with
the references. He weaves leaves of others’ thoughts into garlands, creating his own literary
artifact. As Roland Barthes noted, “We know that a text does not consist of a line of words,
releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but is a space of
many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of
which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of
culture” (4). Zampanò has the same approach as Tristram
Shandy, who also assembles the
others’ ideas and texts, real and fictional, into his own construction, creating something new
and unique.

In the middle of Exploration #4, Zampanò digresses to discuss the history of
labyrinths. He cites Jacques Derrida regarding the structure and centrality. Johnny provides a
preliminary translation of the quotes. According to Derrida, the center of a structure
organizes and orients the coherence of the system and allows the elements to play inside a
total form (Danielewski 112). The center of a totality, thus, can be inside or outside the
structure. “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong
to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is
not the center” (112). Zampanò’s suggestion on how to perceive the labyrinth in the
Navidsons’ house could be seen as advice from the author on how to perceive the entire
House of Leaves. The Derridean way of approaching the novel is, of course, just one of the
many ways of reading House of Leaves and it may not be accepted by those who do not
support poststructuralism. But, as Belletto aptly notes, “…House of Leaves offers numerous
pre-emptive readings; that is, it folds in various interpretive acts that would make sense to
those coming to the novel from differing theoretical perspectives” (108). Later in his
commentary, Zampanò quotes Penelope Reed Doob who claims that the labyrinth perception
varies depending on where you stand. If you stand inside it, you perceive it as a linear but
devious path to the goal, but if you view it from the outside, from above, as a pattern, you
may contemplate the complex artistry and beautiful design of the labyrinth. In that way,
labyrinths “… simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos” (Danielewski 114). Thus, the way the readers perceive the labyrinth may change if they change the perspective from which they look at it. Depending on their perspective, the center of this system may shift, and its labyrinthine structure may alter. The readers may become consumed by one of the stories – either that of the Navidsons or of Truant – and they may wander through the labyrinth of that particular story, yearning to find the way out. On their way, the readers will be interrupted now and then by the intersecting passages of the other story. Or they may view the novel as a whole, as a simultaneous journey of several people into the depths of their memory, they may look at them from above and be amazed by the intricate and complete design of the maze, in which their paths run perfectly parallel, intersect and overlap.

Thanks to the numerous digressive intertextual inserts of texts by real and fictional authors, sermons, memoirs, and allusions to many well-known ideas and their adaptations to the context of Tristram’s story and character, *Tristram Shandy* can be regarded as a universal encyclopedia of knowledge and a source of ideas for allusions for future authors. Tristram’s references to Horace, Hippocrates, Erasmus, Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Moliere, Swift, Rabelais, Cervantes and, of course, his numerous rhetorical appeals to Locke, create a certain halo of intelligence around his opinions and mockingly place a relevant demand on the reader: in order to fully understand and taste Tristram’s thoughts, “Sir” and “Madam” have to be intelligent and well-read.

Tristram’s borrowings from other authors are often considered to be plagiarism. Tristram himself comments on that. After citing Horace and Erasmus, he instantly attacks plagiarism and literary borrowing, as if lamenting his own inability to create something new and unique:

> Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring out of one vessel into another? Are we forever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope? Shall we be destined to the days of eternity, on holy-days, as well as working-days, to be shewing the relicks of learning, as monks do the relicks of their saints – without working one – one single miracle with them? (Sterne 309-310)

His diatribe against literary borrowing is surprisingly modern. Everything has already been written. The more writings emerge, the more one has to borrow and re-work in an attempt to create something new.
Despite his laments, Tristram is quite unique in his unabashed use of borrowings in the most unexpected places and moments. This application of borrowed texts creates new meanings for them, thus something unique emerges. This also applies to the abundant collection of different texts within *House of Leaves*. But the textual assemblage that both novels offer can only be unified and receive its emotional incarnation through the perception of a reader. As Barthes puts it, “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination” (6). As I already pointed out, Danielewski does what Sterne did: he offers a number of texts and provides the context for them, leaving the interpretation to the reader. For instance, the abstract about Derrida’s “center which is not the center” in *House of Leaves* and “Slawkenbergius Tale” about noses in *Tristram Shandy* can be interpreted in different ways depending on the reader’s focus and perception of the context.

