5-2024

"Into the womb of solipsism": the spectrum of loneliness in Wallace's Infinite Jest

Michael Gieger
Montclair State University

Abstract

Academic critics and casual readers of David Foster Wallace's 1,079-page novel, *Infinite Jest,* have long ruminated over the book's daunting physical size and wide narrative scope. This paper offers an argumentative interpretation of the novel's immensity through an exploration of Wallace's thematic preoccupation with solipsism and human loneliness. Building primarily from the critical works of Frank Cioffi and Casey Michael Henry, this essay makes the contention that the length of *Infinite Jest* behaves mimetically, simulating for its attentive readership a sense of perpetual emotional isolation—an isolation reflective of the epic's untold lonesome characters. The argument further suggests that length of the novel is necessitated by Wallace's creative want to depict a broad spectrum of solipsistic characters with profound detail. This essay ultimately establishes the gradient of loneliness in *Infinite Jest* through the character analyses of two antipodal Wallacean figures: Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz.

Keywords: solipsism, loneliness, addiction, *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

"Into the Womb of Solipsism": The Spectrum of Loneliness in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

by

Michael Gieger

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2024

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jeffrey Gonzalez

Thesis Sponsor

Dr. David Galef

Committee Member

Dr. Jeremy Lopez

Committee Member

“INTO THE WOMB OF SOLIPSISM”: THE SPECTRUM OF LONELINESS IN WALLACE’S *INFINITE JEST*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

Michael Gieger

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2024

Contents

"Into the Womb of Solipsism": The Spectrum of Loneliness in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

David Foster Wallace once said to interviewer David Lipsky regarding the astonishing length of his novel, *Infinite Jest*, that "I wanted to do something with a whole lot of different characters that had kind of queer, broad, slow movements. I didn't set a goal of a thousand pages […] I wanted something that had kind of the texture of what mental life was like in America right now. Which meant, sort of an enormous tsunami of stuff coming at you" (Lipsky 270). Lipsky's direction of inquiry, specifically his preoccupation with Wallace's creative decision to make *Infinite Jest* over a thousand pages, is quite reflective of the general public discourse and initial academic criticism which engulfed *Infinite Jest* following the novel's 1996 publication (Lipsky 270). Frustrated readers attributed the hulking volume's size to Wallace's indulgence in a turgid linguistic style and his deployment of superfluous endnotes. Many of these sentiments have held true among *Jest* readership still today, years after Wallace's death. Despite their reverence for the piece, prominent scholars of Wallace's work including Frank Cioffi classify *Infinite Jest* as a "pleasurable novel to read—full of narrative action, excitement, local delights—and at the same time a trying, annoying, difficult novel that is constantly interrupting itself, breaking comfortable routines it has set up, and, in many cases, syntactically reinventing the English language" (Cioffi 162). Readers like Cioffi maintain that the length of Wallace's novel is necessitated by its preoccupation with compelling and emotionally painful observations on human loneliness. The novel's desire to explore these melancholic themes across a wide spectrum of characters, is dually imbued by a persistent authorial urge to entertain and stun the reader with dense absurdly comedic language. Wallace's work and its massive breadth might be considered a result of these ambitious creative decisions.

The broad reception of *Infinite Jest* and its physical enormity was, at the time, divisive enough to arrest the attention of both the literary community and media landscape. In a 1997 television interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace, bemused by the public's fixation on his novel's length, jested (although perhaps stereotypically) on the feminist notion that white males who endeavor to write long works of fiction are in some way seeking to "impose [their] phallus on the consciousness of the world" and that if he was following suit in this tradition, "it was going on at a level of awareness that [he] would not want to have access to." Despite Wallace shrugging off pleas from academia and popular media to provide an explanation for his novel's immense size, the question remains: why is *Infinite Jest* so long? A fairly simple, if not disheartening answer to this question is reiterated by the novel's author throughout several recorded interviews.

