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Liberating Irony: Investigating Postmodern Techniques in David Foster Wallace's Short Fiction

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Liberating Irony: Investigating Postmodern Techniques in David Foster Wallace's Short Fiction

A Thesis Presented

by

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Introduction: Categorizing Wallace (Although Of Course He Resists Definition)

Early in his career David Foster Wallace complained that postmodern writers' use of metafiction and self-reflexivity had exhausted themselves. By exhausting these literary devices, postmodern writers continued to refer to the text's artificiality via metafiction and irony in an attempt to explode the culture's hypocrisies, but their methods, by the 1980s, had ceased to work. Postmodern writers' continual deployment of metafiction and self-reflexivity resulted in circular texts that barely made an impact on the culture. By the time Wallace began publishing his work, writers such as John Barth were continuing to write texts that exposed fiction's conventions and artificiality. For Wallace, repeatedly using postmodern techniques to reach the same conclusion morphed these once experimental fictions into institutions of conformity rather than those of rebellion.

Postmodern fiction explored how language is a construct, which implies that everything, since it's dependent upon language, is a construct. If everything is a construct, there is nothing inherently essential to a culture and everything can be ridiculed and invalidated through deconstructive examination. Postmodern fiction left us in a crisis of faith because it effectively deconstructed humanist beliefs and values: "Postmodern writers called attention to their fictional devices and undermined our faith in the truth-value of various interested conventions" (*Understanding* 13). These writers wanted to liberate the reader from "the prison of naïve belief; the freedom they were offering was the intellectual and spiritual freedom of the cynic to see hypocrisy wherever it was at work" (*Understanding* 13). The postmodern writers' deployment of irony and meta-narratives served the negative functions of destroying "the prison of naïve belief" but failed to counter this destruction with construction. This failure to offer any sort of positive construction left fiction in a state of suspension. Could anything be meaningful if

hypocrisy was everywhere? Did anything really matter if behind every concept, idea, and value lay a contradiction? Devaluing the postmodern writers' cynicism was the ubiquity of television, which appropriated the irony and meta-narrative of postmodern fiction in the 70s and 80s to different ends.

Television proves to be the major focal point of Wallace's anti-ironist screed in his manifesto-like essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." Television dissolves postmodern fiction's revolutionary force because it successfully appropriates and commoditizes its innovations, such as recursion, self-reference, and meta-narrative. By appropriating these innovations, the omnipresence of television makes them commonplace, and as a result postmodern techniques seem futile, which is why Wallace is so dismissive of postmodern metafiction (Harris 103). Wallace argues the image culture has made ironic rebellion ineffective because the television now employs irony via commercials and late night television shows to make it part of the very establishment it originally intended to deconstruct. The issue at stake is how to actually engage with readers to effectively "rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion" without seeming clichéd and naïve.

Instead of responding to television, postmodernist fiction continued strumming the same chords, which, in turn, made these writers look outdated and naive, for cynicism was the new norm. Writers like Barth continued to focus on the self-referentiality of language by exploding the already exploded conventions of narrative. Wallace's hostility surfaced because he felt Barth's fictions had ceased innovating, which rendered them impotent alongside television. The ineffectiveness of postmodern techniques led new writers of the 80s to discard devices like metafiction and recursion altogether. In an oft-quoted passage from *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace blames popular culture for these

developments: “even though [the postmodernist’s use of] self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic’s absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else” (146). Among the appalling consequences of their aesthetics’ absorption by U.S. pop culture was that fiction writers, instead of developing character through mannerisms, thoughts, and action, were now creating characters whose identities could be defined by their favorite brand names and popular tastes. This development made characters into caricatures rather than plausible, real human beings. The writers of the 80s, insofar as Wallace is concerned, responded to the appropriation of postmodern innovations of television with fictions that tried to replicate televisual narratives. They used fiction to mirror the images on the television. But why bother doing this when television already does it better? Why try forcing fiction to appropriate what we already see on television? Image-fiction, like postmodern fiction before it, failed to rebel against the culture’s knowing cynicism even if it did, as Wallace states, have “a genuine socio-artistic agenda” because “Image-Fiction writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context” (“E Unibus Pluram” 52). Image-fiction fails because TV has appropriated the “very same cynical postmodern aesthetic” and thus failed to use irony in a new, rebellious manner by using it in the same fashion as the popular culture.

Wallace’s fiction, then, responds to both the early postmodern writers and the new image writers associated with Generation X. His fiction attacks both types of writing, but it remains indebted to both forms because it reinvents their styles and techniques. Unlike the postmodernists and his contemporaries, Wallace uses irony, image, and intertextual devices to

expose the culture's vapidness and shallowness. He uses these devices to invert the destruction caused by postmodern innovations, employing these very same innovations to show how virtues like sincerity, engagement, and commitment are still achievable by using these devices innovatively to expose how the cynical stance of the culture can be mocked and deconstructed and coopted to explore other ways of perceiving the world.

Postmodernist fiction concerns itself with exposing the hypocrisies of the culture by using language to expose truths and values as constructs. Wallace does not concern himself with this because the fact that the world is constructed through language is a given in his work. His work dismisses this obvious poststructuralist discovery as superfluous and examines how the postmodern worldview impacts individuals within the culture. His fiction is aware of how postmodern irony has reduced concepts such as truth, sincerity, and authenticity to constructs of language. The awareness of critical theory and philosophy within Wallace's fiction forces the reader to consider the validity of humanist values because his work is rigorous, difficult, and erudite. The complexity of Wallace's work operates as armor against the knowing cynic's dismissiveness. It's this complexity that Wallace readers embrace and non-Wallace readers detest.

Wallace's readers are committed – they must be, considering the time his work demands – and by establishing a committed readership, Wallace shows how a centerless culture, one in which everything is deemed a construct, can shirk commitment. The culture asks: if authenticity, truth, and commitment are all just naïve concepts, why bother trying to establish relationships? Wallace sees this stance as toxic because it leads to an ironic worldview.

Wallace's fiction poses a solution to the problems of language (e.g., relativism, nihilism, solipsism) by being so overdetermined and constructed by language that it gestures to the world

where the reader is physically holding the book: the world outside the text. At times, Wallace seems hostile to the reader by writing long, recursive sentences that are syntactically complex and confusing, which makes it seem like he is essentially being ironic in his pursuit of sincerity. In this way, he is difficult because he wants to shirk categorization, thus forcing the reader to choose whether his narrators are sincere or ironic. Wallace's fiction shows how postmodern irony is toxic, but then it shows how the only way out of its cynical knowingness is the belief that concepts such as truth, authenticity, and sincerity can still be meaningful. Wallace's fiction requires the reader to make a leap of faith regarding whether the characters and the metafictional author are sincere in their motives or are themselves self-mockingly ironic.

As a reader, Wallace noted postmodern fiction's concern with poststructuralism's interrogation of our preconceived notions of fixed meanings. Poststructuralists decentered and destabilized language, emphasizing linguistic play within their works, and re-conceptualized concepts such as individuality, freedom, and choice. These re-conceptualized concepts lacked stability, and they could be dismissed as naïve humanist beliefs. In short, any affirmation of one's individuality could be deconstructed through language and invalidated. Postmodern works show the culture determining individuals, showing freedom to be subsumed by new technologies of dehumanization, and explored how every convention was a construct that could be destroyed and abandoned. Postmodernist fiction and image-fictions are texts that

simply monotone how we're all becoming less and less human, that presents characters without souls or love, characters who really are exhaustively describable in terms of what brands of stuff they wear, and we all buy the books and go like 'Golly, what a mordantly effective commentary on contemporary

materialism!' But we already all *know* U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn't engage anybody. (McCaffery 131-32)

The whole idea of image-fiction disturbed Wallace because it created fiction that was ironic but vacuous, and it deployed irony in the same way as the postmodernists, ironizing the culture rather than ironizing irony itself. Image-fiction characters embrace a worldview where sincerity is scoffed at and the ironic attitude reigns supreme. For example, Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* obsesses over his material possessions; they help him achieve a sort of high status within American culture, but ultimately, Bateman is a hollow character, selfish while self(less), who hides behind his good looks, designer clothes, and fancy business card. Bateman exhibits not one moment of sincerity, and his character is shocking and violent, no more than a caricature meant to expose how materialistic our culture is, which, for Wallace, is not the aim of good fiction.

Although taking Wallace's word at face value has helped to incite a plethora of literary commentaries and arguments surrounding his work, it reduces his writing to the agenda he posits in "E Unibus Pluram," which is to say that criticism of this sort has typically placed Wallace as a sentimental writer who aims to connect with the reader and reaffirm the idea that sincerity is still possible. Scholars largely view Wallace as working through the complications brought forth with poststructuralist thought to reaffirm sincerity in a new way, with the new way being an awareness of how sincerity has been criticized and questioned but might yet be achieved. Many of these critics have also, in their agenda to argue Wallace's sincerity, categorized his work as being "post-ironic."

Another prominent way of viewing his work has been through categorizing it as "post-postmodernism." Critics in the post-postmodernist camp see Wallace's fiction as meta-ironic due

to his ability to turn “irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and down to earth” (Scott 40). Adam Kelly, in his essay, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” asserts that to be a post-postmodernist “means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insecurity” (145). As such, the categorization of post-postmodernism defines Wallace’s fiction as being uncertain of its status while simultaneously attempting to use postmodern innovations to return to humanist values.

All of the critics are in uniform agreement that Wallace is not returning to a pre-postmodern realism in his work, but many of the arguments differ in how they posit the aim of Wallace’s use of irony and metafiction. For instance, Allard Den Dulk, in his book *Existential Engagement*, asserts that Wallace is critical of existential irony (irony as a mode of existence) in his work, but that he embraces verbal irony (64). In *Succeeding Postmodernism* Mary K. Holland argues Wallace’s career has an arc that went from traditional realism with his early image fictions to a poststructural realism that reestablishes ‘language as a mechanism for communicating affect and meaning’ through his use of mediation and irony (176).

Conversely, critics like Lee Konstantinou have argued that Wallace is not an ironic writer but a post-ironic writer whose work is preoccupied with reaffirming belief in belief. Konstantinou, in defining the postironist’s agenda, writes, “postironists attempt to use metafictional form as a way of reconnecting form and content, as a way of strengthening belief [...] Postironists don’t advocate a stance of belief toward some aspect of the world but rather the ethos of belief in and of itself” (90). Konstantinou later asserts, “For the postironist, irony must be oppressed because it is now part of the established symbolic order” (103), implying that

Wallace avoids using irony altogether because it is a negative force that has up to this point been unable to effectively rebel against the culture.

Relating to this notion of how irony has been ineffective are the critics who claim Wallace's agenda is to construct a new sincerity through his fiction, and that as a result his work illustrates how sincerity and irony are incompatible. Adam Kelly takes this stance when he distinguishes between intent and motive within Wallace's work, focusing on how in Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*, Orin seduces his subjects through sincerity with a motive, an ironic stance. Kelly writes, "More generally, [the distinction between motive and intent] suggests that the possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play" (141). The dynamic between intent and motive establishes the awareness that our intentions may be pure but can be interpreted as having motive, thus making them impure. In short, I may intend to go out and meet new people, but if my motive is to be liked rather than to engage with others, then I am acting ironically; I appear to engage and care about what others say when I'm really acting out of self-interest.

What all of these criticisms have in common is that they acknowledge Wallace's stance that *existential* irony is incompatible with sincerity and human connection. They frame Wallace within the image culture, and they focus on how he uses postmodern innovation to "break down the fundamental barriers that separate the viewer of art from its author" (Konstantinou 103). It is my contention that Wallace's work oscillates between the two camps of New Sincerity and Post-postmodernism and that he can be more accurately categorized as a metamodernist within the subcategory of metarealism.

In the following chapters I will argue that Wallace's fiction illustrates how irony and sincerity are compatible through its manipulation of postmodern techniques. Wallace uses

postmodern devices like metafiction and recursion to create complex, layered works that say one thing and mean another, all in an effort to engage the reader so the author-audience dichotomy can work to construct meaning through interpretation. Wallace ironizes the culture, postmodern literature, and image-fictions incessantly, and while it's possible to interpret his claims for sincerity as ironic, the whole point is to show how concepts such as trust and empathy only exist if irony and sincerity are compatible.

The whole objective of good fiction, Wallace believes, should be to express “what it is to be a fucking human being” (McCaffery 131). To do this, Wallace places his characters within the culture of image, but he doesn't simply diagnose the culture, as Ellis does, through the eyes of a psychopath whose psychosis is created by that very culture. Rather, Wallace is a writer who, in the American tradition of a William James or Emerson, believes in the power of choice and the importance of engagement with the other. This is why he says, “If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now” (McCaffery 131). This is important because “Wallace was a writer who was ultimately concerned with awareness” (Smith 261), which is why his fiction is at once tortuous but full of gifts: it's meant to interrogate himself and us.

Wallace encountered a generation and culture ensconced in “the ubiquity of television, the voraciousness of late capitalism, the triumph of therapeutic discourse, and philosophy's demotion into a branch of linguistics” (Smith 266). In the face of this, Wallace's fiction asks many questions, but Smith highlights a few key ones: “How to be finely aware when you are trained in passivity? How to detect real value when everything has its price? How to be

responsible when you are, by definition, always the child-victim? How to be in the world when the world has collapsed into language?" (266). Ultimately, for Smith, and myself, Wallace's fiction tries to assert the answer to these questions by portraying solipsistic characters who are absorbed in the self – they're absorbed in language, image, and hyper-awareness of their appearance when confronted by others. By portraying solipsism, Wallace is able to ironize the solipsist who thinks he stands outside the culture, being lost in his head, and is always portrayed as being knowing and cynical while simultaneously feeling uncertain, empty, and hostile.