1.9 Conclusion to Chapter 3

With his elaborate construct *House of Leaves*, Mark Z. Danielewski has reexamined the conventions of the novel and the mode of existence of the printed book. He has reinvigorated the novel and adapted it to the contemporary perception of a text in the era of virtual and electronic culture. His metafictional, intertextual and typographical devices explore the boundaries of the printed book. *House of Leaves* invites its readers to read actively and they can navigate its hypertext almost as they do when they read an online page. Still, it is a printed, physical object to leaf through. Furthermore, it has to be turned and read with a mirror sometimes, to touch all those collages and pictures and to be able to fully contemplate the novel, because its emotional message is delivered not by the text itself but by the shape of that text. Intensive typographical play in the book is not a mere whim of the author or an attempt to be extravagant. This play is an integral part of our immersive hyperreal reading experience.

As Danielewski himself admits, he did not start a revolution but he simply gathered the best practices of the tradition. The tradition that he borrowed from includes Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Indeed, the resemblance may be clearly felt in many aspects of *House of Leaves*, such as its digressional structure in which Johnny Truant, just like Tristram, comments on his own digressions. The resemblance is seen in the characters and the way they are developed – gradually, interruptedly, and self-consciously. Johnny’s self-consciousness in the process of writing and Zampanò’s intertextual assemblage are akin to that of Tristram. Like Sterne, Danielewski places the text above its author and largely relies
on the reader’s interpretation. The narrative in both novels may seem to be a flow of consciousness that threatens to break the physical bounds of the book every now and then, yet it stays within its banks. It is not a spontaneous flood, but rather shows a sophisticatedly constructed order that works exactly as it was intended – it confuses and disorients. Reading both House of Leaves and Tristram Shandy, we are compelled to rethink what the novel is and what the printed book is. Books are not mere objects that offer information for passive consumption. More likely, they are lively environments in which different emotions and experiences are created, depending on who is reading them.
CONCLUSION

In my reading of *Pale Fire*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *House of Leaves*, I have analyzed the use of the technique of digression by Nabokov, Vonnegut, and Danielewski, and how they were influenced by Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. In his novel, Sterne explored both the epistemological issues of the interpretation of world and knowledge that are typical for the modernist paradigm, and the ontological questions of what reality is, what the modes of existence of the world are, and what the modes of existence of a narrative are, that can be attributed to the postmodernist paradigm. There are similar explorations in the three other novels under discussion.

Two months after *Pale Fire* was published, Nabokov said in one of his interviews: “You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (Boyd 5). These preliminary words summarize the outcome of the ontological search for the four authors. There is a hint of how to make the attempt to describe reality. There cannot be a linear structure or a chronological order of plot development. One of not so many ways to deliver all those “steps, levels of perception, and false bottoms” is through an interrupted, digressive narrative that with its very structure can blur the line between fiction and history, biography, and everything that seems ‘real’ to the readers. As Belletto aptly notes, “A highly digressive style disrupts a reader’s sense of what she thinks she knows – the main plot is most significant – which causes her to revise her understanding of what is or is not important, relevant, worthwhile…” (10). My analysis focused on how digression forms the structure of the novels, providing information about the characters and background for the plot, delivering themes, adding a metafictional layer to the texts, and creating intertextuality. In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, *Pale Fire*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I also considered the use of digression in supplying irony and satire to the novels.

The structure of *Tristram Shandy* is thoroughly digressive, and it is defined by the title, the subject and the message of the novel. It is a story about the ‘opinions’ rather than the ‘adventures’ of the character. To maintain an adventurous plot seems impossible in a non-linear order, but there is no better way to deliver certain opinions than that with the use of digressions. And there is no better way to show how complex reality is and that it is impossible to write about life while simultaneously experiencing it. Tristram’s digressions as
part of the structure disrupt the time scheme, provide explanatory background to the events, and blur the line between fiction and reality.