In *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself,* Wallace captures in concise phrasing the essence of *Jest*'s thematic purpose by telling Lipsky he "think[s] it's a fairly nerdy book, about loneliness" (Lipsky 273). For Wallace, *Jest*'s core literary functions—namely its cyclical structure, dystopian future setting, and thematic emphasis on addictive behavior—culminate in a simulative effect whereby the reader is mainlined with the solipsistic dread of the novel's characters. Although reading is itself an inherently isolating activity, *Infinite Jest* implores its readership to live vicariously through the sadness of its characters. The physical space contained within his 1,079-page novel which allows for a simulated sense of loneliness to grip Wallace's readers. Not unlike James Incandenza's lethal film of the same title, the compelling prose of *Infinite Jest* grips its readers to the point of dependency. Regardless of the horror, violence, or profound sadness of a given scene, Wallace's ideal reader (which included a

wide array of readers considering the novel's status as a best seller) is hypnotically entertained by the words on the page.[1]

As the reader progresses through *Infinite Jest,* the wonder of Wallace's unique language becomes a principal source of the novel's entertainment value. Capitalizing on his vast lexicon and stylistic phrasing, Wallace structures his epic novel so that readers get their fix of the book's entertainment only by bearing witness to the "death in life" of its innumerable lonely characters. Wallace infuses *Jest* with a "mixture of slang and literary language, of sense-imagery and figures of speech, of the trite and poetic, [which] gives his work an energy, an incandescent sparkle, that entertains and delights" its readership (Cioffi 167). According to Cioffi, Wallace's language succeeds in making "the novel a kind of addiction," for its readers by "modify[ing] ordinary reading behavior" in a manner emulative of its addicted characters (Cioffi 170). This narrative approach results in "a work that is extraordinarily disturbing," and which evokes "that feeling of being 'stitched in' to a narrative" (Cioffi 170, 168). The book's ambitious dedication to total reader immersion notwithstanding, *Infinite Jest*'s exorbitant length seems a byproduct of Wallace's desire to achieve a "stitched in" narrative effect. The novel's length allows enough narrative space for the reader to realize this effect taking place. Wallace's absorbing language makes the lonely desperation and brutal violence littering the pages of *Infinite Jest* quite enjoyable to read. Therefore, the average *Infinite Jest* reader according to Cioffi, is one who endures the innumerable difficulties of the text to extract further enjoyment from the author's inimitable linguistic style and comedic voice.

[1] In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace identifies the audience he generally writes for, claiming they are "more or less like me, in their twenties and thirties, maybe, with enough experience or good education […] who've been raised with U.S. commercial culture and are engaged with it and informed by it and fascinated with it but still hungry for something commercial art can't provide" (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace* 22).

The sprawling breadth of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative interlinks the lives of untold characters in such a way that its pages and physical space seem to contain or collectively comprise a life in itself—a life Wallace invites his readers to enter and subsequently exit from 1,079 pages later, feeling simultaneously overstimulated and unfulfilled. Culminating in an ambiguous fashion indicative of the book's own cyclical structure, the ending of *Infinite Jest* leaves most readers puzzled. After dedicating a great deal of time "stitched" into the novel, at its conclusion, many readers feel inclined to tear back to the beginning in search of closure that they cannot access. Wallace's hypnotic language and cadence significantly augment *Infinite Jest*'s "stitched in" effect and lend the novel a higher level of re-readability. In fact, the novel's re-readability exacerbates Wallace's linguistic simulation of loneliness, subjecting the reader to further isolation through the act of reading.

James Dorson concurs with Cioffi, agreeing that Wallace's narrative voice is vital to the "stitched in" nature of the text. Dorson claims that, "[l]ike J.D. Salinger's ingenuous narrative voice, Wallace's voice often employs a highly informal tone that brings about a degree of intimacy with the reader that a more formal prose style could not do" (Dorson 70). The intimate idiomatic tone consistently set by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* becomes its reader's ultimate comfort even as they weather the novel's most dense sections. For Paul M. Curtis, even in the portions of the novel that are oversaturated with detail, "*Infinite Jest'*s prose is addictive, due, no doubt, to the thrilling excess of the aesthetic freedom it invokes in the reader" (Curtis 49). Wallace's prose certainly has an effect on his audience's reading behavior, providing readers freedom to occasionally step back from the plot and admire the author's syntactical achievement. Cioffi, Curtis, and Dorson's respective readers, addicted to Wallace's word soup, might find themselves "stitched" into the work over and over again, riding the closed circuit of the novel's plot,

combing the pages for hints to lingering questions the author may have intentionally left unanswered.