Wallace uses the devices of postmodernism to reaffirm certain truths of humanist belief, and he represents a class of fiction writer who cannot dismiss the theories of language expounded by poststructuralist theory. To try to reaffirm humanist values through traditional realism would be to submit oneself to the ironic gaze of the popular culture, and, as a result, authentic engagement and sincerity with the reader, which is part of Wallace's project, would be impossible. Wallace's answer is not to return to realism pre-TV, but to use the image culture to portray the ironic stance so he can critique it in his work. He critiques the culture by appropriating many of the devices of postmodern fiction to attack it ironically. Wallace ironizes irony to create a defense against the culture's knowing cynicism. His use of irony ultimately exposes the culture's hollowness and vapidness but he does more than diagnosis, he offers a solution. Wallace argues that through choice and engagement sincere connection can be established and traditional humanist values can be reclaimed.

His fiction is hyperaware of where it falls within the tradition of writing, philosophy, and contemporary culture. Wallace is a writer whose fictions use irony as an armor to stave off any possible attack by the ironic culture it is a reaction against, and by doing so, Wallace is able to

write fiction that points to the real world that exists outside of the text by using metafiction as a device turned outward instead of reflecting inward on the status of the text.

Wallace's characters are crippled by hyper-reflexivity because they are trapped within their own heads, in much the same way Barth's fictions were trapped within their own self-referential techniques, and the constant self-reflexivity of Wallace's characters portrays a fear of solipsism. The answer to the horror of solipsism for Wallace is portrayed through his fiction when Smith writes, "awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self" (266). Wallace's fiction is always other-directed, even when it appears to be hostile to the other (the reader) encountering the text.

It is important to note that Wallace's fiction points to the importance of awareness as an escape from solipsism, but what's even more important is the question how does he do this without coming off as being clichéd and all too similar to the gooey sentiments expressed in your run of the mill self-help books? How does he make humanistic values seem hip once more? How does he confront a culture that ironizes any attempt at genuine connection? Partly, he does this by continually forcing the reader to invest in his work. If the reader works through Wallace's fiction, she is faithful, and as Smith notes Wallace only wanted faithful readers, for it was through this type of reader that connection, for Wallace, became possible.

On first reading, Wallace's entire oeuvre can easily be conceived of as just more of the same white male narcissistic writing, and, indeed, his writing does seem to contain fully fleshed out examples of characters who cannot let go of the self. Characters who cannot free themselves from their egos are portrayed as solipsistic, and they are not glorified in Wallace's work. Therefore, his writing is not like Updike or Roth's fictions where the male point of view is privileged above all else in the world being written. Opposing these writers, Wallace's work (his

fiction specifically) portrays the dangers of solipsism, being trapped within the self, in an age where new media and technology are making the self into an object of the image. However, the only way to draw these conclusions about Wallace's work is to read him and then reread him, for his complex prose demands much from readers.

In a postmodern culture, Wallace's characters know the world based on their experience of TV, which is nothing new, but nonetheless the fact that his characters reside in a televisual world remains important to the understanding of his life's work. In a televisual world obsessed by appearance, the characters in his work are hyper-aware of being watched and critiqued. This hyper-awareness urges them to act according to certain cultural expectations, and thus they conform to the culture's ironic distance. Wallace's characters act ironically, embodying a stance in life typified by Kierkegaard's aesthete. For the aesthete, authentic connection with others is near impossible. They encounter life ironically, and thus they perform and use their knowing cynicism as a form of armor against the world.

Wallace grew up when TV was becoming ubiquitous. He began his studies in higher education when Reagan's presidency signified the supremacy of the image over the word and postmodernism became a condition: "the postmodern condition is characterized both by the cultural dominance of images and the omnipresence of irony as a cultural attitude" (413). The privileging of the image over the word marked the Eighties as the period when postmodernism transformed from a concept into a reality. Postmodernism transformed into a cultural condition. Within this condition, irony became omnipresent in books, commercials, television show (e.g., SNL, M*A*S*H*, Late Night with Letterman, etc.).

Within the image culture Wallace argues that irony has become a cage. In this framework, irony as cultural worldview becomes a cage one is stuck within, and a cage is a

fitting metaphor here because, like Wallace's characters, you can reach out of the cage, but ultimately you are still stuck within it. The cage protects and isolates, making any hope of prolonged connection impossible. As soon as an ironist is asked what he stands for, he can simply retreat into himself and perform ironically. However, Wallace realizes it is possible to use rhetorical irony against the ironist who performs, and he never fully dismisses irony's importance in art: "For irony--exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are--is the time honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy" ("E Unibus Pluram" 65). Irony can be dangerous when it tyrannizes the culture by debunking hypocrisies without letting up its assault. Instead of offering a solution, irony presents us with more ironies, becoming endless. For Wallace, the ironist is like Kierkegaard's aesthete. The ironist and aesthete are "impossible to pin down" ("E Unibus Pluram" 67), and they always stand at a distance in order to mock the culture and the individuals within that culture who take it seriously. The ironist stands apart, feigning a knowing cynicism that creates separation rather than communion.

Wallace's hostility toward postmodern irony in particular stems from his view that it has now become rote, meaningless, and vacuous. Postmodern irony lost its sting by becoming just another trope. He laments it is often used to show how intelligent the writer is, i.e., the writer showing off. He writes, "Even gifted ironists work best in sound bites" due to their "trendy sardonic exhaustion" ("E Unibus Pluram" 67). The ironist simply doesn't have an off button. This is harmful. Irony has become the cultural norm. This royally hinders any chance of sincerity or meaningfulness because a constant ironic stance leaves everything open to satire and parody. Wallace posits that irony as a cultural stance is harmful because it creates distance between individuals:

Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its subject is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself. (“E Unibus Pluram” 68)

The irony of Wallace’s statement is that he could at times be such a wonderful ironist himself. He scorns irony in the above passage for being appropriated by the very institution it once scoffed at, but instead of reading this as Wallace saying that irony is always negative, as some critics suggest, I suggest that he sets out to reclaim irony from institutions in order to use it to critique the knowingness of the postmodern mindset. Wallace loves irony if it is used constructively, or destructively with a purpose, to dismiss the knowing sneer of the ironist who dismisses concepts such as truth or sincerity. Wallace essentially mocks the ironist’s stance by outsmarting the ironist.

Wallace knows that for irony to be meaningful it needs to be in the service of something other than the self. Wallace essentially loathes postmodern fiction that expose cultural problems without offering any solutions, and he abhors writers who use language to confuse the reader for the sake of confusing the reader. Although Wallace can be confusing at times, his confusion serves to force the reader toward a poststructural awareness of language that reclaims and fosters sincerity and community. Wallace uses the same inventions of postmodern narrative to rebuild what the postmodernists essentially deconstructed.

After metafiction had found legitimacy in the eyes of the academy, Wallace says

crank-turners and wannabes come running to the machine, and out pour the gray pellets, and now the whole thing's become a hollow form, just another institution of fashion. Take a look at some the critical-theory Ph.D. dissertations being written now. They're like de Man and Foucault in the mouth a dull child. Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances. (McCaffery 135)

In light of Wallace's view that metafiction and postmodern narratives were once considered innovative rather than simply rote and legitimate – they were actually a form of rebellion – I find it simplistic to suggest that Wallace sees the old forms of metafiction, recursion, reflexivity, and most importantly, irony, as something to be overcome. Rather, Wallace's fiction isn't concerned with overcoming irony, but is instead concerned with liberating irony from the very notion it needs to be overcome by employing it in a specific way that differs from the postmodernists and his own contemporaries.

It becomes important when considering Wallace and irony to distinguish the type of irony he was hostile to in his fiction. Irony is a complex concept with multiple levels of affect existing on a spectrum, as outlined by Linda Hutcheon in her book length study *Irony's Edge*, with a range from minimal affective charge to maximal affective charge that encompasses both a positive articulation and a negative articulation. Whether or not the outcome of irony embodies a positive or negative affect is dependent upon the oscillating interpretation of the reader and the intent of the author (*Edge* 47). The author may intentionally incorporate irony into a work, but how it is interpreted depends upon the reader. The reason for this has to do with the pretense surrounding irony:

The pretense theory may be expressed as follows. Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A', who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S' speaking to A'. What S' is saying is, in one way or another, patently uninformed or injudicious, worthy of a 'hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt'. A' in ignorance, is intended to miss the pretense, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the 'inner circle,' is intended to see everything—the pretense, S's attitude toward S', A', and what S' said. S' and A' may be recognizable individuals or people of recognizable types. (Clark & Gerrig 122)

With the pretense theory of irony, Clark and Gerrig argue that irony always involves some sort of deception on the part of the ironist. When S is talking to A he pretends to be talking as S' talking to A' sincerely when in fact he is being ironic, which A' misses, but A, being in on the pretense understands. Therefore, S's words are not ironic to A'. They are ironic to A, however, suggesting for irony to happen the ironic utterance must happen between an ironist and an addressee who inhabit the same, inner circle: a discursive community.

As mentioned earlier, Wallace demanded readers who were faithful and would put the time and effort into reading and understanding his work. With this mind, I suggest Wallace's literary agenda was his means of setting up a discursive community that would understand his fiction within a certain context to ultimately understand how Wallace was using irony against itself to complete his agenda of bringing back into esteem humanist concepts without being labeled naïve.

Chapter 1 focuses on "Little Expressionless Animals" from the collection *Girl with Curious Hair*. In this chapter, I focus on the main character Julie Smith and her relation to the

game show *Jeopardy!*. Julie represents the negative effects that image culture has on individuals. When she is under the spotlight she knows how to perform for an audience, and she meets their expectations. Once the cameras cease to roll her face implodes and she ceases to be human. Wallace uses Julie in an ironic way to critique this very notion that for a self to exist it must be seen, which he knows is an all-too-simple conception of the self. The essay also explores how Julie's relation toward *Jeopardy* is hostile, examining her actions on the show itself as contrasted to how she presents herself when she is alone with her lover, Faye Goddard. This chapter examines how Wallace uses image-fiction early on to critique image-fictions that came before it, and I explore how irony is deployed to explode the ironic gaze of the culture. Lastly, the chapter explores how Wallace uses irony to take a stance that is similar to fence-sitting. He refuses to condemn televisual culture outright, and he forces the reader to come to his or her own decision. In order to come to a decision, the reader must engage critically with the text. Wallace helps the reader to view the text critically by writing the story in fragments that lack any chronological order.

Chapter 2 focuses on the metafictional narrative component of the short story "Octet" in Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In "Octet" the reader is forced to consider whether the author is being sincere or simply perpetuating more meta-narrative devices with the same agenda as the postmodern writers of the 60s. Is the David Wallace character of "Octet" being sincere in trying to reach out to the reader and establish a sincere and empathetic connection? Or is it all simply a farce? Either way, by allowing the reader to make a choice, the narrative of "Octet" ironizes postmodern irony because it creates the very means for the autonomous self to reach outward and engage with the text to establish connection between reader and writer. On a narrative level, Wallace also ironizes irony here by using

realism to expose the artificiality of the “Pop Quizzes” in the text, and by doing so he gestures to the author writing the text. The irony is that, by making the text even more artificial, Wallace is able to draw attention to the fact that a living person arranged the text. The overly artificial story refers to the text as construct without needing to overtly state it like previous postmodern fiction. Overall, this chapter argues that Wallace inverts metafiction against itself to point to the reader-writer relationship that exists outside the page. It pays specific attention to the idea that sincerity and irony are not mutually exclusive and that the two concepts are constantly in play in “Octet” so as to force the reader to make a choice about the author’s intention. By doing this, I argue Wallace’s story is illustrating how trust works; it’s a leap, and we can never know for certain if someone is being sincere or ironic, but this is the whole point of trust.

Chapter 3 will examine the ‘fraudulent paradox’ as it is described in the story “Good Old Neon” in Wallace’s final short story collection, *Oblivion*. In this story, Wallace ironizes the ironic worldview through the voice of Neal, a man who promises to tell us what it feels like to die. The story’s structure is a mirror for solipsism. It uses long paragraphs and recursive sentences to mirror the way thoughts turn back in on themselves. The long paragraphs are formatted as large blocks of texts that give the reader the impression of being assaulted by words. Words are literally inescapable in this story in the same way our own consciousness is inescapable. The irony, by the end of the story, is that the story was never really even about Neal to begin with, but was instead about David Wallace looking through a yearbook and wondering what could have led his former classmate Neal to kill himself. Thus the story combines the devices explored in the last two chapters: irony and metafiction. The importance in this story lies in Wallace showing how irony is not endless. Through awareness (the whole meta-part of the text), the subject is able to stop the endless play of irony. It’s important to note though that

Wallace chooses not to continue the cycle in “Good Old Neon.” This can be summed up best with the last lines of the text uttered by the meta-David Foster Wallace: “Not Another Word.” Once he ironizes irony, Wallace stops. He refrains from continuing the cycle and remains concerned with establishing empathy and sincerity through earnestness. In this way, he aligns himself with the American tradition that privileges choice over determinism.

Chapter 1: Critiquing the Postmodern Landscape through Image-Fiction

Girl with Curious Hair illustrates David Foster Wallace's ability to write stories that exhibit a variety of styles, content, and techniques, spanning from traditional realism to what we could call postmodern fiction. Wallace's range sets him up as a chameleon-like writer who, due to his willingness to experiment, is hard to pin down upon a first reading. The collection is a showpiece for the young Wallace to show off his literary skills, but it also exhibits a preoccupation with many of the themes he would polish in his later fiction (such as other-directedness vs. solipsism, appearance vs. reality, image vs. word, and sincerity vs. irony). In this early collection, Wallace aligns these binaries against one another, but he does not yet attempt to fully dissolve them and show how concepts are intertwined rather than exclusive. Instead of attempting to portray the dissolution of binaries in these early works he merely intimates dissolution is possible by showing us the negative and positive effects of simple categorization. The dissolution of binaries is intimated when Wallace ironizes and thus parodies a world predicated on 'either/or' conceptions.