The critical apparatus in *Pale Fire* is made in accordance with conventions, but by making it a part of a fictional work, Nabokov mocks the scholarly tradition, just like Sterne mocked the 18th-century novel by perverting its conventions in *Tristram Shandy*. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s commentaries may be regarded as digressions from Shade’s poem. But it may as well be the contrary: that by referring from time to time to certain lines of the poem, Kinbote interrupts his own story. He digresses within his own comments, that may span pages, to provide an extensive Zemblan background to his own plot. Kinbote’s style largely resembles Tristram’s in its pomposity and in its propensity to digress. Like with Tristram, Kinbote’s engagement in his memories and contemplations recalls a flow of consciousness that runs in different ways. The linear order of the events of Kinbote’s life in New Wye is disrupted, but his Zemblan events are told in a consequent manner if the numerous interruptions are removed. In this way, Kinbote’s style is digressive, but progressive too, just like Tristram’s. Kinbote’s digressions serve to construct his own world, just like Tristram tries to reflect the ‘real’ world in his digressions. Nabokov shows that it is possible to construct an imagined world, but it is impossible to define the actual world and comprehend our reality. Thus he proves Sterne’s message.

Reality is incomprehensible for Kurt Vonnegut as well. It is complex but also absurd. Recognizing this absurdity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he also constructs his own world, a world where war can be omitted, and where the past, present and future exist on a flat board. This concept defines the digressive structure of the novel and its disrupted time scheme. The episodes of Billy Pilgrim’s life outside the war circle around his war plot. The technique of digression allows Vonnegut to show fragments of Billy’s life in different parts of time simultaneously. There is no suspense in the novel and no climax, as there is no beginning or end in the traditional understanding. In this, *Slaughterhouse-Five* resembles *Tristram Shandy*. The readers are thrown into the novels at a random point in time, and randomly follow the narrator throughout the texts. The episodes of Billy’s life are scattered before them like beads from a torn string, chaotically, because there is no other way to tell about the absurd and irrational world.

Reality is a labyrinth of memory, says Danielewski in *House of Leaves*, and each individual has their own labyrinth. His novel’s structure is shaped like a house with a labyrinth of text and ‘leaves’ of digressions. Each reading may construct another labyrinth. The way his readers enter that house next time – via the front door of Johnny Truant’s
Introduction or via the back door of his Appendix – is left for them to decide. Several plots are developed simultaneously by several narrators as footnoted narratives. Whether Johnny’s footnotes constitute digression from Zampanò’s monograph or vice versa depends on the perspective from which the readers look at the labyrinth of the book, and on the ‘door’ through which they approach it. Digressions permeate both Zampanò’s commentary and Truant’s footnotes. The structural elements of the novel, such as the Appendices, are also digressive elements of the stories told in the main section. Danielewski uses the device as extensively as Sterne. Similar to Sterne, he applies typographical play as part of his narrative, inserting collages, scribbles, and blank pages. Like Sterne, he pushes the boundaries of the existence of the narrative and of the printed book.

Interrupting himself during the description of his life, Tristram reveals information about his characters: their background, their vision, their hobby-horses. Each major character is actually defined by their hobby-horse, and there is a chance to explore them from this perspective throughout the novel when they provide their separate, non-related excurses, only minimally linked to the slowly progressing events of Tristram’s life. Walter Shandy is obsessed with theories and concepts, intolerant to anything that does not fit his views. Uncle Toby is obsessed with the reconstruction of his military past through building fake fortifications. He is kind and tender but unable to build any kind of connection with other people. Parson Yorick is a naïve but kind and generous jester who dislikes gravity and seriousness, and who suffers because of his frivolity. All the characters are static, though they are depicted extensively through numerous digressions. They all serve as yardsticks to define Tristram’s evolving character through his attitudes and opinions about them.