In this paper I propose that the length and complexity of Wallace's novel serve together as a mimetic tool—one which, for dedicated readers, simulates the sensation of experiencing the loneliness of its characters. In congress with Cioffi's reading of *Infinite Jest* as a novel mimetic of the solipsistic experience, I intend to further explore the specific varieties of loneliness evident in Wallace's work. By analyzing two divergent anhedonic Wallacean figures, Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz, through their respective Sisyphean toils against isolation, I will argue that the boundless density of *Infinite Jest* is a purposeful function of a novel whose author sought to mimic the perpetual cycle of human loneliness. Wallace makes the unique choice to analyze this grim cycle as it would emerge across an enormous spectrum of solipsists residing in a dystopic and hyper-consumerist future United States.

The culture of loneliness in *Infinite Jest* is eerily similar to the present day where disruptive world events and dependencies on entertainment technology have guided Americans further into isolation, deeper into "the womb of solipsism" (Wallace 839). A scale of loneliness and social disconnection containing infinite variations of isolated individuals exists both within and beyond the pages of *Infinite Jest*. In 2023, the *Surgeon General's Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* claimed that "[T]oo often, indicators of social connection or social disconnection are considered in dichotomous ways (e.g., someone is lonely or they're not), but the evidence points more to a gradient. Everyone falls somewhere on the continuum of social connection" (*Our Epidemic* 12). This is precisely the gradient of social disconnection, the continuum of loneliness, which I contend Wallace had sought to capture in his novel. After considering Wallace's fractal thematic emphasis on solipsism and his affinity for page-long

sentences, explanations for the daunting length of *Infinite Jest* become more apparent for exasperated readers.

The particularly sad and solipsistic variety of loneliness experienced by Hal Incandenza, members of his own family, and ancillary characters like Bruce Green and Kate Gompert, emerges in the text as a fundamental Wallacean theme. Several of these characters are tormented by an inability to find substance in their interior and exterior worlds. Kate Gompert describes this sort of "anhedonic state as a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" (Wallace 693). The reader becomes acquainted with these same anhedonic feelings as they billow within protagonist Hal Incandenza over the course of the book. True to Wallace's intricately envisioned spectrum of lonesomeness, Hal inhabits a niche locus on this gradient. Despite being highly intelligent, athletically gifted, and having several meaningful companionships (with his tennis mates and two older brothers) all while hailing from a financially stable background, Hal still grapples with depressive and addictive tendencies. Hal's inescapable melancholy coupled with his boundless talent in the realms of academia and sport allow his character to become a reflection of the novel's author.

Similar to Hal, in his youth David Foster Wallace was a "regionally ranked junior tennis player" [2] who also "did a lot of [drugs] in [his] teenage years" (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace* 79). Hal might therefore be read as Wallace's vessel for inserting more of himself into the narrative. The comedic veneer that shrouds Hal's underlying sadness is an example of Wallace's self-perception bleeding into the text. Wallace, known for writing with "not quite black humor, but […] a kind of creepy humor" uses comedic relief as a front before diving into deeper and more painful underlying thematic elements (Lipsky 272). Hal and his colorful E.T.A.

[2] From *Infinite Jest* "About the Author" section.

teammates are primary sources for *Jest*'s absurdity and wit—i.e. drug-dealing-math-wiz Michael Pemulis, aspiring-sports-commentator Jim Troeltsch, and blindfolded-Pakistani-exchange-student Idris Arslanian. Wallace has maintained that before *Infinite Jest*, he had written "some funny stuff and some heavy, intellectual stuff, but [he'd] never done anything sad" (*Conversations* 58-9). *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's stab at a "sad" novel often reads like the mind of a secretly depressed person who uses humor as a crutch.

According to the narrator of the novel, "Classic unipolars [are] usually tormented by the conviction that no one else [can] hear or understand them when they tried to communicate. Hence jokes, sarcasm, the psychopathology of unconscious arm-rubbing" (Wallace 75). David Foster Wallace whose suicide looms over a catalogue of work rife with biting sarcasm and outrageous comedy, was clearly guilty of the same comedic unipolar coping mechanism. For example, during a 2003 interview with German television station, ZDF, regarding his "wickedly comic" epic novel, Wallace revealed he had "set out to write a sad book. And when people liked it and told me that [what] they liked about it was that it was so funny, was just very surprising."[3] Wallace believed his true intention for *Infinite Jest* was to express a general sadness and to investigate themes of loneliness through the filter of a characteristic narrative voice. Miscommunication in intent between Wallace and his audience therefore occurs when readers allow the entertainment value of *Jest*'s captivating narrative tone to eclipse the importance of its solipsistic meditation. Similar then to Hal whose late father "had this delusion of silence when [Hal] spoke," Wallace also believed, despite his affinity for prolixity, that he was frequently unheard or misunderstood by others, especially in regard to his literary intentions (Wallace 899).