Wallace hints that binaries can be unwound, and that language is much more complex than an 'either/or' construction, by ironizing this naïve worldview. Therefore, as Marshall Boswell notes, Wallace shows how naivety and cynicism are not exclusive by taking naïve presuppositions we may share culturally and flipping these on their heads. We see this done effectively in "Lyndon," Wallace takes an iconic character and deconstructs and reconstructs our view of the man à la fiction. "Lyndon" is one example among many of how Wallace's main concern in this collection is with destroying the ironic detachment of his postmodern forebears by turning irony back in on itself, thus ironizing the ironic worldview of the postmodern televisual culture. He does this by embedding his characters within the milieu of popular culture,

showing characters on *Jeopardy!* (“Little Expressionless Animals”), Letterman (“My Appearance”), and on their way to the biggest McDonald's commercial ever produced (“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”).

Girl with Curious Hair provides a prophetic diagnosis of the pervasiveness of postmodern irony. The stories depict a world in which genuine sincerity is scoffed at and the cynical knowingness of the television is everywhere. Wallace, more a writer of questions than conclusions, always sits on the fence when he portrays the culture of image. He shows us a world where television is everywhere, but he does not deem it bad or harmful. Wallace is not the type of writer who blames the medium for how people act, and instead he opts to write characters who rebel against the irony of popular culture. Wallace writes about characters who refuse to be representatives of the sameness that is so profuse in the image culture.

The television connects individuals who watch it while offering individual characters a means of rebelling against the ironic detachment embodied by the corporate enterprises Wallace portrays. With television's ubiquity, the ironic tone is inescapable and TV's harm and danger derives from the fact that it's fun to watch, which can make it addicting. We can't get enough of it. However, individuals have a choice when it comes to watching or not watching. Choices largely define each character within this collection, but conversely characters are also determined by their shared culture. This determinism comes from television's glaring omnipresence. In *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace attempts to answer the questions: (1) is television's ultimate purpose to give pleasure? (2) how does this impact the culture at large when everything becomes about fun and nothing can be taken seriously? The answers to these questions retain their ambiguity when we encounter the stories within the collection.

Wallace, though he says he abhors postmodern irony, uses irony throughout the texts in this collection to revert “to a more simple sense of irony as a semantic balancing act, as a fence-sitting, bet-hedging middle where evasion and complicity sit - not totally comfortably - with commitment and critique” (“Complex” 219). Wallace, therefore, neither denies nor affirms that TV and pop culture are inherently negative instruments. He is not a doomsday writer. Instead he illustrates how TV and postmodern irony isolate and alienate us, making commitment more difficult and engagement near impossible, but ironically he portrays characters who rebel against these effects even though they are fully embedded within the culture. These characters are not outside observers, and rather “than allowing his characters an estranged perspective on the degradations of commercial culture in the manner of Saul Bellow, Wallace positions his dramatis personae as caught up inexorably in the belly of the beast” (Giles 332).

By experiencing the culture’s crippling irony firsthand, Wallace’s characters reflect the affect produced by this mass culture while they simultaneously avoid cultural determinism: they retain their volition. Characters avoid isolation when they choose to believe in human empathy and sincerity, however, there are times when characters are crippled and forced into stasis by the ironic detachment of the culture. Due to these cultural circumstances, how can one ever truly trust another person when we cannot know if they are being ironic or sincere? The answer to this, as scholar Linda Hutcheon posits, lies somewhere in our belongingness to a discursive community that recognizes postmodern irony and sincerity as being not mutually exclusive, but as oscillating stances that shift and are never stable. Hutcheon writes, “Irony happens because what could be called ‘discursive communities’ already exist and provide the context for the deployment and attribution of irony” (*Edge* 18). A Wallace reader comes away from his work realizing that irony and sincerity are not exclusive because as faithful readers (the ones who read

and reread) they have become part of Wallace's discursive community, and by becoming part of Wallace's discursive community, these readers should realize "that saying one thing and meaning something else is not a lie" (*Edge* 18). In this sense, ironic distance does not necessarily mean sincerity is implausible, especially if we are in on the irony. Ironic distance also allows one to stand back and be critical, which enables a community to engage in a discourse, opening a space where sincerity is possible.

The beauty of this whole situation is that Wallace is able to use irony while remaining sincere. With Wallace, everything is essentially a double bind, and can be interpreted as sincerity or irony or a combination of both. The whole point for Wallace is not which stance is right. The point is to engage with the text to construct meaning actively rather than passively. Thinking is hard work in Wallace's fiction, and although his essays on fiction have been useful, scholars have mistakenly believed Wallace meant all irony was bad, when in fact he rebelled against the endless play of irony he linked to postmodernism. The endless employment of irony contributed to its "being reassimilated to the modes of power and knowledge one seeks to disrupt" (*Edge* 30).

Wallace knew the culture had appropriated the irony of the postmodernists. Part of his agenda can be seen as reclaiming irony's subversive function through prose that uses "a self-critical, self-knowing, self-reflexive mode that has the potential to offer a challenge to the hierarchy of the very 'sites' of discourse, a hierarchy based in social relations of dominance" (*Edge* 30). By looking at pop culture through an ironic lens, Wallace is using irony against the culture of ironic distance, casting an eye to the TV where ironic distance is at its most vapid.

The distrust of irony evinced by many Wallace scholars stems from their assumption that it somehow is only destructive, a negation of sincerity, and its endless deployment will lead to

the same detached worldview of postmodern. Their unease surrounding irony is well-founded based on irony's nature. Linda Hutcheon argues that irony is always met with ambivalence and unease because it operates using deceit (said/unsaid) combined with power (it must destroy). Those who are often hostile to irony are those who are at the receiving end of its power or who are outside a discursive community and fail to understand that irony is being used. Wallace was vocal about his stance on irony in order to make a certain community (his readers) aware of the fact that he was using irony in a complex way that was different from the postmodernist's use of irony. Before he could move from postmodern irony, however, he had to dismantle it, and to do so he had to ironize the ironic culture, "using deceit combined with power" to negate the existential irony of the culture.

With this conception of irony in mind, I analyze "Little Expressionless Animals" to show how Wallace used irony to ironize the postmodern image obsessed culture of the 80s. This story is an image fiction since its primary concern is with TV's impact on spectacle, authenticity, and sincerity. This story suggests that in the age of the image, the word can still be rebellious and the ironic gaze of the culture can be stripped of its power. Irony can still be used as an act of true artistic rebellion. Wallace is able to pull off part of his agenda (but not with complete success) by using postmodern narrative techniques such as fragmentation, hyperawareness, meta-narrative, and an ontological critique of the televisual medium.

The irony of "Little Expressionless Animals" functions on the level of author-audience, meaning Wallace intended his readers to recognize irony at work through his use of pop culture as a backdrop. In doing this, Wallace sets himself up as an ironist, and he demands his readers infer what is really going on in his texts. Wallace sets himself up as an ironist and begs interpretation to take place:

From the point of view of the interpreter, irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid. The move is usually triggered (and then directed) by conflictual and contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon. However, from the point of view of what I too (with reservation) will call the ironist, irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude than what is explicitly stated. (*Edge* 11)

Hutcheon expresses some reservation with the term ironist here, and it's important to note this is because irony has innumerable functions and, regardless of intent, does not always materialize. Nonetheless, when an author like Wallace intends to show the paradoxes of a culture by ironizing that very culture, it is hard to avoid calling him an ironist. What's important to note is that even though he is an ironist in countless instances throughout his work, he is not a postmodern ironist. Wallace is an ironist who tries to connect to the reader by making his work contemporary and relevant to the current moment while simultaneously inviting the reader to interpret his work, delving beneath what is said in the text to what is implied and unsaid.

Wallace uses the backdrop of popular culture to connect with his readers, creating an author-audience dynamic, so that he can better employ irony in the text to bring down the knowing cynicism of the culture without directly stating the culture is bad or negative. As Boswell writes, Wallace doesn't use pop culture "as an ironic lens or as a symptom of cultural decline but rather as a regenerative means of communication between [himself] and his readers" (*Understanding* 64). From the very outset, we see Wallace's concern for connection with the reader, and his prose ironizes the ironist who has absorbed television and believes sincerity is an

impossible task. The irony of using pop culture to express what is real lies in the recognition that the pop culture is just as fictitious as any other fiction, making an understanding of the irony here dependent upon context. By recognizing the fictitiousness of pop culture Wallace shows how it is a created, fabricated construct. The story asserts that to avoid alienation, we must be aware of the fact that pop culture is constructed so we are not swept up in its images. Awareness prevents us from mistaking the images on the screen for the real thing. The way Wallace uses pop cultural icons, his decision to use television shows in his stories, and his experiments in structure all force the reader to recognize what they are reading is mediated by the consciousness of the author. With this recognition comes the recognition that all the images on TV, rather than being reflective of reality, are mere constructs as well that are mediated by other people.

The story begins when a man and a woman ditch two children by the roadside. The children think their parents are coming back to get them. The mother leads the children outside, tells them to hold a wooden post, and drives off into the distance. She never returns. From the beginning, the prose is short and terse:

Two small children are brought out of the car by a young woman with a loose face. A man at the wheel of the car stares straight ahead. The children are silent and have very white skin. The woman carries a grocery bag full of something heavy. Her face hangs loose over the bag. She brings the bag and the white children to a wooden fencepost, by the field, by the highway. The children's hands, which are small, are placed on the wooden post...There is a cow in the field near the fence. The children touch the post. The wind blows. Lots of cars go by. They stay that way all day. (3)

This passage is eons away from the long, recursive sentences of Wallace's later work. Each sentence is short, succinct, and rooted within the image by using adjectives interspersed throughout the subject-predicate syntax. The irony of this sentence structure is predicated on the reader's knowledge of the brat pack writers of the 80s, who used similar stylistic prose to convey the shallowness of contemporary society. Wallace uses the same form to different ends, ironizing the minimalist style to portray a world where meaning is fluid and characters can choose within the pop culture to be transparent or guarded. However, this early scene shows two characters stuck holding a post, incapable of movement, implying that minimalist styles alone are incapable of escaping the scrutiny of the ironic culture. The terse prose never successfully mirrors the physical world in the way TV does. How could it when the former is words on the page while the latter is rooted in the image? The answer is through portraying human beings in all their complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions instead of as the caricatures we see on TV.

The story focuses on a savant, Julie Smith, who winds up being the girl we encounter at the beginning of the story. In the bag the mother is holding is "an obscure and limited-edition Canadian encyclopedia called *LaPlace's Guide to Total Data*" ("Little" 11). We later learn the brother who is ditched with the sister is actually autistic, and by the time of the *Jeopardy!* narrative he is deeply disturbed and institutionalized. Julie has fully memorized all of the facts within the encyclopedia, and as a result she becomes the reigning champion of *Jeopardy!*. While on *Jeopardy!* she meets Faye Goddard. The two become lovers. By placing the events among the context of *Jeopardy!*, which is no accident by the way, Wallace sets up the narrative to critique pop culture's ability to alienate and destroy authentic connection through its ironic standpoint. The show itself "is all about inversion...and about the fluidity of rules, of binaries" (*Understanding* 71). Wallace, unlike the show, blurs the line between binary difference between

the real and the fictitious. In this way, he uses a show as the contextual backdrop to critique it through irony. The story holds a mirror up to the culture, at once critiquing it and affirming its fictitiousness by pointing to the reality outside the screen.

The story dissolves the binary of the real versus the fiction by using a show in which real people act their parts out. Wallace believed that TV's aim was to persuade us that being inside it was better than being outside of it, hinting at the idea that those who are within it are "somebody" while those outside of it are "nobody." Of course, the irony here is that those within the set are deemed somebody but once they are aware of themselves as existents within the TV they are nothing more than a signifier existing on the screen, and this points to the idea that even within the TV "our status as 'existents' is firmly grounded in that unbreachable chasm between reality and text" (*Understanding* 75). The show is just as real as the world existing outside of the show, which is considered to be more genuine and real than a construct.

Wallace affirms that both are constructs, and as such, they are both genuine and valuable once the awareness of their existences as a construct are exposed. Wallace essentially exposes how our society is more in love with representations of things than the things themselves. The game show is a metaphor for life, it mirrors life: "we're all...contestants in a multifaceted system (or, better, multifaceted systems) of language games" (Olsen 209).

With this multifaceted system in mind, the story's form is able to mirror its thematic content. Structurally, the narrative is not in chronological order, which is typical of Wallace, who demands awareness and attention of his readers. His fiction counters the passivity that comes from viewing TV in that it is purposely hard at times and the reader must do as much work as the writer if s/he is to construct meaning.

The thirst for categories and univocal meanings is a focal point of “Little Expressionless Animals.” This desire for univocal meaning is best embodied in the character of Julie. Julie is a savant with a predilection for facts. She is ultimately more or less like a computer than a living, breathing human being because she can answer questions from categories with the speed of a processor. The culture reduces Julie to a machine, but she is more than that: “Julie, best likes: contemporary poetry, unkind women, words with univocal definitions, faces whose expressions change by the second, an obscure and limited-edition encyclopedia called *LaPlace’s Guide to Total Data . . . and the O.E.D.*” (10). Her affinity for words, her ability to memorize data, and her love of univocal meaning places her within the spectrum of a machine, but Wallace, always on the fence, exhibits a refusal to outright categorize Julie as being a machine, tending to show her acting as such only when she is being dehumanized by the cameras/audience. On *Jeopardy!* she spouts data like a machine, but when she is with Faye, she is humanized by contradictions. We learn that she likes univocal meanings, but that she also likes poetry, which is anything but univocal.

After she tells her significant other, Faye, that she likes poetry, Faye tells Julie she doesn’t like poetry. When Julie asks why, we read: “I’ve just never liked it. It beats around bushes. Even when I like it, it’s nothing more than a really oblique way of saying the obvious, it seems like.” Julie grins. Her front teeth have a gap. ‘Ole,’ she says. ‘But consider how very, very few of us have the equipment to deal with the obvious’ (13). Julie’s point correlates to our culture’s use of irony. The fact that we have are ill equipped makes us self-conscious. We are aware of the obvious but fail to recognize it day in and day out because we are being bombarded by images that distract us from the obvious. The distractions provided by the culture make us less aware, and we are self-conscious about allowing ourselves to be hooked in by the cultural

images we mock and scorn. To compensate for these attributes of postmodernity, we remain ill-equipped “to deal with the obvious” so we ironize to overcompensate for our shortcomings, isolating ourselves from others as a means of protection. Wallace’s fiction suggests the only way to overcome this postmodern dilemma is through other-directedness.