In *Pale Fire*, through Kinbote’s digressions, the readers are thoroughly informed about all the characters, or, at least, how Kinbote views them. Like Tristram’s characters, Shade is just an auxiliary object around which Kinbote’s personality is developed. The fictional metamorphoses of both Kinbote and Shade when they become their texts inevitably resemble Tristram in his autobiographical pursuit. Shade reconstructs his life in his poem, and after his death, he becomes a stack of cards with a written text. Kinbote reveals himself in the context of Shade’s poem by his irrelevant commentary. They both define themselves through the text, just like Tristram tries to convert his life into a multivolume autobiography stuffed with numerous abstract derivations.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim’s character is, apart from Tristram, as static as the characters in *Tristram Shandy*. Billy’s character is one of the means of delivering the author’s message: in an irrational world, there cannot exist a character that is able to make
choices. In his static mode, Billy Pilgrim resembles Uncle Toby and in his grotesqueness he resembles Tristram. Even though Tristram does evolve, he does not face any significant challenges. There is no traditional protagonist-antagonist conflict in either novel. As Sterne, Vonnegut uses his character as a conductor of the fictional world of his narrative, providing his readers with fragments of knowledge through Billy’s eyes and ears.

In both House of Leaves and in Tristram Shandy, one gathers fragments of the characters’ images throughout the novels, from their self-descriptions, from the information about them provided by others, and from their digressive opinions. In House of Leaves, Zampanò explores Karen and Will’s personalities and their relationship through references to various materials that were allegedly created about them. Johnny Truant’s regards about Zampanò are based on his alleged conversations with his readers. Truant’s character is, probably, the most developed in the novel. He is with the readers from the first to the last pages, and he mostly talks about himself. Finally, his personality and background become fully revealed in the Appendix, ostensibly attached by the Editors, the most mysterious character who the readers do not get to know. In the process of their reading of The House of Leaves, Tristram appears before them in a new light. He can now be interpreted as a composite character, reflecting Danielewski’s two most sound narrators: Truant reminds one of Tristram by his self-reflexive interruptions, and Zampanò by his erudition and propensity to apply numerous intertextual digressions.

Consideration of the common themes delivered by means of digression in Pale Fire and Tristram Shandy brings the readers to the relations between reality, delusion and disguise, destiny and fate, exile and memory, death and mortality, and the theme of hobby-horses. In a sophisticated manner, Nabokov allows his readers to see both Shade’s real life and Kinbote’s ‘wonderland’, just as Sterne makes them ‘see’ the grotesque reality of Shandy Hall, exploiting Locke’s association of ideas. In their literary works, both Nabokov and Sterne go beyond the realm of literature and move to philosophy, psychology, and epistemology in their explorations of how a human mind filters reality and interprets the received ideas. Memory is treated by Nabokov in a way similar to Sterne’s. The examples of Kinbote and Uncle Toby show how memory can both be a means of reconstruction of the past and of alienation from the present. As for death, in Pale Fire it is comprehended and experienced, and in Tristram Shandy it is mocked and escaped.

Among the themes common to Slaughterhouse-Five and Tristram Shandy, delivered by differently manifested digressions, are the relations of free will and predestination, and of time and death. Tristram Shandy laments the misfortunes that fate prepared for him, and
wishes he had been born on the Moon rather than on this nasty planet. He does not choose who to be, and the only place in which he can make any choices is in his writing. Vonnegut takes the idea of predestination and the absence of free will to the extreme. Billy Pilgrim is absolutely passive and indifferent to anything that is going on in his life, because he became acquainted with the Tralfamadorian concept which stipulates that the universe is designed in a certain way, and there is no such thing as free will. The theme of time and death permeates *Slaughterhouse-Five* and is also connected with the Tralfamadorian concept. In four-dimensional reality, death is just something that happens in one of the episodes of the life of an individual, and it is not the end. For Tristram, death is just an annoyance that distracts him from writing about his life. He escapes it to continue telling what he promised to the reader. For Vonnegut, the disrupted time scheme and the Tralfamadorian concept serve as a formal means to get through the atrocity of war and death, and for Sterne, the fragmentation of his narrative is a method of delivering the inconceivability of life and reality in general.

Among the themes common to both *House of Leaves* and *Tristram Shandy* and delivered by differently manifested digressions are the theme of self-discovery and the theme of consciousness and reality. Danielewski’s characters wander around the labyrinths of their memory in their search for their selves. Only through the process of remembrance and painful acknowledgment of their past can they find the way out of their mental traps. This recalls Tristram, who discovers his tripped identity in the process of remembrance and in his realization of how the layers of his memory overlap. The fictional reality in *House of Leaves* has three dimensions: the reality of *The Navidson Record*, the reality of Zampanò, and the reality of Johnny Truant. It resembles a Russian nesting doll: a continuous embedding of worlds. Not only are the readers confused by the narrators about which of the worlds is “real”, but the narrators themselves become frustrated about it. There are even moments when Johnny Truant is not sure about his own existence and begins to believe that he is being created and defined by the text he works on. However, at the end of their wanderings both Navidson and Truant contemplate themselves through their books, identifying themselves with the texts.