[3] *Infinite Jest* cover endorsement from Greg Burkman, *Seattle Times.*

Although critics like Andrew Bennett have maintained that "[b]eing alone, loneliness, solitude, and its attendant solipsistic dangers are major themes in David Foster Wallace's novels and short stories," it can be easy for casual *Jest* readership to become preoccupied with Wallace's humor and overlook the fact that his "narratives typically explore what Don DeLillo calls a 'spiraling sense of isolation'" (Bennett 69). This focal disconnect between reader and author only adds to the solipsism of *Infinite Jest*. Even after hundreds of pages and endnotes, in Wallace's mind he still could not fully express the extent of his or his novel's sadness to the public. The word-saturated pages of *Infinite Jest*, which have drawn "many comparisons to computer hypertext," mimic the verbal divide in Hal's relationship with his father (*Conversations* 78). Before his suicide, Hal's father convinced became convinced that whenever Hal spoke, "he believed [Hal] was not speaking" (Wallace 899). The extreme verbosity of *Infinite Jest* is on the part of Wallace a reflection of how Hal is perceived as voiceless to his father. Wallace's novel since its publication has garnered public infamy as containing one of literature's most incomprehensible styles of prose. Consequently, the public plays the role of J.O. Incandenza— someone who believes nothing has been said, when in fact, multitudes have been fervently expressed but to deaf ears. For many readers, Wallace's melancholic thematic purpose becomes lost in the sea of his own comedic verbosity, just as Hal's true voice is lost on J.O. Incandenza. This relationship between author and audience bolsters the notion that *Jest*'s author can be viewed as another sad reflection of the book's protagonist.

In mimicry of the author's own struggle against anhedonia, Hal relies heavily on humor to shroud his own emptiness. Hal making an athletic event of "clipping his nails into a wastebasket that sat several meters away" while on the phone his eldest brother Orin is an early example in the novel of Hal's comedic façade. As Orin questions Hal about the day of their

father's suicide, Hal keeps score of how many clippings he makes into the basket, "shooting seventy-plus percent" overall at the beginning of their conversation (Wallace 242). When Orin asks, "who it was who found" their father with his head exploded in the kitchen microwave, Hal replies with an odd tone of dry wit that he was "[f]ound by one Harold James Incandenza, thirteen going on really old" (Wallace 248). These remarks and others from Hal align perfectly with the novel's own examples of anhedonic tendencies. Hal's word play and sarcasm can seem out of place in situations where it is clear he is uncomfortable, further revealing to the reader the extent of his sadness.

Lying dormant beneath every witty allusion, detailed characterization, and meticulously envisioned scene in *Infinite Jest* is a profound sense of eternal loneliness. Set in a dystopic future United States whose government and populace have submitted to their most unsavory and slothful qualities, *Infinite Jest* depicts a society at the peak of its technological and socio-communicative dependency. Wallace's futuristic self-isolating Americans are ravaged by drug addiction or confined to the ceaseless droll of structured institutional routines. Preferring quick solutions to enormous issues, Wallace's American politicians absurdly relinquish swaths of polluted New England territory to Canadian control and allow corporations to subsidize the name of each calendar year in the new millennium. The future decline of the United States envisioned by *Infinite Jest* is brought on by the public's own apathy and their eagerness to trade autonomy for instant self-gratification. This psychological tendency in Wallace's hands breeds further loneliness and is enabled by a dependency for escapist entertainment technology.

The various functions of the teleputer (Wallace's vision of a futuristic home entertainment system) echo in chilling aesthetic fashion the glowing, wall-mounted, advertisement-laden-streaming-service technologies of the 2020s, which serve as social media

platforms, video-chat services, Smart TVs, all rolled into one. The subsidized era's psychological addiction to technology cannot be overlooked when discussing the ubiquitous theme of loneliness in *Infinite Jest*. Physical objects like the teleputer and its congress with J.O. Incandenza's mind-melting "Entertainment" cartridge become malevolent representations of humanity's technological dependence in the novel. The simulated-serotonin-inducing allure of such escapist technologies fades when readers confront scenes where the lives of characters are absorbed into the empty glow of the teleputer's white light. Wallace considers modern loneliness and its direct correlation to TV overconsumption in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.":

> If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and if it's true that lonely people find in television's 2D images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans, then it's also obvious that the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans solipsistic, lonely. (Wallace 163)

Isolated among hordes of other isolated people, all experiencing a sense of collective solipsism induced by an addiction to virtual escapism, *Infinite Jest*'s characters often find emotional communication and gratification both completely unattainable. The overall solipsistic dread which haunts the book's essential characters is compounded by the isolating effects of technology. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace becomes highly interested in exploring isolated moments of character inaction and motionless, setting several such scenes with characters slumped and vegetating in front of the teleputer.