In this conversation, we see two people engaged with one another, recognizing their own biases and assumptions, and most importantly their own affinities. By recognizing their own biases and assumptions, these characters become aware of their place within the culture: “In Wallace’s fiction, characters are challenged to recognize the effects of their affinities and antipathies from within their necessarily embedded experience” (Kaiser 64). Within their embedded experience, the characters above are able to articulate their worldviews, essentially sharing their own subjective evaluations of their surrounding milieu. All of this makes them seem more human. As they are embedded within the milieu of pop culture, Faye is fixed and stable, whereas Julie is malleable, and as Wallace writes, “Everything about [Julie] is sort of permeable: even the slim dark gap between her two front teeth seems a kind of slot, some recessive invitation” (13).

Julie, for Wallace, is a convex mirror held up to the culture she is embedded within. This explains the reason behind her going slack jawed when she shifts her gaze from the audience on *Jeopardy!* to when she becomes zombified in her dressing room after the show: “Julie sits staring at herself in a harsh makeup mirror framed with glowing bulbs, her face loose and expressionless. She has trouble reacting to stimuli” (17). In the brief interlude, Julie sits watching herself slack jawed like someone in front of the television. The use of mirrors reflects that Wallace is using irony throughout the text, turning it back in on itself in an endless play of recursion.

The whole character of Julie represents the human element confronting the onslaught of postmodern irony. During a pivotal scene within the story, Wallace shows a Julie who is simply owning it on *Jeopardy*. Julie is destroying her opponents on the show, and, instead of Trebek being the focal point of spectacle, she is standing at the center of it all. As Wallace writes, “Trebek, who has never before had an audience get away from him, gets more and more flustered.” The audience is completely absorbed in the show, but the irony is that the star, Trebek, is no longer the star, and what has replaced celebrity here is an authentic human being. Within the limelight, Julie is able to act authentic because she is simply doing what she does, she answers questions, she is an encyclopedia. However, when the show is out of Trebek’s control, the show stops, literally, for a commercial break. This is where it gets interesting, and the symbolism here might be too obvious, showing Wallace to be a young writer going off an idea rather than a story, but the scene is symbolic of his whole fictional agenda:

“JEOPARDY!” breaks for a Triscuit advertisement. Faye and Dee stare at the monitor in horror. The studio audience is transfixed as Julie Smith’s face crumples like a Kleenex in a pocket. She begins silently to weep. Tears move down the clefs of her cheeks and drip into her mike, where for some reason they hiss faintly...The lights light. America watches Julie Smith murder every question on the Double Jeopardy board. (18)

When the show breaks for commercial, her face literally crinkles and becomes concave. Wallace creates a layered fiction in which Julie is a mirror for the culture watching her both within the TV and at home; she is a mirror mediated by a screen that acts as a mirror for the culture at large. These various layers of mirroring are meant to show how TV mediates our experiences of what is real. Wallace suggests people relate through the TV more than they do daily to one another.

Their experiences with television characters have more of an impact on their lives than actual people. Wallace uses Julie's experience to show how this is a negative consequence of television.

As soon as the lights go down Julie becomes withdrawn into herself, literally, and no longer mirrors the culture. When she can be herself by simply answering questions, she is convex and mirrors the culture's need for knowingness, but once the questions stop coming she becomes concave under the audience's gaze. Julie's response answers the question: what do we do when the lights go out and we are left to engage with one another. The answer is we become concave, and we withdraw from others. After spending countless hours engaged with a mediated reality, we have forgotten how to be ourselves in front of living others. When she encounters reality, she no longer knows how to perform and she is unable to be herself.

This play between Julie's convex and concave face pokes fun at language's self-referential system and dependence upon binary opposites to express meaning. Wallace is always using Julie as a means of blurring the line, showing how binaries aren't mutually exclusive and how the dash between words can be dissolved by subjects. He more or less parodies binaries through contradictions. Binaries make the world into a neat "either/or" dichotomy that is rigid rather than fluid. To express this, Wallace creates hyperbolic characters through overt symbolism: Julie is a mirror, Trebek is the image culture, and Faye is naivety in the flesh. These symbolic characters are not fully fleshed out because Wallace is not trying to portray characters realistically. Instead he uses characters to question our own presuppositions about meaning: "[Wallace's] stories simply don't investigate character; they don't intend to. Instead they're turned outward, turned to us. It's *our* character that's being investigated" (Smith 273). Julie allows Wallace to sit on the fence when it comes to her being a mirror for the culture, she doesn't choose sides, saying TV is bad or good, or that the image culture has an insidious agenda and is

making everyone dumb, and she complicates the notion that one's language creates who they are, as Wittgenstein argued, because she knows all the words and the data but not necessarily what they mean, and without meaning, Wallace asks, can we ever truly know anything about ourselves. Wallace uses the characters within "Little Expressionless Animals" to ask all the questions while refusing to give us the answers. "Wallace's fiction...positions itself as a more ironic point of intersection between the ghost and the machine" (Giles 340). In the story, Wallace shows us a culture of excess, but he never tells us whether it's bad or good, he shows a dramatized version of the culture in order to get us to decide for ourselves what we think of it. And as soon as we think of the answer, he complicates our position by adding a small nuanced complexity to his characters.

This happens when Wallace portrays Julie in the first round of *Jeopardy!*. In this scene, the dynamic between Julie and Trebek is established. This is to say the dynamic between sincerity and irony is embodied by the two characters. Trebek, the ironic game show host, essentially faces off with Julie, who, once she encounters data and information simply seethes with sincerity and authenticity. Her face becomes a convex mirror, heightening certain aspects and relegating others into the distance. Data and words are all she really knows. On her first round of *Jeopardy*,

Faye and Dee watch Julie as the red lights light and Trebek's face falls into the worn creases of a professional smile. Something happens to Julie Smith when the red lights light. Just a something. The girl who gets a three-score and who stares with no expression is gone. Every concavity looks to have come convex. The camera lingers on her. It seems to ogle. Often Julie appears on-screen while Trebek is still reading a clue. Her face, on-screen, gives off an odd lambent UHF

flicker; her expression, brightly serene, radiates a sort of oneness with the board's data. (17)

Julie's face glows under the camera's gaze, but it's not from the fact that she's on TV that her face pushes outward. It's due to her engagement with a game, specifically a language game, which requires a community or audience to exist. This is Wallace's technique for preventing the mechanical televisual world from absorbing human subjects: humans engaging with one another, creating unique encounters, to affirm individuality in spite of the sameness glowing from the screen. As Paul Giles writes, "Wallace takes the new worlds of computer science and global media as givens, but he seeks to open up spaces within these abstract grids of information technology where human emotion and identity can be explored" (Giles 341). He refuses to let humanity be swallowed by institutions. Period.

Within this story, the text itself acts as a multifaceted system that forces the reader to sift through chunks of text arranged out of order, which is disorienting, but forces the reader to do what Wallace so desired s/he to do: be aware. We are forced to construct meaning. Awareness plays a crucial role in Wallace's later fiction, as we'll see with "Good Old Neon," but even "Little Expressionless Animals" seems to be preoccupied with the need for awareness in life and how hard that can be in the image culture. The need for awareness of one's place within the world is evident. Wallace portrays Julie as a mirror when she has an audience (and this includes herself looking in the mirror at herself in a later scene), and as the camera rolls her face is convex, but as soon as it stops she crinkles in on herself and becomes concave. Within the image culture, Julie's face oscillates between the two modes of being, and in each instance she is not being self-reflective nor is she engaging with another person. She is simply in the flow of data and words and as soon as the questions cease she withdraws into herself. The only times that this

dichotomy ceases is when Julie engages with Faye, suggesting that communion transcends the reduction of binary systems.

Wallace's worlds always show individuals engaged with excess, especially when it comes to entertainment, and by having Julie become a mirror within a mirror, he ironizes popular culture by projecting a tearful Julie onto the culture. The double bind here, however, is that he is simultaneously critiquing Julie's ability to regurgitate facts like a machine while affirming her autonomy. Wallace does this by writing a scene from the perspective of TV exec Merv Griffin, who speaks through his associate to a room full of people (another form of layering) to argue that Julie has a force, which "is the capacity of facts to transcend their actual internal factual limitations and become, in and of themselves, meaning, feeling...This girl informs trivia with import. She makes it human, something with power to emote, evoke, induce, cathart" ("Little" 25). Although Griffin is arguing his point so he can exploit Julie and earn more revenue, his view of her has some truth to it: Julie makes cold, dead facts human.

The irony surrounding this portrayal of Julie as someone who makes facts human through her ability to stir our emotions is due to the fact that the very men who are saying she has this ability care less about emotions and more about making Julie into a commodity. Merv Griffin wants to profit by using Julie as a means to manipulate the viewer. Griffin says "human" but means commodity. In short, Julie is swallowed by the system and represents the status of postmodern fiction due to her being a rebel who destroys the system (by dominating the game) who later becomes part of the same institution she originally disrupted. The catch here is that Julie is ultimately dethroned and instead of capitalizing on her fame she disappears. Even when she is famous she wears a disguise in public so as to go unnoticed. All of this creates a strange web where Julie could be seen as using volition or becoming a victim of the establishment,

which is why her face contorts whenever she is out of the limelight but still on the set, she mirrors a mirror, and it is up for the reader to decide whether Wallace is ironizing both pop culture and Julie to intimate that authenticity can surface through the web of manipulation and postmodern ironic posturing.

The answer lies later in the same scene. Julie acts as humanity's agent in destroying postmodern irony. This is best evinced in the scene we read in which she enters Final Jeopardy. During this round Julie has once again left her opponents with no money while she has accumulated \$22,500. In the final round, Julie bets all of her earnings on the next question and ends the show with \$45,000 in earning, and what ensues is the pure spectacle of TV: "The audience applauds. There are bongos. And in a closing moment that Faye Goddard owns, captured in a bright glossy that hands over her iron desk, Julie Smith, on television, calmly and deliberately gives Alex Trebek the finger" (19). The non-reflective audience is the nation, which "goes wild" at Julie's deliberate "fuck you" to Trebek. However, the irony here is that by giving the finger to Trebek, she is essentially giving it to the whole televisual enterprise and those who are so absorbed within the screen and think it is reality. The finger signifies the human element that rebels against the witticisms and self-mocking intonations of the caricatured Alex Trebek Wallace portrays.

Julie is a character who defies our definitions. One moment she is withdrawn, concave, a shriveled face, no different than the expressionless animals she abhors, really. The next moment she is convex and mirroring the televisual. When she is alone with Faye she becomes more human because she likes poetry for its complex meaning, so the notion that she is simply a deposit for data and words becomes crippled. Julie, in short, does what many Wallace characters tend to do, which is "take issue explicitly with the reflexive dimensions of postmodernism,

seeking to use human perspectives to subvert a culture of corporate images in which the legends of TV advertising have become naturalized” (Giles 331). The image of Julie flipping off Trebek acts as a means to subvert the power of a cultural image.

“Little Expressionless Animals” “describes the mechanical routines of *Jeopardy!* contestants in a world where television has become anthropomorphized (“‘A special grand prize chosen just for you,’ says the television” (31)). This is a cultural milieu within which reflexivity, so far from being a daring intellectual strategy, has now become merely a corporate pastime. This leads the human characters who are adrift in this sea of commercialism to try to retain an idea of human otherness as a means of resisting incorporation into imperial forms of homogeneity” (Giles 331) and all of this effort, on Wallace’s part represents “a paradigmatic shift from corruption into authenticity” (Giles 331). Unlike irony, authenticity can’t simply happen due to one’s knowledge of a discursive community; instead outward relationships must be sought out and an other-directed orientation must be actively embraced, for if, as we see in the later stories, our gaze looks inward, we engage in the same old game as the postmodernists: self-reflexive solipsism.

The whole problem with the older generation of postmodern writers is how they embrace the poststructuralist notion that language is a self-referential system without a center, a signifier chain, circling around a void. Language’s existence always pointed towards absence for these older writers. Absence of authenticity, absence of sincerity, absence of truth, ad nauseam, but to what end? Wallace’s fiction ironizes the preconceived notions of the poststructuralists in order to use language in a way that points to presence, and as such, even amid all of the postmodern irony in the corporate world Wallace’s characters still seek connection and their corporal bodies

always intimate presence. This is what Paul Giles is getting at when he writes that the “ironization of irony leaves scope for tantalizing glimpses of authentic presence” (340).

Chapter 2: Metafiction Gesturing Outward in “Octet”

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men circles around the themes of solipsism, alienation, and hyper-reflexivity, whether it be through the brief interviews themselves, which consist of male speakers who know the right words, what their words mean, and how the interviewee will interpret their words (in essence, these men are the embodiment of postmodern irony), or whether it is in his shorter stories, such as “Forever Overhead,” where the theme of solipsism is explored in a condensed bildungsroman. “Forever Overhead” depicts a pubescent boy who is thinking too much before he jumps off a diving board into a swimming pool. A straightforward enough premise, but Wallace puts a wrench in its apparent simplicity by reaching out to the reader. He complicates the story by referring to the boy as “you.” By using the second person point-of-view, Wallace aligns the reader with boy, forcing us to empathize. I mention “Forever Overhead” because it acts as a microcosm for the collection as a whole since we see Wallace experimenting with technique while maintaining his earnestness. Earnestness is a recurring motif in the text, and it differs from sincerity because it implies Wallace is continually repeating himself using different methods of narration. It’s the continuity of his convictions that makes the texts in *Brief Interviews* seethe with earnestness, and thus the sincerity and the irony still comeingle, but these stories differ from his previous collection because he is not distracted by anything unrelated to his fiction’s goal to reposition irony.

