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Artifact Paper: David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*

David Foster Wallace's fiction has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the last few decades. A search for journal articles dealing with his novel *Infinite Jest* yields a long reading list. Wallace's nonfiction has not been ignored: In a recent piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, Maud Newton draws a line from Wallace's hyperconscious self-presentation in his essays to broad rhetorical trends in online writing. In the scholarly realm, however, Wallace's nonfiction has been subordinated to his fiction. Scholars draw on Wallace's nonfiction, but often for the sole purpose of better understanding his fiction. Though there are certainly connections between the two, Wallace's nonfiction is crafted too carefully to be a mere stepping-stone.

For my primary artifact, then, I have chosen Wallace's *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. The collection comprises works about literature, the porn industry, rhetoric and style, political discourse, September 11<sup>th</sup>, and tennis, as well as the titular essay on the Maine Lobster Festival. I am interested in the book in the context of this class for three primary reasons. In all three cases, the analogues Wallace implicitly or explicitly suggests, complicates, or rejects between the "human" and "nonhuman" are central to my reading and investigation.

First, there is Wallace's focus on the operations of human social systems, particularly political and communal systems. Even those pieces not overtly focused on political topics address the ways in which social relationships function, and particularly the ways machines with screens can alter and mediate relationships among neighbors, fan communities, and so on.

Wallace also addresses sexual relationships, particularly male-female sexual relationships. I am interested in this topic in light of arguments sometimes made as explanations for—if not defenses of—rape based on the notion that sexual satisfaction is a natural biological urge in human males.<sup>1</sup> Wallace addresses the violence and justifications that can accompany various sex acts in his piece on the porn industry, though this will be a spot where I will also draw on his fiction. In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a number of Wallace's "hideous men" simultaneously reference, make, and retreat from problematic arguments about women, human relationships, and sex. I am interested in considering what objections to many of these arguments are possible by looking at what is considered "normal" and "deviant" human sexual behavior alongside consideration of various other species and evolutionary biology.

Finally, I will be looking at how Wallace depicts "animals" themselves, particularly in the essay "Consider the Lobster." In it, he applies a *via negativa* approach to the ethics of the Maine Lobster Fest. Rather than asserting the wrongness of the festival using positivistic arguments about what the lobster that is caught, killed, cooked, and eaten (presumably in that order) definitely experiences, Wallace works to raise doubts in his readers' minds about what they might take for granted when seeing a lobster as food. I find this rhetorical approach keenly persuasive, and plan to take a closer look at what it offers as our class develops.

In all of this, I have in mind a term that has become a Wallace watchword in recent years: compassion. Compassion is an imperative Wallace argued for quite directly in much of his work, and all of his comments on humans, politics, sexual relationships, and lobsters touch on the importance of compassion as a value in one way or another—something that strikes me as a relevant foundation for the sort of inquiry we and I will be undertaking in the course.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dilbert* creator Scott Adams composed a notorious example earlier this year.

## Bibliography

Adams, Scott. "Pegs and Holes." *The Scott Adams Blog*. Universal Uclick, 15 June 2011. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

A blog post in which Adams declares rape a natural instinct of human men, a claim which echoes many of rhetorical points Wallace problematizes in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and "Big Red Son," his piece on the *Adult Video News Awards*.

Boswell, Marshall. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2009. Print.

Boswell's collection focuses on Wallace's fiction, but deals with themes (entertainment, play, sentimentality and irony) that are clearly present in Wallace's nonfiction as well.

Bresnan, Mark. "The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique* 50.1 (2008): 51-68. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

Bresnan's article addresses the function of "serious play" in Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. In terms of my project, Bresnan provides background on how Wallace depicts humans behaving within necessarily restrictive social systems, and how play in *Infinite Jest* may translate to Wallace's nonfiction, as well as open up potential analogues between humans' and other animal species' use of "play" as a learning and socializing mechanism.

Giles, Paul. "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007): 327-44. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

Giles argues that Wallace's nonfiction and fiction explores new ways for humans to relate to both their physical and digital environments in an increasingly electronic world. This relationship of human self to world and other beings is a fundamental one to the project I plan to undertake.

Harris, Charles B. "David Foster Wallace: 'That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself.'" *Critique* 51.2 (2010): 168-76. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

This biographical piece includes details that elucidate Wallace's development as a person and writer, as well as influences on his writing—contextual information for a close reading of Wallace's nonfiction and a clearer understanding of how he constructs his subject position as a writer.

Hering, David, ed. *Consider David Foster Wallace*. Los Angeles: Sideshow, 2010. Print.

A collection of written versions of conference papers, this book does not seem to enjoy a solid critical reputation, but provides some examples of the angles from which scholars are reading, writing about, and attempting to understand Wallace.

Jacobs, Timothy. "American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace." *Comparative Literature Studies* 39.3 (2001): 215-231. *Project Muse*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

Hopkins uses nature and natural phenomena as analogies for and windows into how he sees God as ordering the world, and Jacobs' comparison of Hopkins and Wallace provides a different way of understanding Wallace's understanding of order and chaos in natural and human-made systems.

---. "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.3 (2007): 265-92. *Project Muse*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

This article by Jacobs explores Wallace's depiction of human interactions at the filial rather than the public/political level, as well as exploring Wallace's connection with the filial relationships depicted in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Maniatis, Nick, ed. *The Howling Fantods! David Foster Wallace News, Info and Links*. N.p., 3 Sept. 2011. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

A website on Wallace that centralizes recent developments in scholarly and popular work being done on him.

Newton, Maud. "Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace." *New York Times Magazine*.

New York Times, 19 Aug. 2011. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

A short article in which the author claims Wallace's method of rhetorical self-presentation has—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly—influenced much of the style of present-day blogs and other online genres. Newton addresses issues of ethics, empathy, and argumentation in Wallace's rhetorical method.

Wallace, David Foster. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1999. Print.

A collection of short stories and fictional "interviews" which I will use to (1) enrich my understanding of Wallace's views on human sexual relationships, and (2) explore how human sexual practices are defined and understood as both analogous and diametrically opposed to the sexual practices of nonhuman species.

---. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. Print.

---. *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*. Ed. Steven M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.

This essay draws on a variety of scientific, philosophical, and mathematical ideas as Wallace works to understand the position of the human subject in relation to natural phenomena.

---. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Little, Brown, 1996. Print.

Wallace's most-cited and -theorized novel, without an understanding of which approaching much extant Wallace criticism is nearly impossible.

---. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. New York: Little, Brown, 1997. Print.

The first major collection of Wallace's nonfiction, understood here as a precursor to and deeper grounding in many of the points and argumentative moves used in *Consider the Lobster*.

---. *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009. Print.

An adapted version of a commencement speech Wallace delivered in 2005, this short work went viral shortly after Wallace's suicide, achieving popularity as an explicit argument for the importance of empathy and compassion in contemporary life.

Woodward, Wendy. "The Nonhuman Animal and Levinasian Otherness: Contemporary Narratives and Criticism." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 21.1-2 (2009): 342+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 5 Sept. 2011.

Woodward only makes a passing reference to Wallace's "Consider the Lobster" in this article, but her broader points about the othering of "nonhuman animals" in southern African cultures hold potential deeper applications and implications for reading Wallace's nonfiction and how Wallace deals with the "human" and "nonhuman."