One such scene occurs in the wake of a disastrous campus event, when Hal is suddenly forced to "Abandon all Hope" and abstain from marijuana due to an impending urine-screening. His mother's position as Headmaster at E.T.A., would allow Hal, unlike Michael Pemulis, to be spared expulsion in the event of a dirty urine test. According to Hal however, his true concern is that a failed urine test would besmirch the name of the tennis academy and therefore the name of Hal's father, the academy founder (Wallace 784). Hal turns to sobriety not to save himself, but the honor of his late father's memory. After 850 pages of nightly Pump-Room one-hitters, the novel's narration suddenly adopts Hal's first-person perspective. In sobriety, Hal's character assumes the personal "I," suggesting that his current predicament made it seem as if "I was in a zoo. There were no animals or cages, but it was still a zoo" (Wallace 851). As an early-morning blizzard rattles the windows of E.T.A.'s sub-dormitories, Hal is overcome by anxiety and depression and lies down horizontally "on the carpet of Viewing Room 5, still on the second floor, fighting the sense that I'd either never been here before or had spent lifetimes just here" (Wallace 897). From his position of horizontal paralysis, Hal views one of his father's films, *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space with Mind-Boggling Efficiency,* while Michael Pemulis attempts unsuccessfully to have "some really important interfacing" with Hal (Wallace 907). Hal's variety of solipsism stems from a tendency towards "Marijuana Thinking," a pattern of thought often (but not always) experienced by Wallace's characters while under the influence of marijuana. According to the novel, this occurs when someone "thinks themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning" (Wallace 1048n269). Hal's motionlessness while lying on the floor of the viewing room is then not truly brought on by physical lethargy or stress, but by the inescapable maze of thought his mind occasionally

imprisons him in. Alone with his thoughts, looking up at the ceiling, Hal explains that "There seemed to be so many implications even to thinking about sitting up and standing up and exiting V.R. 5 and taking a certain variable-according-to-stride-length number of steps to the stairwell door, on and on, that just the thought of getting up made me glad I was lying on the floor" (Wallace 900). The prison of thought Hal finds himself in at the end of the novel raises the question of whether the "zoo" he's trapped in refers to the exterior world or the one inside his skull. However, much like the novel's unresolved Joelle van Dyne-facial-deformity question, it is perhaps most likely that Wallace wants his reader to see the lack of difference from the afflicted person's perspective. For Wallace, it does not matter if Hal is actually alone in the world or if he creates his own isolation. The net result either way is inescapable loneliness.

Hal Incandenza's perpetual inner crisis seems brought on by an anhedonic inability to experience pleasure or satisfaction. Especially after witnessing the gruesome aftermath of his father's suicide, Hal claims to have not "had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny," but nonetheless manages to "satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being" (Wallace 694). Hal's father was one of the few figures in the novel who attempted to address or solve his son's struggle to overcome plaguing solipsistic thoughts, even if his methods were unsound. Afterall, according to Incandenza's ghostlike wraith who haunts a delirious hospital-ridden Don Gately, it was Hal who inspired the hypnotic effect of Incandenza's deadly *IJ* film.[4] The senior Incandenza, coming to the rueful realization that he had mimicked the failures of his own father by ostracizing his brightest son, sought a cinematic remedy to Hal's mounting emotional decay. By producing a film like *IJ,* Incandenza believed he

[4] For the purpose of clarity, this essay will refer to Wallace's novel as *Infinite Jest* and the character J.O. Incandenza's lethal film which shares the novel's title, as *IJ.*

could "[m]ake something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him 'out of himself,' as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY VERY SORRY and have it *heard*" (Wallace 839). This of course was not a viable solution to his son's emotional distress. Additionally, the film, which ironically was designed to be Hal's lifeline out of a sea of loneliness, becomes one of the most dangerous objects on the planet. Those in possession of Incandenza's film have the power to capture and destroy the minds of anyone within ocular range of a teleputer screen. Certain Canadian terrorist organizations in the novel understand the devastating power of such a weapon—especially if unleashed on the TP screens of America's "Joe Briefcase" solipsistic-type couch potatoes.[5] The narcotizing qualities of entertainment are too familiar for characters like Hal, who spends hours soaking in lamentation rewatching cartridges of J.O. Incandenza's work to remember his father since his suicide.