In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace portrays characters being trapped inside their own heads. They recognize that everything is a construct and pigeon-hole individuals into stereotypes of the culture, dissecting people based on their appearance and mannerisms with ironic detachment. We see this stance in “B.I. #20” when the male interviewee says, “this was

what one might call a quote Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Ager,” and then goes about listing what this category entails with a knowing smugness:

Granola Crunchers or simply Crunchers, terms comprising the prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcana, emotional incontinence, flamboyantly long hair, extreme liberality on social issues, financial support from parents they revile, bare feet, obscure import religions, indifferent hygiene, a gooey somewhat canned vocabulary, the whole peace and love post hippie diction that im— (288)

The interviewer cuts the interviewee’s ironic detachment off. Enough is enough. He has exhausted his depiction of the Granola Cruncher as a result of defining her through an overly descriptive stereotype, one we’re all familiar with because we all have TVs. The interviewee is emblematic of the stance of the postmodern culture, toward which we now know Wallace was hostile. He counters these types of characters with characters and narrators who exhibit complexities to deter any chance their views will be seen as naïve or ideal. Wallace’s earnestness in the face of a solipsistic cultures ingrained in a posthumanistic culture is evident throughout *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

All of the stories within the collection are more uniform in their structure, style, and technique than in Wallace’s previous collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*, and we start to see a more mature Wallace emerging, one who still explores various styles, but whose writing is complex, layered, and much more reliant on postmodern devices than his previous work.

Wallace’s short story “Octet” uses metafiction against itself, turning it away from the text to interrogate the reader. By interrogating the reader via metafiction, we see Wallace gesturing outward toward the reader, asking him/her to make a choice about the text’s motives in trying to establish a connection between writer and reader. As we have seen thus far, Wallace takes

pleasure in using traditional postmodern narrative techniques and turning them backwards on themselves, using them in new and innovative ways to gesture to the reality outside of the text.

In “Octet” his intention is no different, and he uses metafiction to interrogate his own intentions and to question and critique the reader’s own views on what metafiction can be and achieve.

Metafiction is a technique that traditionally celebrates the imagination’s power while being self-conscious of fiction as a construct, leading to it questioning and interrogating the text itself, destabilizing fiction’s ability to capture the real world. According to Patricia Waugh, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). For the metafictionist, writing fiction is a way of interrogating fiction, which is why Brian McHale has described postmodernist fiction as being primarily concerned with the ontology of fiction, whereas modernist fiction was mainly concerned with questions of epistemology (27). Postmodernist fiction’s lack of concern with epistemological questions allows it to examine “unlicensed ontology in a teacup” (McHale 25), meaning it creates worlds it analyzes fictions own fictitiousness. By analyzing fiction’s status as an artefact writers provide “a critique of their own methods of construction” and “such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh 2). By exploring fiction through fiction, metafiction explodes language in the same as the poststructuralists by pointing to the outside world’s textuality.

McHale further explores the implications of postmodern fiction’s desire to explore fiction’s ontology when he writes, “to ‘do’ ontology in [a postmodern] perspective is not necessarily to seek some grounding for our universe; it might just as appropriately involve

describing other universes, including ‘possible’ or even ‘impossible’ universes – not least of all the other universe, or heterocosm, of fiction” (27). After the revelations of poststructuralism could no longer be ignored, fiction had to look toward its own beingness to evolve so it could accurately depict how language works, and by doing so they destabilized certain conventions of narrative by directly addressing the reader to expose how a story was constructed, or to analyze how the narrative was constructed to manipulate the reader. Postmodern fiction explores and plays with language to create fiction that is aware of itself as a linguistic construct. David Foster Wallace inherited postmodern modes of writing and further evolved them to create fiction like “Octet,” which is so heavily mediated by language it points outside the text.

Like “Little Expressionless Animals,” “Octet” is a fragmented, non-linear narrative, but instead of trying to portray the televisual culture via realism it is structured as a series of pop quizzes. The author of the story tells us in Pop Quiz 9 that “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” (145), aligning us with the writer in an attempt to create both empathy and connection via fiction. He does this by breaking the fourth wall in an attempt to help us understand the author’s intentions. Insofar as I’m concerned, Wallace’s intent is to show how old techniques can be used innovatively to reposition humanist values despite the assumptions of postmodern thought. He resorts to metafiction to show how it can be repurposed, but he can’t do this without first acknowledging how metafiction is dated. By acknowledging the current connotations surrounding metafiction, he ironizes the previous generation of writers use of the device by analyzing it as a tired old technique when he writes, “things have come to such a pass that belletristic fiction is now considered safe and innocuous.” The way Wallace attempts to overcome this view of metafiction is by daring to assert he is being sincere and honest even though his narrator knows it will come off as naïve. The irony here is that Wallace reverses the

roles of what is safe and unsafe by making metafiction a safety net to assert his unsafe stance of complete honesty. We see this when he writes,

Which is all again to say that you – the unfortunate fiction writer – will have to puncture the fourth wall and come onstage (except for your hand’s hat) and say all this stuff right to a person who doesn’t know you or particularly give a shit about you one way or the other and who probably wanted simply to come home and put their feet up at the end a long day and unwind in one the very few safe and innocuous ways of unwinding left anymore. (157)

The above passage uses multiple layers of irony to align the reader with the narrator of the text. On one level, the narrator asserts that you, the reader, are also the “unfortunate fiction writer” to try to create empathy and understanding. The narrator knows the piece is belletristic, which should be, up to this point in time, safe, but somehow is no longer safe insofar as “Octet” is concerned. Reading should be safe, the narrator writes, but in this instance it is dangerous because it forces us to actively engage the text to discover its multi-layered meanings. So instead unwinding by reading we become guarded against the motives behind the text that claims to want to create empathy.

The ambiguity surrounding the narrator’s intentions and motives are not what makes “Octet” an ironic text. “Octet” is ironic because it is subversive in its ability to undercut the established methods for which metafiction has typified, turning a convention on its head so it is no longer rote and safe, but tricky and dangerous. It’s the trickiness and dangerous aspect of this story that makes an ironic reading possible. Hutcheon asserts this use of irony is crucial in subverting popular discourses, in this case it would be subverting popular discourses surrounding sincerity and naked honesty:

In this view, irony's intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests – it uses their very language as its said – is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) and also 'to relativize the [dominant's] authority and stability' in part by appropriating its power. (*Edge* 30)

The narrator of "Octet" turns ironic distance into intimacy within the dominant discourse of metafiction, thus subverting the traditional role of metafiction to point to the artificiality of the text and the world as text in order to reposition the text, ironically enough, toward the direction of the reader. By doing this, he relativizes the authority and stability of poststructuralist discourse and metafictional convention by using these practices in ways that should not be possible, which is to construct a stable meaning through establishing a community of readers. In ironizing how we view language and form, Wallace asserts "that irony not only works to point to the complexities of historical and social reality but also has the power to change that reality" (Hutcheon 29). Wallace recognizes the irony, by its very multivocal nature, can both affirm and negate, and with this realization in mind he goes about creating experimental fiction that innovates how we conceive of once naïve concepts such as sincerity and truth to be possible.

In typical Wallace fashion, the narrator both asserts intent and then contradicts himself in the metafictional section of the text, "Pop Quiz 9." Here Wallace's trademark use of the footnote allows him to say that he won't include a certain pop quiz, but ironically, by describing the neglected quiz, he incorporates the very quiz he claims to exclude. He also uses the footnote to tell us what we, the fiction writers originally conceived this story to be, writing, "Right from the start you'd imagined the series as an octet or octocycle, though best of British luck explaining to anyone why" (146).

Using the metafictional trope of self-reference in “Octet,” Wallace attempts to “pave the way for methodological and didactic considerations that ultimately make difficult literature more accessible as a cultural phenomenon” (Larsen 13). The piece is undoubtedly a difficult one to work through due to its fragmentation, footnotes, and esoteric vocabulary. However, Wallace tries to overcome this by using self-reference to create genuine connection with the reader. He does this by pointing out the textual fault within “Octet.” The text is incomplete and it can be read as an exercise in self-indulgence. The only way for the reader to overcome these faults of the text is to trust the intentions of the writer. The writer tries to convince us that reading the seemingly belletristic piece is worth the hassle because it forces us to slow down and read the piece deeply. In doing so, Wallace interrogates the reader based on his or her response to the text. If the reader wants to be entertained, he or she will dismiss it and find something else to read. However, if the reader wants to be challenged, he or she will engage with the text and be changed by it.

Wallace’s metafiction isn’t just more of the same Barthian gimmickry; it serves the purpose of referencing the text to deconstruct it for the reader, pointing toward the human being behind the creation of the narrative rather than simply trying to expose the fiction as a construct. By gesturing toward the human being responsible for the creation of the text, Wallace uses metafiction to evoke the presence of a writer as the mediator of the text. Rather than asserting that the words on the page lack stability, Wallace argues the engagement of the reader with the text creates fluid interpretations, which are more valuable than fixed meanings.

Traditionally, a meta-level “points toward a level inside a given sign system” and as a result it can only ever refer to itself, and, therefore, it can never refer to or make sense of “a given field of objects” that operate “in relation to another sign system” (Larsen 14). Thus

language is an “intra-semiotic” system that is only ever able to construct meaning through a self-referential methodology that relies on analogous relationships within a system. The idea that language can only ever refer to itself points to how language is interrelated and circular, implying there is no escape from language and thus we are essentially, just like fiction, constructs of language. Wallace is hostile to this view in his fiction, and he reveals this when he uses a footnote to digress his reasoning behind reverting to metafiction to assert the sincerity of the consciousness behind his work. He does this to argue that “Octet” isn’t simply just another postmodern text meant to manipulate the reader’s suspension of disbelief only to eventually expose the artificiality of the text. He writes,

...with the now-tired S.O.P. ‘meta’-stuff it’s more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what’s going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he’s at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that’s he’s back there pulling the strings, an ‘honesty’ which personally you’ve always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., the ‘meta’-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you’re enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you’re in the middle of is artificial (like you didn’t know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn’t see what was right in front of you), which more than anything seems to resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and unmanipulative he’s

being all the time, a type of person who's even more irritating than the sort of person who tries to manipulate you by just flat out lying to you. (147)

In this section, the traditional view of metafiction as a means of exposing how the text is artificial is discarded when the narrator essentially chastises previous writers who exposed the text's artifice ad nauseum, arguing how these writers insulted their readers' intelligence. Metafiction tried to appear smart when it really just stated the obvious. The narrator distances himself from this type of meta-narrative in the above excerpt by being earnest about his intentions by directly engaging with the stance that interprets what is going on in the text is not really about the reader at all but about the need for the author to be liked and admired. By directly addressing the possibility that the text can be read this way, Wallace is honest about manipulating the reader in an attempt to gain some sort of connection rather than in an attempt to showcase his own intellectual superiority.

Ironically, Wallace describes the type of writer who wants to be liked as being manipulative to get us to trust his intentions behind the text so that we will, in turn, like him and care enough to dissect and engage with his work. Wallace uses the intra-semiotic system of language to argue for the sincere writer operating within the shared system. Our metafictional narrator exposes the traditional reasoning for reverting to metafiction to turn it on its head and imply how he is using it is differently when, in fact, he too is just trying to get us, the readers, to like him enough to engage with him. Once again, we see Wallace taking an ironic stance: he is fence sitting. Although he claims to be nakedly honest he still hides behind the veneer of irony to force us to consider that the narrator is the type of person who wants to be liked and is acting with a motive, or, due to the difficulty of the text, the narrator does not want to be liked and is hostile to the reader for thinking he needs to be liked at all. The truth of the matter is that the

narrator embodies both of these positions. There is a fine line between metafictional tradition and innovation at work within “Octet.”

Wallace uses metafictional narrative to assert his separateness from the previous models of metafiction, but, as we shall see in the end, he is unable to pull this off since he is unable to escape from the irony of the situation. However, just because irony is obvious within the text doesn't mean Wallace's metafictional narrative is being insincere. He tries to show us sincerity and irony aren't mutually exclusive. He exposes that since the two concepts aren't mutually exclusive the only way for trust to occur is through a leap of faith rather than actually knowing whether or not one is being honest or dishonest.

By using the given sign system, Wallace aligns himself with Wittgenstein rather than Derrida, asserting that language is more than a self-referencing chain of signifiers since its being understood depends upon community, language games and shared contexts. For Wallace, language's ability to mean depends upon one's inclusion within a given sign system. Wallace assumes his reader already has some gleaning of the discursive community he comes from, and thus he is aware the informed reader would be familiar with the meta-level of the text stemming from a deeper tradition. This assumption is a leap of faith on Wallace's part. He has faith the reader will know what metafiction is, and if the reader doesn't they will be faithful enough to his work to actually look into the tradition Wallace inherited.

It comes as no surprise that Wallace, after asserting the “truth,” tries to force his subjectivity on the reader. Yet the irony here is that the more Wallace lays claim to truth the less the reader believes his sincerity, and as Shannon Elderon writes, “It has certainly illustrated the way in which trying to access sincerity or truth directly is a project doomed to failure” (510). Elderon goes on to argue that Wallace tries to evoke sincerity to express his “true self” but is

unable to because to do so he can only ever express it through the representative faculty of language. The gap between reality and representation is irreconcilable, for true reality is outside the scope of language since language can only ever attempt to *represent* “reality.” It is never reality itself.

The reality of Wallace’s self within the text is only ever a mere representation of a self and the actual self is defined by the absence left by that representation. Wallace uses his authorial intent to impose on the reader the “truth” of the text by first asserting the “truth” of his actuality. In “Octet” Wallace replaces the absence of the writer by aligning himself with the reader so as to evoke presence when he writes:

You were betting that the queer emergent urgency of the organically unified whole of the octet’s two-times-two-times-two pieces (which you’ve envisioned as a Manichean duality raised to triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis w/r/t issues which both characters and reader were required to ‘decide’) would attenuate the initial appearance of postclever metaformal hooey and end up (you hoped) actually interrogating the reader’s initial inclination to dismiss the pieces as ‘shallow formal exercises’ simply on the basis of their shared features. (151)

In an attempt to compensate for the growing anxiety that sincerity is never truly possible, Wallace utilizes a self-referential narrative in a self-conscious effort to convince the reader of his actual presence instead of the absence of his “self” on the page. He does this by pointing to the fact that he is using self-reference to empathize with the reader, implying that he finds the technique annoying too, but that in this case it serves a purpose that will be beneficial to the reader. Wallace knows a reader may dismiss the whole octet cycle as intellectual masturbation and so he challenges the reader by interrogating his/her assumptions surrounding metafiction’s

effectiveness to reach outside of the text, questioning the view that metafiction can only ever be a means of exhibiting the author's own cleverness and awareness surrounding language. Wallace does this by avoiding the sham-honesty he loathes by making sincerity and genuine connection be the concepts at stake in the story.

