

Midterm Essay: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

6-8 pages

due Tuesday, March 3rd

hardcopy in class and uploaded to SafeAssign

We've been admiring and eulogizing him, which is of course appropriate, but now the time has come to evolve the critical conversation about Wallace and to champion him for what he is: the most important author of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I think a world in which Wallace is a household name would be a more mindful, passionate, and compassionate world. It's up to us now to continue the conversation he started.

Greg Carlisle, introduction to *Consider David Foster Wallace*

During the first six weeks of this course we have read a novel that anyone should feel proud to say they have completed. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) has loomed large over the American literary landscape ever since its publication, and for many (though certainly not everyone) it has served as a kind of rite of passage, a marker of generational literary awareness and seriousness. Part of this is surely due to its sheer size. Like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004), or any number of other big, fat, ambitious, encyclopedic novels, any thinking about Wallace's most important work cannot ignore an encounter with its size.¹ No matter how one might consider the novel as "interactive," part of its interactivity involves simply lugging it around, hefting it up to read, slogging through its pages, trying to keep up (with the pace set by the syllabus). It is a book that makes its reader fully cognizant of the fact it is a book; it is an object that always emphasizes the basic materiality of print; it is a text where some of the wider implications of the word "reading" begin to emerge (in all their complexity); it is something one must spend some *time* with. Whether someone considers it a friend or foe by page 981, I imagine *some* relationship has necessarily and unavoidably been forged between reader and text. The hope of this assignment is that it can be a space for you to explore some specific aspect of the relationship you have developed with this important book.

For your midterm paper I would like you to write a sustained and rigorous critical essay interpreting some *specific* aspect of Wallace's novel. Now, obviously one of the challenges of writing and thinking about a text like *Infinite Jest* is, well, where does one begin? Writing about an encyclopedic novel, as many people can attest to, requires a mix of an eye for overwhelming specificity with an ear for symphonic totality. In other words, rather than trying to get at anything close to the whole text, for this essay I want you to hone in on some *specific* aspect of the novel, to see it with an incisive critical eye while bearing in mind, while *hearing*, the larger issues of the text. In a six-to-eight page essay there is simply no way you will be able to engage with the entire novel, so choose a handful of passages, a single theme, a specific point of the plot, a particular character, etc., to incisively, narrowly, and rigorously focus on. As should be clear by

Epigraph drawn from Greg Carlisle, introduction to *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 20. This is to note that though I do not share Carlisle's hyperbolic assessment of Wallace—for the sheer fact that there are too many important writers in too many different traditions and languages during the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries to say that any of them are the "most important"—this does make clear how important *some* people consider Wallace.

¹ For an interesting discussion of the history and legacy of the encyclopedic novel, see Mark Greif, "'The Death of the Novel' and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the 'Big, Ambitious Novel,'" *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 11-30.

now, Wallace's prose is incredibly rich, and it rewards close reading and careful textual analysis. But his formal concerns, as we have discussed at length, also allow one to think of the novel as a network or a system. So obviously, though you will necessarily be choosing to write about some relatively small aspect of *Infinite Jest*, I imagine your reading will inevitably connect with other, larger aspects of the novel. You will probably also find that by honing in on something specific, by narrowly focusing on some particular aspect of the novel, larger conclusions about the kinds of aesthetic and literary meaning Wallace is producing will become clear. There are *many* directions one could take in an essay such as this. (I hesitate to list possible directions in fear that 1) your own work will be overdetermined by such suggestions and 2) that I would never stop writing this assignment.) So this is to say that your midterm offers you considerable flexibility to pursue something that *you* are interested in about this novel, and I certainly look forward to seeing where you go.

As in all your work this semester, I expect you to articulate a complex, explicit *argument* interpreting the novel, an argument with clear critical *stakes* (i.e., why is it *important* for you to notice what you have? to make the argument you are making?), and to support that argument through close, careful attention to the text itself. Also, for this essay I am requiring that you draw upon the work of at least *two* additional critical sources. These can come from the essays I have provided on CourseWeb (either critical essays or additional work by Wallace) or elsewhere, as long as they were originally published in a scholarly journal or book. Your engagement with criticism on Wallace and *Infinite Jest* need not be extensive. Indeed, as little as two well-considered footnotes about the work of others will fulfill the requirement for additional sources (though obviously you should be encouraged to engage with critics significantly more). The idea here is that you demonstrate an awareness of and draw upon the considerable critical conversation about the novel, and that whatever critical work you choose to draw upon, incorporate, argue with, or dismiss will ultimately serve the work *you* are doing. As always, I am primarily interested in the strength of your argument and the quality of your idea.

You have just under a month to complete this essay, so you should feel free to talk with me during office hours or make an appointment, get help on sources you might want to consult, or ask me to look at early drafts. Students should also be aware that I will be out of town February 26th – March 1st, and will be mostly unavailable during this time by email, so they should bear this in mind, meeting with me well before the last minute if they desire help.