Coming to terms with living a life burdened by unipolar depression becomes the central conflict of Hal's young adult life. He consistently struggles with the notion that very few, if any people, can actually hear or understand the words that leave his mouth. This frustration in his inability to be heard, especially by those who love him, contributes to the self-medication with marijuana he has to quit later in the book. Hal acknowledges that being high does not fulfill his want for feeling. The ritualistic act of getting high "and obsession with having nobody […] know he's high" provides him a vague sense of worth (Wallace 54). Wallace emphasizes this thought

[5] Dissatisfied with their government's incorporation of polluted New England land, a variety of Canadian terrorist organizations in the novel are formed in protest to the unfavorable rearrangement of U.S.-Canadian boarders.

pattern in Hal's marijuana abuse from the instant the reader is clued in on the protagonist's secret addiction:

> Here's Hal Incandenza, age seventeen, with his little brass one-hitter, getting covertly high in the Enfield Tennis Academy's underground Pump Room and exhaling palely into an industrial exhaust fan. It's the sad little interval after afternoon matches and conditioning but before the Academy's communal supper. Hal is by himself down here and nobody knows where he is or what he's doing. Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high. (Wallace 49)

That Hal's favorite activity involves fleeing the presence of others only informs his fear of slipping further into the grasp of an isolated world. Wallace uses the cycle and procedure of Hal's marijuana consumption to provide a context later in the book for just how hollow and performative Hal has allowed his life to become.

True to *Jest's* inclination for all things circular, marijuana dependency becomes for Hal both the solution to and the cause of his inescapable anhedonia. Hal's usage reaches such a stage by The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, that marijuana consumption becomes requisite to the navigation of his social and athletic performances. As a top-ranking player in Boy's 18's tennis at Boston's prestigious Enfield Tennis Academy, a facility founded by his late father and operated by his mother Avril Incandenza, Hal uses cannabis as a performance enhancing drug and as a relaxing incentive to keep trudging through his dissatisfied life. Hal's reliance on "Bob Hope" (marijuana's Bostonian street name in *Infinite Jest*) is designed to combat his depression and dull the rigor of exhausting, near-professional athletic training. Although marijuana abuse is generally shrugged off by harder ex-addicts like Don Gately who used to treat weed "like tobacco," from cannabinoid addict Ken Erdedy's experience, it is "the obsessive analyzing,

finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implications of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch," which makes having an issue with "Bob Hope" a living nightmare for certain users (Wallace 503). Hal's propensity for indecisiveness and "analysis-paralysis" is an indication of his addictive behavior. Combined with his general psychological decline, the side effects of Hal's dependency contribute significantly to his downfall, particularly as previously covered in the book's second half when Hal's streak of usage is interrupted by a looming urine test.

In the novel's final scene, a group of assailants inject Gene Fackelmann, a drug addicted former criminal associate of co-protagonist Don Gately, with an anti-narcotic serum that counteracts the effects of his opiate high "so he'd feel the needle as they sewed his eyes open" (Wallace 980). Casey uses this scene to contextualize Hal's forced cannabinoid withdrawal, likening his excruciating stint in sobriety to wide-awake torture. Henry explores Hal's doomed relationship with marijuana, claiming that "Hal becomes painfully aware of his problems (namely, how or whether to continue to abstain from marijuana, the withdrawal from which may potentially compromise his performance at the career-defining WhataBurger tournament), as if he, like [Gene] Fackelmann, had been injected with the 'anti-narc'" (Henry 494). The reader watches Hal come to the realization that his cycle of marijuana abuse has taken an annular form[6]—helping Hal dull the pain of his anhedonia, while simultaneously deepening his fall into the solipsistic existence he seeks release from. Hal's affinity for concealing ugliness and vice in his character from others (i.e., his drug habit and growing emotional vacancy) develops into the ultimate motive for his continued dependency. For Hal, "the amount of organization and toiletry-

[6] A chemistry term adopted by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* to demonstrate "a type of fusion that can produce waste that's fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion" (Wallace 572). By transference, Hal's marijuana abuse is a byproduct of his depression, which ironically is also the fuel for his abuse.

lugging he has to do to get secretly high in front of a subterranean outtake vent […] would make a lesser man quail" (Wallace 54). In this way, the ritual of secrecy resulting from Hal's shame about his usage perpetuates a habit Hal finds "hard to say for sure whether [it] is exceptionally bad, this tendency" to get high alone without being able to quit or feel unashamed about his usage (Wallace 54).