For the reader, it is valuable to believe Wallace's intentions and recognize that the metafiction is there to connect all the previous pop quizzes and to illustrate the inherent double bind of trying to express one's sincerity. The double bind of "Octet" stems from the fact that the narrator is arguing he is sincere rather than simply being sincere. By arguing for his sincerity, the narrator can be seen as the type of person he claims he isn't: the type who needs to be liked. This would make the story all about the narrator, rather than about engagement with the reader. To overcome this, Wallace critiques the narrator's need to be liked through self-reflexive prose that exposes how the culture of irony has forced the narrator to make the case for sincerity. The culture scoffs at all attempts toward sincere engagement. Instead of seeming naïve, the narrator addresses the fact of this circumstance and argues as a way to counter the knowing cynicism of the postmodern culture. The narrator tries to negate the culture and affirm the reader.

All of his self-referential claims try to evoke a reader-writer relationship that is built on the presence of both, when, in fact, there is only ever the presence of the reader, for the author is inevitably always absent from the text. Simon de Bourcier points to this when he writes, "...self-reference is always self-reference to another, because the "self"—whether it be text, artificial consciousness, or the human subject—is always grounded on absence" (57). Indeed, Wallace seems to anticipate this point, and as mentioned, instead of referring to the metafictional narrator as an "I" he refers to him/her as a "you" to make the self's presence felt within the text since the self is the consciousness engaging with the text in an effort to make genuine contact. The reader

holding the book who is engaging with the narrative voice becomes that narrative voice through the use of “you” so as to evoke a presence, real and concrete, that exists outside the page.

The reference to “you” could be seen as a reference to the text itself as being the author’s “real self”, which leads to the text’s recursive structure as a means of reinforcing itself by referencing itself as being authentic and real, whereas in actuality by referencing itself it exposes to the reader that the text itself is a construct by breaking down the rules of writing. The double bind of “Octet” is that it recognizes how intertextuality always exists on the page as dead symbols, but that meaning exists outside of the page as well because for it to be had two minds must come into contact. Meaning, the text asserts (and I agree), is both self-referential (absence) and other-directed (presence). This awareness of how sincerity always works in conjunction with irony creates a text that is recursive in nature, making us as readers make a choice as to the text’s overall meaning.

Wallace knows language offers possibilities through the process of recursion, which suggests language can be infinite while it is simultaneously finite, making the structure of language itself paradoxical. As a result, language can never fully explain the inexplicable, although it can suggest answers. Letters are dead symbols on a page, they are finite, and Wallace acknowledges: “Once I’m done with the thing [i.e., a book], I’m basically dead, and probably the text is dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but through the reader” (“Author Here” 38). The text comes alive through the reader, and the dead symbols on the page become a way for two various individuals to engage in the construction of meaning. This happens on multiple levels in “Octet” due to the various viewpoints of the narrators in the text. We have a seemingly omniscient narrator who ultimately turns out to really be a metafictional narrator who identifies himself as “you.” Irony is at play here on a textual level with the multiple

layers of narrative, but the intent of the text remains the same: it earnestly attempts to make a connection with the reader.

“Octet” is the work of both writer and reader and its ability to be effective hinges upon the reader’s ability to understand Wallace’s sincere stance means nothing without contrasting ironies. Wallace is ironic, like when he suggests there “are right and fruitful ways to ‘empathize’ with the reader, but having to try to imagine yourself as the reader is not one of them” when he is, in fact, aligning himself with the reader in an attempt to empathize with his reader. Wallace imagines the reader’s response to the meta-narrative throughout a large portion of “Pop Quiz 9,” and he’s aware that he’s using a tired device, so he tells us how it will make him look, and, regardless of metafiction’s poorly regarded status, he rebels and does exactly what he says he won’t, which is to create a belletristic, difficult piece of writing that is at once hostile and rewarding to the reader. He acknowledges the obvious confusions this to resorting to metafiction will provoke:

Rather it’s going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do . . . more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*. (160)

The narrator aligns himself with the reader even further by showing how his confusion surrounding his text’s effectiveness makes him more like a reader encountering the text for the first time. Reader and writer share in their confusion. The unsaid component of this whole enterprise stems from the fact that Wallace is fully aware of his intentions. Scholar Ian Williams

suggests that Wallace's intent here is "the willful shedding of the protective authorial veil that has been engendered by irony and a readiness to accept ridicule when asserting the efficacy of the author in the wake of poststructuralism, in exchange for authentic dialogue and connection" (307). This view is misleading because although Wallace does shed "the protective authorial veil" at times he still only does this juxtaposed to assertions that he is aware of how all of this will appear to the reader, which is a way of continuing to use the authorial veil to shirk criticisms that pigeon-hole his whole agenda as naïve. The whole said/unsaid dichotomy of "Octet" reveals the text to be both nakedly honest and knowingly guarded.

Wallace is sincere when he is expressing doubt about our ability to be certain about sincerity, a bind that pretty much expresses what I've quoted him as saying in "E Unibus Plurum," which is irony is sincerity with a motive. The motive of irony here is to ironize the knowingness of the ironic stance by doubting the certainty surrounding sincerity. One can never know if someone is being sincere, if this were the case, we wouldn't even really need the concept of trust, we could simply know whether or not someone was messing with us or being honest. Therefore, the whole point of this story is to highlight how we are all interrelated (the fragmented and seemingly unrelated pop quizzes point to this), and how we're pretty much all in the same boat when it comes down to what we can know and what we can't know, and what ultimately makes us human is our ability to leap and believe we are being sincere and genuine to create a bond between us and another person that is confirmed via trust.

"Octet" creates an output that circles back on itself through the self-referential techniques embodied within the Pop Quiz 9 section while making possible the understanding of trust as being the concept that unites both irony and sincerity and severs the binary categorization that claims each one is mutually exclusive. By using stories to show the possibility that binary

opposites can be dissolved, Wallace illustrates that if the presence of a writer in a text is a fiction, as poststructuralism says, then the same goes for presupposing the existence of an absence in the text. Wallace, ever aware, shows us that binary opposites are compatible and incompatible simultaneously. If concepts can be fictions, and thus constructs, then they can also be realities we choose to believe in. Wallace's fiction is always about the reader making the choice, knowing full well that author, simply by writing the story to begin with, has made his choice to gamble and reach out to the reader. The author may want to connect with the reader, but the reader affirms this connection. Thus Wallace's fiction recognizes that it is the reader, not the author, who gives fictions its power to engage and interrogate.

Chapter 3: The Author Reclaims Irony in “Good Old Neon”

The double binds in David Foster Wallace’s stories create layered fictions that feature multiple devices at work simultaneously in a given text, exposing paradoxical situations through prose that oscillates between an ironic and a sincere stance. Wallace employs the double bind scenario from the beginning of his career to the end, whether it be with Julie’s ambiguous position as either a convex and concave reflection of the image-culture in “Little Expressionless Animals” or whether it is with the meta-narrator’s pleas for sincerity through an ironic stance in “Octet.” In his last story collection, *Oblivion*, “Good Old Neon” adds to his agenda of reclaiming irony. Like the previous two stories I analyzed, “Good Old Neon” illustrates the compatibility of irony and sincerity by depicting a character plagued by paradox. In *Oblivion*, the reader encounters even more layered and intricate fictions of paradox than in his previous collections.

Many of the stories contained within *Oblivion* concern themselves with solipsism, language games, sincerity and irony, and being human within an increasingly capitalistic and technologically oriented culture. Wallace shows us characters who are complex humans enmeshed in the corporate world of consumers and advertisers (“Mister Squishy”), a savant with superhuman knowledge who blossoms into self-reflexive awareness in an ancient culture (“Another Pioneer”), and an artist whose literal medium is shit, which displays the possibility of oppositional binaries being intertwined in a single construction (“The Suffering Channel”).

A main theme throughout *Oblivion* is that hyper-awareness leads to a crippling form of self-consciousness. This, in turn, “often leads characters into stasis or limbo or to a crisis of identity” (Carlisle 10). “Good Old Neon” embodies *Oblivion* as a whole in its concern with the negative effects of hyper-awareness. It illustrates the negative affect produced through Neal, a character whose commitments lie wholly within a negative spectrum, meaning his commitment

to fraudulence and ironic distance only serve the negative purposes of destroying any chance he may have at connecting with another human being authentically. The negative effect of Neal's crippling self-awareness leads to his suicide by the end of the narrative: the ultimate act of destruction.

By making the reader aware of Neal's imminent suicide, Wallace is able to contextualize his whole agenda within a life or death scenario. Living a life of ironic distance is nothing to scoff at within the parameters of this story. By adhering to an ironic stance and being hyper-aware, Neal adheres to Wallace's description of the knowing cynic. Neal's problem derives from the fact that he can't find any way out of his ironic stance. All of his attempts at sincerity and authenticity are thwarted by his recognition that he's trying to be these concepts. By trying to be these, he is merely acting out how he thinks sincerity and authenticity appear to others.

Neal is a character who reflects the hip ironic distance of the postmodern culture, and he represents a toxic form of irony. This stance makes us feel "horribly alone in our sophisticated irony: so preoccupied are we with getting the joke that we never allow ourselves to feel anything directly, for 'fear of ridicule'" (*Understanding* 14). We see this 'fear of ridicule' in Neal when he tells us how he would pretend to fit in with a certain crowd, always looking for acceptance, worrying more about being accepted than actually being in the present so that he may actually connect with others. Neal's use of irony here is self-deprecating. Using irony to give the illusion of being self-deprecating empowers Neal because "self-deprecation can be feigned; it can be a form of indirect self-promotion, even arrogance" and as such it allows Neal to use irony as a kind of defense mechanism (*Edge* 50). Neal appears a certain way to defer any type of commitment. He ridicules himself for his fraudulence. He does this to appear noble – he is coming clean – but he is only ever indirectly going about a form of self-promotion.

If irony allows Neal to avoid commitment, he can always sit on the fence. Neal's fence-sitting always results in a negative affect, suggesting irony's constructive role depends upon one's intentions. If irony is used in service of the self it can lead to a recursive form of solipsism, but if it is used in service of community and it is other-directed then it can produce a positive effect. Wallace's agenda represents the latter form of irony (although he uses it both to negate and affirm) while Neal represents the former. Neal always uses irony for his own self-interest. He tells us about a group he hung around with who were contemptuous of clichés. Since these friends hated clichés, Neal pretended to hate clichés as well. In doing so, he acted ironically by pretending to be someone he wasn't so he could fit into a group: "I spent all my time trying to get them to think I was dry and jaded as well, doing things like yawning and looking at my nails and saying things like, '*Am I happy?*' is one of those questions that, if it has got to be asked, more or less dictates its own answer" (142). Wallace shows us a character who acts without conviction, Neal does everything to be liked not because he likes what he is doing, and he can never truly connect because he is not being himself. The crux is he has never been himself because he has always acted – since the age of four we're told – ironically. Irony in this sense is not the simple construction of when we say one thing and mean another. It does not work on a simple *either/or* substitution within this narrative. Rather, it works within what Linda Hutcheon has termed the inclusive function of irony, which operates on a *both/and* substitution for what is said/unsaid:

The semantic 'solution' of irony would then hold in suspension the said plus something other than and in addition to it that remained unsaid [...] the inclusive pleasure of irony – similar to that claimed for jokes and puns – might then be seen to reside precisely in the discovery of two or more different 'isotopies' or

principles of coherence in an utterance thought to be single and homogeneous.

(*Edge* 63)

For Neal, there is no ‘inclusive pleasure of irony’ for he views it on an either/or binary, meaning he sees himself as being fraudulent which implies he cannot be honest even though he wants to be honest, even though he yearns for connection. Neal cannot escape his conviction that his ironic stance towards life defines him and he remains trapped within the fraudulence paradox. He fails to recognize irony can be pleasurable because it operates within multiple “principles of coherence.” Neal sees his honesty about his being a fraud in terms of paradox because he views irony on an ‘either/or’ axis when it really operates on a spectrum of plurality, meaning it is always saying multiple things simultaneously. Neil’s conception of irony is dangerous because it represents postmodern irony’s knowingness and smug cynicism, which views irony as a device solely meant to negate values. There is no Truth only truths, says the postmodernist. Everything is a construct so values are arbitrary, says the postmodernist. If you have the gall to proclaim you’re an authentic individual, the postmodernist laughs.

Postmodern irony positions individuals on a plane of knowingness and cynicism that is inescapable when viewed through sincerity. Make no doubt about it, Neal *is* sincere in his honest confession about his fraudulent existence, but he cannot escape the fraudulence paradox through sincerity because he is committed to the postmodern dilemma of cynicism and knowingness. If my sentence construction here seems repetitious, it is because Neal’s dilemma presents us with a recursive loop. As a result, the only way to destroy the ironist’s knowing detachment to make room for sincere commitment lies in using irony against itself.

Going back to Hutcheon’s assertion that inclusive irony posits the possibility of more than one result of irony, meaning an ironic utterance or narrative produces more than simply the

said/unsaid binary and instead leads to the both/and result, which allows irony to produce multiple layers of meaning. For Hutcheon, irony is “a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings – and doing so with an evaluative edge” (*Edge* 89). Therefore, interpreting Neal’s ironic distance should never lead the critic to dismissing Wallace’s ability to fight irony with irony. The use of irony itself does not produce more irony, and, in fact, the only way to destroy irony is through irony itself, for the use of naked sincerity would just be mocked by the ironic utterance. Ironizing irony does not always imply a destructive force is at play, since “arguably all irony can have a corrective function” (*Edge* 52), which is how I see Wallace’s meta-ironic stance working within his later short fiction.