What makes a literary work metafictional is that the author makes his own text subject for consideration within this text. In this way, *Tristram Shandy* is highly metafictional. Tristram is a self-conscious narrator who in numerous interruptions analyzes his own method, explains his choices regarding his text, reflects on the process of his writing, refers to the critics in self-defense, and appeals to the readers in an attempt to gain approval.
In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote’s commentary presents itself as a narrative about another, ostensibly autobiographical text, the poem. In his comments and in the Foreword, Kinbote describes the process and the context of his engagement with Shade’s poem, providing details of his own life and giving his judgment on a variety of topics, including Shade’s and his own methods. In this way, his writing becomes a self-sufficient and self-reflective narrative. There is a possibility that Kinbote may be the sole author of both texts, but it could also be Shade. The narrator, thus, whoever he is, should not be confused with the author, Nabokov, who peeks out at the end to confuse his readers further about the narrator’s identity. This is just like Tristram should not be confused with Sterne, who peeks out from time to time in the footnotes to correct “Mr. Shandy” regarding different issues. The same applies to the audiences of both Kinbote and Tristram – their narratees are their characters, rather than the actual readers of Nabokov and Sterne.

Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a deliberate work of metafiction in which the text poses itself as an artifact and in which the whole meaning of that text relies greatly on the narrator’s self-conscious reflection on it. Vonnegut makes his preface part of the novel, and by doing so he intentionally makes himself a fictional narrator, as one of the characters of the novel. This inclusive position expands Vonnegut’s ability to deliver his message fully and it adds credibility to this voice. In his self-reflexivity, Vonnegut’s narrator resembles Tristram. They both share their plans and intentions regarding their texts, and neither succeeds in following their intentions, because reality makes its own corrections to their plans. The frustration that both narrators feel about that is a deception of the reader that both Vonnegut and Sterne engage in: both texts are exactly as they were actually planned by the writers, and having fictional narrators allows them to play that game.

Metafiction in *House of Leaves* is as extensive as in *Tristram Shandy*. Several narrators with their own stories, styles, fonts and places on the page exist simultaneously due to the digressive structure of the novel. Johnny refers to the reader, argues with them, analyzes Zampanò’s style, explains his narrative choices and reflects on the effects that the text has on him. He is as self-conscious as Tristram. The Editors who also provide comments on Truant’s text in their footnotes resemble the editor who occasionally corrects Tristram in his footnotes. Both *House of Leaves* and *Tristram Shandy* may be called ‘critifictional’ texts, which means they contain their own theory and critique within them.

Sterne’s erudition was vast, and it is reflected in *Tristram Shandy*. Due to numerous inserts of the texts by real and fictional authors, sermons, memoirs, and excurses about philosophical ideas, the novel can be regarded as a universal encyclopedia of knowledge and
a vast source of ideas to borrow from. Tristram’s references to Horace, Hippocrates, Erasmus, Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Moliere, Swift, Rabelais, Cervantes and, of course, his numerous rhetorical appeals to Locke, are applied in a new context and adapted to Tristram’s particular purposes, and in this they receive their unique incarnation and new meanings. These references support Tristram’s judgment, serve as illustrations to his and other characters’ thoughts, and entertain the reader.