Hal's goal of maintaining utter secrecy vis-à-vis his nightly Pump Room rendezvous ultimately proves unsuccessful. It is clear several of Hal's closer friends at E.T.A. are aware of his affinity for "Bob Hope"—Michael Pemulis (who is Hal's supplier), Trevor Axford, Jim Troeltsch, and Ted Schacht for instance. A few of these friends, however, foresee an implosion heading Hal's way involving his weakness for marijuana and its relationship to his on-court performance. According to the Crohn's afflicted Teddy Schacht, "deep down [he] believes that the substance-compulsion's strange apparent contribution to Hal's erumpent explosion up the rankings has got to be a temporary thing, that there's like a psychic credit-card bill for Hal in the mail, somewhere, coming, and is sad for him in advance about whatever's surely got to give, eventually" (Wallace 270). Schacht's premonition of Hal's reckoning comes true in the wake of the Interdependence Day Eschaton debacle. During a rare holiday day-off at E.T.A and while taking in a "homemade academy game called Eschaton" from the sideline of a tennis court, "Hal finds himself taking the proffered duBois and smoking dope in public without even thinking about it or having consciously decided to go ahead" (Wallace 322, 332). This incident shows that Hal's relationship with marijuana is clearly one he no longer has control of. As the narrative of *Infinite Jest* progresses, the loneliness plaguing Hal's psyche is increasingly amplified so that his habit usurps the importance of his own self-worth. This trend is consistent with most of the depressed or addicted characters in the novel. Most characters in *Infinite Jest* curse their

addictions and are aware of how thoroughly their pursuits for relief have destroyed their lives. Conversely, to balance out the repentant lonely figures on his spectrum of loneliness, Wallace also infuses *Infinite Jest* with the voices of characters who have utterly disappeared within their addictions and self-delusions. These characters are unable to recognize their own state of solipsism.

Although Hal and other characters like Kate Gompert and Joelle van Dyne are mortified by the solipsistic devolution of their lives, Wallace also focuses his expansive narrative on characters content with embracing "the womb of solipsism." These characters too, are usually addicts in some fashion, but are unapologetic about their usage—unashamed, jaded, and angry at the exterior world for impeding their ability to satisfy their addictive pursuits. Ennet House resident and cat-bagging-dog-murdering-coke-fiend Randy Lenz, is perhaps the greatest example of such a Wallacean archetype in *Infinite Jest*. Although it is common for rehab patients and half-way house residents to have absolutely no intention of staying clean, Lenz's determination to stay high and to disobey authority is strong enough to suggest that his frustration and rage is directed somewhere far beyond the lowly influence of Don Gately, Ennet House staff, or even the police or government. Lenz's solipsistic rage against the realm external to his own poisoned mind derives from a psychotic need to embody the antithesis of banal modern American life. Lenz is arguably the darkest case of loneliness cited by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* largely because he is powerless to perceive the depths of his own mental isolation and unable to realize how brazenly checked-out from society others understand him to be. Clearly suffering from mental illness or psychosis, Lenz convinces himself without a smidgen of self-reflection to pity every "poor son of an urban bitch [he's] on the same street with" (Wallace 718). He pities the

"common man," and laughs at their drone-like obedience to authority, their enthusiasm to assimilate with the crowd.

Although his deranged self-perception prohibits him from recognizing his own loneliness, Randy Lenz surely inhabits a point of extremity on the spectrum of solipsists examined in *Infinite Jest.* Wallace pours his readers into the empty "husks" and sad lives of several characters, but none so self-destructive and sadistic as Lenz. According to Henry, Wallace's work is often "marked by a certain precociousness and projected good will, a willingness to co-opt darker and more spiritually nihilistic states in order to find absent character interiority" (Henry 485). Lenz therefore becomes a portal for Wallace's audience into the manic depths of American loneliness. He is a glimpse at just how bad it can get. Wallace's narrative emphasis on Lenz, a byproduct the author's meticulous cataloguing of loneliness and his artistic vision "not to have a single main character," therefore contributes significantly to *Infinite Jest's* imposing length (*Conversations* 58-9). When the narrative spotlights characters like Hal Incandenza, Joelle van Dyne, or Don Gately, Wallace investigates depression and anhedonia as it would exist under more ordinary conditions. The opposite is true for Randy Lenz. Equally crucial to the completion of *Infinite Jest's* solipsistic mosaic, Lenz embodies American loneliness at its polar limits—an existence guided exclusively by vice and violent compulsion.