Hutcheon notes irony can always be labeled destructive or corrective, and how it is interpreted largely depends upon the person interpreting irony. This is due to irony’s transideological nature, meaning “it is the overlapping of some of the communities of ironist and interpreter that sets the stage for the transmission and reception of intended ironies” (*Edge* 20), which suggests irony, depending on one’s community, can be labeled both affirming and negating (*Edge* 28). Irony both affirms and negates because it is inclusive and exclusive simultaneously by its very nature. For irony to work, someone must be excluded from its function so they take what is said at face value while another person realizes what is being said is not what is actually being meant. Hutcheon sums this up with what she defines as “irony’s edge”:

Irony’s edge, then, would seem to ingratiate and to intimidate, to underline and to undermine; it brings people together and drives them apart. Yet, however plural these functions, we still seem to want to call the thing itself by a single name: irony. This pragmatic decision doesn’t at all mean that we should forget the

complexities of irony's inferred motivations, though: an awareness of the range of operations that irony can be interpreted as carrying out may help resist the temptation to generalize about either the effects of which irony is capable or the affect to which it most certainly can give rise. (*Edge* 56)

Wallace, in his nonfiction, gave in to temptation and labeled irony as negative due to the affect he saw it give rise to, which was postmodern knowingness and cynicism. His fiction, however, does irony justice by refusing to label it negative or positive, showing instead how it functions as both affirming and negating. Irony's ability to affirm and negate is most evident in "Good Old Neon" due to Wallace's use of the metanarrative. With Neal we see how irony negates and creates a negative affectation, but the later metanarrative introduced by Wallace affirms irony as a device with a plurality of functions. The story shows how irony's edge can bring people together and drive them apart due to its ability to include and exclude simultaneously.

Neal can be understood in light of what Hutcheon terms irony's multiple unsaid meanings. With Neal, we can see an interplay of sincerity and irony working together to produce the fraudulence paradox. The fraudulence paradox is ironic because Neal is aware he is trying to be honest about being a fraud. If he's a fraud, however, he could simply be lying about being honest. The paradox presents an impossibility that leads to the irony surrounding Neal's situation. Neal's honesty surrounding the fraudulence paradox illustrates how he is stuck in an endless play of irony, he says one thing, but always means something else. Since he is a fraud, everything he is says is unreliable. However, since he is honest about his fraudulence he allows us to see how irony and sincerity work. We either trust him or we dismiss him. All of this can be seen to be a result of Wallace trying to interpret the times in which he was writing in: "Wallace's method was rooted in the conviction that literature ought to address the paradoxes and

confusions of its moment. His moment was late capitalist America, which he knew from his own life manufactured nothing so surely as a sense of fraudulence and despair” (Baskin). Neal’s character shows the dilemma that leads to endless irony, which is hyperreflexivity: “Problematic irony can be said to follow from the problem of hyperreflexivity: a person who cannot stop thinking about himself and his possible actions, cannot or can only just barely come to conclusions and actions, let alone actions to which he is fully committed” (*Existential* 60). Although Neal is able to come to conclusions, he is incapable of acting sincerely, which makes him incapable of committing to anything. Although I agree with Dulk’s assertion that an ironic attitude can lead to an inability to commit, I think he is missing a step in his analysis, for the reason one cannot commit has to do with anhedonia resulting from irony rather than stasis resulting from irony. Stasis only comes about as a result of Neal’s apathy.

Neal reveals the age he became hyperaware as being fourteen. Before he was fourteen, he describes his love of baseball, and how he loved “the feel of stepping up to that plate knowing anything was possible” (156). This mentality changed for Neal during his early teenage years when he began to worry about how he appeared to other people. Once he became aware of other people watching him, Neal began to display the crippling effects of hyperawareness: “Putting in all this time and energy to create a certain impression and get approval or acceptance that then I felt nothing about because it didn’t have anything to do with who I really was inside, and I was disgusted with myself for always being such a fraud, but I couldn’t seem to help it” (142) By putting in all “this time and energy to create a certain impression” of himself Neal forgoes any attempt to create an authentic self. However, the irony at play here is that Wallace presents Neal’s authentic self as being contingent upon his identity as a fraud. Without his recognition that he is a fraud, Neal is left with nothing, and as a result he clings to this identity even though

he appears to want to free himself from his status as a fraud. This is why he can't seem to help it: he is simply being his authentic self. This may seem to contradict the idea of Neal as a fraud since to be authentic is usually considered contingent upon one's ability to be sincere, but these two concepts are not independent from one another. In his essay "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," Adam Kelly highlights the differences between authenticity and sincerity: "Whereas sincerity places emphasis on inter-subjective truth and communication with others [...] authenticity conceives truth as something as inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication" (132). Therefore, Neal is trapped in an inward cycle of hyper-awareness. He cannot direct his efforts outward with any conviction, and as such his actions are always the result of his authentic self's desire for approval. He is authentic without being sincere.

Neal is unable to act sincerely because he is aware of the double bind implicit with any act of sincerity. For Neal, every sincere act can be viewed as both calculating and incalculable, meaning it can be done in the hopes of seeking approval while containing an element of the unconditional, which is to say the effects of the sincerity act remain unknowable. This notion of the double bind implicit in any act of sincerity is best represented when considering the social implications that surrounds gift giving:

A gift, for example, is structured by a paradoxical relation between, on the one hand, calculation, conditionality, and a self-conscious awareness of impurity—the gift as exchange, as a means of getting something in return, even if what one gets is only a moment of self-approval—an on the other hand, the incalculable, the unconditional, a relation to the other that goes beyond all forms of cognition, manipulation, narcissism and self-promotion. (139)

Neal never sees his actions in quite this light, for everything he does is a result of making him look good while leaving him feeling empty inside. So on one hand we have him acting a certain way as a means of “self-promotion,” but for a character evincing such hyper-awareness he seems oblivious of how anyone can conceivably be stuck in the same bind as he is since every action involves “calculation” and “conditionality” while it also entails the “incalculable” and the “unconditional” because we can never fully know how our actions will be interpreted by others.

Neal’s lack of awareness of how his actions could possibly appear differently than he wants them to come off as leads him to be stuck within his fraudulence paradox. Sure, he is honest about being a fraud, but beside that he does little to overcome it because he can never seem to wrench himself free of the need for approval. In this is he much like the meta-narrator we encountered previously in “Octet.” Neal’s hyperawareness allows him to act authentically because this awareness is an inward awareness, but it does not allow him to act sincerely because he always lacks outward conviction, which is to say that he is naïve in the sense that he sees sincerity as being a pure action rather than a muddled “gift” as highlighted by Kelly above. As a result of his naïve conception of sincerity, Neal believes he is an insincere person who cannot escape his own conception of himself as a fraud, and this results in his inability to feel pleasure:

And about how by only maybe fourteen all that had disappeared and turned into worrying about averages and if I could make All City again, or being so worried I’d screw up that I didn’t even like ironing the uniform anymore before games because it gave me too much time to think, standing there so nerved up about doing well that night that I couldn’t even notice the little chuckling sighs the iron made anymore or the singular smell of the steam when I hit the little button for steam. (156)

Hyperawareness prevents Neal from being in the moment, so much so that he cannot even “notice the little chuckling sighs the iron made” and he cannot manage to find any enjoyment in ironing, something he formerly liked to do, saying he “didn’t even like ironing the uniform anymore” to reveal how hyperawareness can be crippling but it can also lead to anhedonia.

This inability to be sincere cripples Neal because he can find no pleasure in anything, and he suffers from anhedonia, as I have stated, but his hyperawareness does little to help him be sincere since he is withdrawn inwards and no one is actually aware of his entrapment within the fraudulence paradox, excluding his therapist Dr. Gustafson.

When talking to Dr. Gustafson, Neal reveals how he’s a fraud, creating the paradox of being honest and fraudulent:

And yet at the same time I already saw what I’d left myself open for – and sure enough he says it. ‘If I understand you right,’ he says, ‘you’re saying that you’re basically a calculating, manipulative person who always says what you think will get somebody to approve of you or form some impression of you you think you want.’ I told him that was maybe a little simplistic but basically accurate, and he said further that as he understood it I was saying that I felt as if I was trapped in this false way of being and unable ever to be totally open and tell the truth irregardless of whether it’d make me look good in others’ eyes or not. (145)

And later Neal delves further into this paradox:

The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likeable image of yourself so that

other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were.

(147)

Neal tries harder and harder to be likeable but he is left feeling emptier inside. Here we have a character who lacks a self regardless of whether or not he is being authentic. His other-directedness is fraudulent; he's doing it for the wrong reasons, for his own motives, making him an essentially ironic character. In Wallace's terms, sincerity with a motive is always irony.

The irony of Wallace's portrayal of solipsism is that he expresses it with an onslaught of words while simultaneously showing us, through Neal, how words are inadequate in capturing the complex flighty dynamic flashing within our skulls: "We all seem to go around trying to use English...to try to convey to other people what we're thinking and to find out what they're thinking, when in fact deep down everybody knows it's a charade and they're just going through the motions" (151). However, if it's a charade, then why bother? What's the whole point of Neal's honest portrayal of his fraudulence? Neal is hostile to words because they can never truly convey what he's trying to tell us, but he recognizes they're all we have to inscribe meaning. He says, "Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what's really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time English is all we have to try to understand it" (151). So, is Neal basically throwing his hands up in the air and acknowledging language's inadequacy in describing reality but choosing to ignore this in his narrative to try to tell his story? The answer is not so clear. For starters, his hostility toward the very medium he's choosing stems from his presupposition that his mind somehow exists separate from reality when, in fact, it is part of reality. What is separate from reality is language, which is used to represent reality, but is not, as the poststructuralists realized, reality itself. Neal's frustration ultimately stems from his inability to recognize the need to believe in the value of subjective

realities, he wants to describe a universal reality in describing death, but always falls short because words cannot describe the universal, they can only ever intimate it. Neal's attempts to describe death with words always fall short because they ultimately end up being dead symbols on a page.

By recognizing the limits of language, Wallace over determines his texts, making them seem even more artificial by incorporating footnotes and meta-levels of narrative. It is important to note that in *Oblivion* the footnotes are sparse compared to Wallace's previous fictions, which makes the inclusion of just one single footnote in "Good Old Neon" all the more important and artificial because it sticks out of the text, it seems out of place, and it interrupts the narrative cadence of the text, but it does all of this with a purpose, linking theme with form.

Iannis Goerlandt acknowledges that Wallace's use of footnotes have been the source of frustration for many readers, but he argues the annotations in Wallace's fiction and non-fiction "in their different textual settings" work to create "various annotation systems" that "serve different ends, especially on the level of textual performance" (Goerlandt 156). Goerlandt argues that these different purposes of annotations keep the main text clean of excess information, they are meant to annoy the reader, or they are meant to clarify a point in the text.

Goerlandt argues that the footnotes in *Oblivion* are sparse mainly because Wallace got annoyed with them (169); however, Goerlandt rightly concludes that the one footnote in "Good Old Neon" works to heighten the text's theme: a way out of the nightmare of hyper-consciousness. The footnote (which is far too long to be quoted at length here, so a summary must suffice) is repetitious insofar that we have Neal returning to the idea that time is not sequential. However, instead of merely repeating what has already been said, Neal furthers his original idea and says we experience the supposed paradoxes of time (where it's both passing

and present) in stillness, asking: “What if there’s really no movement at all?” (179). Neal then argues the “now” of time is infinite and “never really passes in the way your mind is supposedly wired to understand pass,” so that before death there is flash like neon that occurs in an immeasurable instant where everything that is humanly conceivable shoots off in your mind. This footnote is important because it shows Neal’s hyper-consciousness, but it always show the implications of his hyper-consciousness in a way that is analytical and no longer merely stuck in a bind. Through analytical reasoning, Neal understand he contributes to humanity, and as such he realizes all of his excessive uses of language weren’t really a product of his fraudulence at all, and that he is no different than any other person because we all experience the dilemma of using words to express some inexpressible truth to some extent or another. The other reason this footnote is so important is due to the fact it ends with a pang of finality. The last words we read are “THE END,” and the huge capitalized letters jump out at us. Goerlandt seems content to suggest that “THE END” signifies how Neal does not lose himself in hyper-consciousness and that the story “tries to offer closure, a way out of the nightmare—in expressly and tragically dramatizing “THE END” of hyper-conscious thought” (171). However, is Wallace ever this easy to understand or analyze? Does “THE END” actually signify the end of hyper-conscious thought? As far as I’m concerned it does not. “Good Old Neon” does not end with the assertion that the only way to get out of the recursive loop of hyper-conscious thought is through death, for if we read “THE END” as the end of hyper-conscious thought, we can’t simply ignore the fact that these words come right after Neal drives his car fully head on into an abutment and commits suicide. Wallace isn’t saying the only way out of solipsism is death because he continues to write and offers us the Dave Wallace¹ character.

¹ For the sake of clarity, I’ll be using ‘David Wallace’ to refer to the meta-narrator within the story and ‘Wallace’ to signify the actual writer within the world who actually physically sat down and worked through this thing.

Neal hints at the existence of the David Wallace character when he says, “Not to mention I am maybe full of B.S. about knowing what happens – if I really did kill myself, how can you even be hearing this? Meaning I am a fraud. That’s OK, it doesn’t really matter what you think. I mean it probably matters to you, or you think it does – that isn’t what I meant by *doesn’t matter*. What it means is that it doesn’t really matter what you think about me, because despite appearances this isn’t even really about me” (152).

The whole irony contained within “Good Old Neon” is that we think we are reading Neal’s voice throughout the narrative when in fact we are reading what David Wallace believes went on with Neal, a former classmate of his who committed suicide via car crash, who appeared so happy but in actuality was not. The David Wallace narrator complicates the story, making the story metafiction because it’s a story about a story. David Wallace is constructing the story and we see him constructing through both the Neal narrative and the narrative about him constructing the story itself in his own head as he looks at Neal’s picture in an old yearbook.