In *Pale Fire*, the very title sends us to Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* and to the motif of thievery and borrowing. By showing Kinbote’s incorrect translation of Shakespeare’s lines, by Shade’s intentional misuse T.S. Elliot’s term ‘sempiternal’, as well as his intentional misinterpretation of Keats’ *Chapman’s Homer*, Nabokov raises the same epistemological question that Sterne raised. They question how knowledge is transmitted from one knower to the other, and how reliable the interpretation of this knowledge by each receiver can be. Through his play with the word ‘bridge’, Sterne shows how individual preoccupations affect the interpretation of words and knowledge in general. Through similar wordplay with ‘mountain’ and ‘fountain’, and through his intertextual distortions, Nabokov proves this claim.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, like *Tristram Shandy*, is a motley canvas permeated with intertextual allusions, references, and quotations. Like Sterne, Vonnegut establishes a certain frame of reference for his audience by his numerous literary and historical allusions. Throughout the novel, he quotes a carol and limericks, and he refers to real and fictional novels, poetry and historical works. Two allusions are encoded in the very title of the novel, and the author explains them in the first chapter. Inserts, references, and allusions to other real texts create a web of grotesque and tragic images and place the novel’s subject in a larger historical perspective. Inserts of texts by Kilgore Trout serve the purpose of satire and obscure the line between reality and fiction. Billy Pilgrim’s name inevitably brings us to another allusion in *Tristram Shandy*, the allusion to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, this universal encyclopedia of knowledge and metaphor for travel. Tristram travels through the episodes of his life like Billy travels around the episodes of his life, through time and space.

In *House of Leaves*, Zampanò now and then interrupts his description of the film with references to other texts, real and fictional. In that way, he comments, researches, and explains the events and the characters’ behavior. His references, like that to Heidegger’s interpretation of the ‘uncanny’, or the excursus into the physics of echo, also serve the purpose of creating the suspense and terrifying context for the events to follow. Sometimes, Zampanò’s intertextual digressions span pages, and it may seem that he collected a pile of
fragments of knowledge and uses The Navidson Record to illustrate that knowledge. He creates his own opinionative narrative. In doing so, he resembles Tristram Shandy who also assembles the ideas of others into his own construction, creating something new and unique.

The most featured object of Tristram’s irony is, probably, his father. Obsessed with his futile eloquence, Walter Shandy never stops trying to convince everyone to accept his concepts, though nobody ever cares, and nobody listens to him. His thoroughly thought-out theories and plans always fail, as for example Tristram’s name and the Tristrapedia. He keeps philosophizing, though, lonely in his hobbyhorsical obsession, unable to enter into communication with anyone and unable to fix the creaking door.

In Pale Fire, the most ironic figure is John Shade. An established poet who wrote what was probably the best work of his life, self-reflective and deeply personal, in which he reflected his contemplation of death, dies on the porch of an insane king of Zembla who happened to be his neighbor, being accidentally shot by an assassin who suffers from bowel disorder. Shade’s poem, an exalted ethical work, comes into hands of this insane king who distorts it with his own fantasies. Like in Tristram Shandy, the irony in Pale Fire stems from places high values, aspirations, philosophical contemplations and gravity into an inappropriate context.

Slaughterhouse-Five, like Tristram Shandy, is meticulously impregnated with irony, black humor, and satire. Irrational juxtapositions, equivocal meanings and hints, grotesque images and exalted disparities are delivered in a firm and distanced tone. The most ironic figure in Slaughterhouse-Five is Edgar Derby. A decent man, in good physical shape, a teacher of Contemporary Problems in Western Civilization, is executed by the Germans at the end of war for taking a German teapot. Another personification of fate’s joke is Roland Weary, a “musketeer” with profound knowledge of instruments of torture, who is caught by old men and teenagers, and dies in agony of gangrene. The last sentences of both novels sound like final jokes of the authors and leave the readers with a confused but impressed smile.

All three novels subtly and explicitly draw allusions to Tristram Shandy, and in that way, they resonate with each other. In my reading, I have detected the following common features for Pale Fire, Slaughterhouse-Five, and House of Leaves: acknowledging the complexity of reality and its incomprehensibility; exploration of the modes of existence of a narrative and expanding its boundaries; blurring the line between fiction and reality; exalting the text over the author; defining characters as text; extensive self reflexivity; disguised
narrators; and intertextuality. All these features are manifested through the technique of digression that is largely derived from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.

By this, I can apply Tristram’s comment on writing to the contemporary novels: “Every author has a way of his own in bringing his points to bear” (Sterne 16). Nabokov, Vonnegut, and Danielewski prove and expand this notion.
WORKS CITED