By the end of the story Wallace has complicated what kind of story we are actually encountering. Before he reveals the meta-level of the text, the story could easily be seen as a realist work, but Wallace complicates this category once he introduces David Wallace into the story. With David Wallace’s introduction, Wallace complicates the text, making the story not about Neal, but about David Wallace thinking about Neal, so that the whole story is a complex imagining on David Wallace’s part as to what could have possibly led his former peer to suicide. If Wallace had simply ended the story when Neal kills himself and left us with a realist text, it would have been “about the life and the death (by suicide, in a car wreck) of a phony, successful, 29-year-old yuppie named Neal, whose ghost narrates the story from beyond the grave in a style that’s uncharacteristically (for Wallace) jargon free and conventionally told” (Peters). It would

have been a vehicle to show how “Consciousness in and of itself is not a cure for oblivion; awareness can lead inward to crippling self-absorption and feelings of fraudulence” (Carlisle 73). The text would have been a negative expose about how solipsism is inevitable since there is no way out of our heads, but this is not the case since David Wallace is able to project his own consciousness toward Neal in attempt to connect with someone else, thus avoiding the solipsistic trap. Solipsism can be avoided when we try to reach out to another person with the intent of connecting with them, rather than acting out of a motive for self-gain. The former conception is sincerity, whereas the other is irony. Wallace liberates irony from an endless cycle by escaping the solipsistic trap we have seen through Neal – the endless expositions, inward directed, and ironic worldview – by asserting the importance of choice within a language system that defines us. For choice to matter, however, we must be aware of our position within a culture, language, and capitalism. In short, we need to be aware of everything that shapes our identities rather than adhering to the delusion that we are absolute unique individuals with identities that transcend the world that shapes us. One of the ways the world shapes us most, for Wallace and the poststructuralists, is through the language we use every day.

As scholar Patrick Horn writes, “Feeling stuck by the limits of language is an illusion. Language does not ‘fail’ when Wallace’s realer self says to the self with a penchant for endless ironizing, ‘Not another word’² (“G.O.N.” 181)” (Horn 267). In his essay, Horn argues that Wallace’s story portrays a struggle with solipsism, and it spouts the belief that true empathy is impossible, but that Wallace failed to see that these ideas were shortsighted with regards to his own work. Horn writes Wallace thought our relationship to irony and sincerity was “tenuous” (Horn 246) when in fact “his own writing did considerably more than haunt us with sincere moral and religious language” since it does ultimately connect to us to realities. Horn argues

² “Not another word” referring to the last line in “Good Old Neon”

Wallace's Neal is constantly ironizing, which creates the problem of solipsism since everything is within his head, but that when we look at religious and moral abstraction we must consider how these are not considered ironic musings by the practitioners of certain religions, and as such we cannot always look at the ethicist or the religious follower through an ironic lens because they truly believe the words they utter connect them to some higher meaning. Belief is enough, argues Horn, writing that language is a part of reality. It is not separate from it. Horn argues against the binary of language/reality:

On the contrary, an investigation into the use of language reveals that the skeptical gap between the mind and the external world, the gap needed to make sense of the problem of solipsism, is seen to be an illusion. The notion of a mind separated from the world is an illusory picture. The word 'mind' is inextricably linked to the concept of a world. In fact, there is no ordinary use of the word 'mind' that does *not* entail a world with people perceiving things and relating to one another in various ways. Thus, strictly speaking, there can be no problem of solipsism because the statement of the problem requires imagining a concept (a mind without a world) that is not found in the course of our ordinary lives. (251)

Horn argues that solipsism is a myth because it is predicated on the idea that our minds create reality when, in fact, our minds are part of reality, meaning our minds exist within the world. He is right that our "'mind' is inextricably linked to the concept of a world" but he is wrong to assume solipsism as a concept means the existence of a mind without a world. Simply put, solipsism puts us as the center of the universe, and in the case of Wallace's work we have seen through Neal how this idea of solipsism can be toxic, and simply because it is an idea rather than a reality makes all the difference in the world. Horn argues that solipsism cannot exist since

language is never private because it depends on a community to have meaning. Nonetheless, the danger of solipsism exists even if, by definition, it cannot. This is because solipsism is felt rather than reasoned. Neal still embodies the concept of solipsism since he thinks he is trapped within his own skull. The definition of solipsism matters little to a character who can't escape his recursive thoughts. What helps him ultimately escape solipsism is David Wallace's use of language to empathize with Neal's suffering.

During "Good Old Neon" we're not actually encountering Neal's ghost for the majority of the text. We're encountering David Wallace thinking about the events and circumstances of Neal's death, making the story not about suicide, but about one person trying to empathize and connect with another human being. The introduction of David Wallace shows how "awareness can also lead outward to possibilities of extraordinary perspective" (Carlisle 73).

Awareness of theory and philosophy allows us to think differently, more diversely about the world around us and our own place within it. At first, it can be seen as crippling, this highly self-conscious mode of thought, but it can also be liberating. Awareness, in the case of Neal, is shown to create a sort of stasis due to his ironic knowingness. He is hyperaware of how language is inadequate, yet he ironically uses language to explain this (he's even aware of the irony here). However, David Wallace complicates this idea that language is inadequate in expressing abstract concepts and deep inner since he is able to imagine what Neal must have felt like, so that language is not wholly inadequate because it is able to create empathy from person to person. Not only that, but by introducing David Wallace and the individual footnote, Wallace hams up the artifice of the text, making it so its mediation is obvious, to indirectly point toward the outside world, the world where the reader is holding the book rather than being self-referential like the postmodernists of old to refer to the text's artificiality. Wallace does not refer to the text's

artificiality; he simply makes it more obviously artificial through his recursive sentences, long drawn out paragraphs, and meta-narrative techniques.

Wallace increases the artifice of the text to show us how language does not limit us as individuals because it always points to what is absent from the words on the page: the world. This is Wallace exposing the inverse function of language that is opposed to the poststructuralist notion of language. Where poststructuralists saw absence through the written word, Wallace exposes how absence always refers to presence and vice versa, making it once again obvious how binaries are not “either/or” conceptions, but rather “and/both” conceptions. Language oscillates between seemingly polar opposite terms as a result. Therefore, Wallace shows how language can be viewed as ironic, sincere, or both. It has been my contention that he is sincere in his efforts to destroy the ironic stance of the postmodernist writers before him, but that his quest to destroy irony was not absolute, for he realized the only way to overcome the cynical knowingness of the ironist was to ironize his/her stance towards the world.

A Brief Conclusion: Wallace's Love Affair with Irony

The three short stories analyzed above are linked by their themes, structures, and indebtedness to tradition. Wallace was a writer who was aware of what came before him, and these three stories show a career arc that shifts from drawing attention to the image-culture toward reader-centric prose. Each story shows individuals trying to negotiate their way through a complex flow of images that are at once real and fake, exposing how easy it is to lose one's sense of self within a culture that is hostile to individuality and preoccupied with the sameness of commodity. Anyone who resists the smirking and knowing media is deemed, by the culture's postmodern irony, to be naïve and simple. The stories are linked by their preoccupation with fragmented structures that are both telling in what they leave out and what they decide to leave in, portraying worlds that are fully real but overtly artificial. Each story draws attention to its own artifice through hyper-stylized language, fragments of story, non-linear plots, and meta-narrative techniques. All of these postmodernist devices are employed to show how authenticity and sincerity can co-exist with irony, and each story makes a point of casting a complex web of irony and sincerity that forces the reader to engage with the author to make meaning.

In "Little Expressionless Animals" Wallace's attack on postmodern irony is not as evident as his later, more experimental work, but it's still there if we simply look closer. Julie is alien within the ironic televisual culture in which figures like Sajak and Trebek are considered more real because they occupy space within a screen than those who exist outside of the screen. Her reactions to the limelight, and the inward/outward movement of her face are clear reactions to the culture she encounters. In true Wallace fashion, however, he never decides for us whether what is harmful stems from the culture or is somehow within Julie herself. It's for us, as it always is, to decide.

Wallace's preoccupation with the reader-writer relationship is evident when we transition from "Little Expressionless Animals" to "Octet." In the former story, Wallace is not so much concerned with convincing the reader of the authenticity of his endeavor to resurrect sincerity. The earlier story is simply Wallace diagnosing the culture in such a way that we're unsure as readers if he damns or praises the image-culture. In reality, Wallace posits himself somewhere in the middle, using irony in order to sit on the fence in terms of his diagnosis, to engage the readers into making a decision. Is the image culture harmful to individuals? Does endless irony subsume the self and absorb it within the culture? How the reader chooses to read Julie's reactions and interactions within the public and private spheres will ultimately sway the reader to one conclusion or the other. My reading has it that Julie is a vehicle to show how the ironic gaze of the culture cannot ever see the inner self of the individual because it mocks the very notion of a self altogether. Julie's convex face during the commercial break forces us to see how once she is no longer performing for the camera (in a sense, she's still being authentic since performance is central to being under the camera's gaze) her veneer implodes and she withdraws inward. All of this is to suggest that her withdrawal inwards under the gaze of the culture makes it impossible for her to feel comfortable, genuine, and real. Wallace's stories are interactive in a sense, always interrogating us, and forcing us to decide what is actually going on, for we can't help but think Wallace is writing in a way that evokes his definition of irony: sincerity with a motive. His need for the reader to decide whether Wallace is screwing with us is made even more prominent in his story "Octet."

The narrator (possibly narrator's) of "Octet" creates Pop Quizzes, which point to the artificiality of the text even more so than the previous story mentioned. By creating these Pop Quizzes, Wallace's narrator(s) create a disjointed text that has segments out of order, doing away

with any attempt to logically arrange them, so as to force the reader to do the work in much the same way as he did in “Little Expressionless Animals.” In both instances, the demand for the reader to do the work points to Wallace’s desire to create a metaphorical yet fully felt relationship between the reader and the author, and with all relationships, the outcome is never fulfilling if it’s one-sided. “Octet” is concerned with our ability to perform as well, but its concern it is also preoccupied with exploding conventions by turning metafiction outward toward the reader rather than analyzing the text in a Barthian way. Arguably, “Octet” is the next step in Wallace’s agenda, moving away from his attempt to reinvent the possibilities of image-fictions by taking a bold step toward evolving what Barth’s fiction did. Wallace’s bold move is to break the fourth wall not to point to the texts artificiality, but to focus on how words on the page can have real, valuable meaning (regardless of whether or not we view them as dead symbols) to the reader holding the book. And like any good relationship, Wallace forces us to work hard by frustrating us with a seemingly overused device: metafiction. The informed reader, however, will see that Wallace isn’t simply trying to anger us; he is trying to engage us by making us read on a deeper level. The frustration the reader feels is due to the fragmentary structure, the footnotes, the digressions, and the onslaught of recursive sentences. In “Good Old Neon,” Wallace takes the devices of metafiction, irony, and recursion even further by leading the reader through a character defined by paradox.

Neal, the pseudo-narrator of “Good Old Neon,” is a paradox: an honest fraud. In “Octet” Wallace was concerned with paradox when he expresses how annoying it is to meet someone who yearns to be liked while his narrator(s) hope to be liked so they can be believable in their sincerity. “Good Old Neon,” by contrast, is concerned with showing how an unreliable narrator can be honest by admitting his own fraudulence and lack of believability. Neal is suspect from

the beginning of the story. His portions of the text are large chunks of paragraph that mirror Neal's own solipsism. The only reality that matters to Neal is the reality in his head, which is linked directly to the image-culture because we know he is a product of it. The image-culture has influenced Neal in a way that makes him think his every thought is under the magnifying glass. Neal is an actor and the world outside is simply a product of his own interpretation because he's never really present since he's lost within his own head. Even when he tries to appear present, he's only focused on *appearing* present rather than actually *being* present. Neal, like the poststructuralist conception of language, circles around the void of his own language and represents absence. The only way Wallace evokes presence within the text is through his use of irony, and as I've shown "Good Old Neon" is a story written in first person where the original narrator, Neal, is not the actual narrator. The real narrator of the story is David Wallace, a character who went to high school with Neal. The story is David Wallace's hypothetical account of the circumstances that led Neal to suicide. By being from David Wallace's point-of-view, rather than Neal's, the story is more about empathy than paradox. Wallace illustrates how presence can be reclaimed from absence by bringing Neal back to life through words.

All of Wallace's stories are obsessed with language: playing with language, using recursive sentences, creating characters as symbols to explore themes, and using footnotes to create stories within stories (even when they appear to be superfluous they're not) to add layers to the work, making the artificiality of the text itself apparent without needing to resort to old techniques to tell the reader what is already obvious. Wallace uses all of these techniques in the three stories I've explored in order to reclaim irony's original purpose of being subversive so it can parody and critique the postmodern culture's cynicism and knowingness. Each story is established within a certain tradition and, in turn, a reaction to the tradition it's immersed in. The

stories show how easy it is for individuals to be absorbed by the culture, making them lose their autonomy, and he ironizes the irony of the culture as a defense mechanism to prevent his work from seeming sentimental and naïve and humanistic. All three stories lend themselves to the idea that Wallace was ultimately a postmodern humanist who knew how to create fictions that turned language's absence into presence.

Wallace was a writer rooted in tradition. By knowing what came before, he crafted fiction that was at once indebted to certain authors even while it simultaneously seemed hostile to the tradition from which it arose. Although many critics have noted Wallace's use of irony in his work, many have read his manifesto-like writings to argue his work is "post-postmodern" or "postironic" when the truth is his work does not fit so easily into these categories. Instead Wallace is a metarealist whose concern is to reclaim irony from postmodern appropriation. He repurposes irony to show how concepts such as trust and truth are contingent upon an awareness of irony's presence if they are to hold any value that makes them more than empty constructs. Wallace's deployment of irony in his prose creates difficult stories that forces the reader to make a choice, and thus his use of irony does not attempt to exclude the reader, but instead requests the reader spend a lot of time with the texts to understand how all of the ironic pleas for sincerity are done for the reader's sake. Wallace tries to engage the reader as if the text were a conversation, which roots it in reality and makes it other-directed. All of this suggests that Wallace's difficult prose repurposes postmodern devices to negate the culture's knowing cynicism, and that it does so in the name of empowering the reader.

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