Lenz differs again from Hal's solipsistic model in that his shame does not compel him to commit crime and take substances in isolated secrecy. As revealed by the narrator, Lenz had "gotten high on organic cocaine two or three, maybe half a dozen times tops, secretly, since he came into Ennet House in the summer, just enough times to keep him from going totally out of his fucking mind" (Wallace 543). Similar to Hal and his Pump-Room one-hitters, Lenz also requires secrecy to imbibe. Distinct however from Hal who is deeply ashamed by his urges, Lenz

is unapologetic in his drug usage. Lenz produces a clear reason for his cocaine usage: to keep "from going totally out of his fucking mind." Hal, however, cannot provide a legitimate explanation for his private abuse, claiming he "has no idea why this is, or whence, this obsession with the secrecy" of his marijuana usage (Wallace 49). Lenz eventually convinces himself of the preposterous notion —in the interest of keeping "him from going totally out of his fucking mind"—that he "will use cocaine in the very interests of sobriety and growth itself" (Wallace 555). The following excerpt explains the rationale behind Randy Lenz's rather untraditional method of self-rehabilitation:

> cocaine-ingestion this occasional and last-resort is such a marked reduction of Use & Abuse for Lenz that it's a bonerfied[7] miracle and clearly constitutes as much miraculous sobriety as total abstinence would be for another person without Lenz's unique sensitivities and psychological makeup and fucking intolerable daily stresses and difficulty unwinding, and he accepts his monthly chips with a clear conscience and a head unmuddled by doubting: he knows he's sober. (Wallace 543)

Lenz's adamance about his "unique sensitivities and psychological makeup," permits him to rationalize the absurd and paradoxical act of getting high in order to stay sober. Glaring delusions like this clue the reader in on the extent of Lenz's loneliness—a blabbering-street-walking aloneness he is powerless himself to recognize. Lenz's delusions go unchecked and run rampant because his nihilistic state of solipsism prohibits letting anyone close enough to challenge the insane ideas he finds comfort in.

The secrecy of Lenz's cocaine use is a function of an outrageous self-image which he endeavors preserve: the slick mysterious type; someone not to be messed with and totally in

---

[7] *Sic.*

control of their own destiny. Since his arrival at Ennet House after stealing cocaine from "what Lenz didn't know was supposed to have been a D.E.A. sting operation in the South End," Lenz has pretended to be in the process of recovery (Wallace 276). But for adept ex-cons like staffer Don Gately, it becomes "obvious that Lenz is [at the facility] mostly to hide out" from the law and vengeful dealers (Wallace 276). The resulting success of Lenz's slippery maneuvers in Boston's drug underworld floods his psyche with a massive dose of hubris. With no intention of getting sober like the other "suckers" at Ennet House and having been convinced of his invincibility to consequence, a partial reason for Lenz's secret cocaine ingestion is simply because the ingestion of any chemical substance is forbidden while residing at the half-way house. Furthermore, as simply someone "hiding out" at Ennet House under the guise of being a patient, Lenz feels absolutely no obligation to comply with the rules of sobriety as long as he can keep staying there.

Lenz's cocaine use while at Ennet House, unlike his proclivity for suffocating cats and blood-letting canines, follows no set routine; nor is the usage confined to a fixed location. Readers might note that Hal's addictive rituals are performed out of sight and underground in the rarely visited E.T.A. Pump Room, while Lenz rips lines in rather stereotypical seclusion "through a rolled dollar bill off the back of the john in the men's can" (Wallace 545). Although the secrecy of Lenz's usage remains paramount throughout his narrative arch, the poor concealment of his imbibement may indicate a subconscious desire to be caught. To the careful reader, Lenz's careless methods of vice concealment reveal a deeper desire: to be given the go ahead by an exterior force to fall blissfully and alone into the bottomless addictive trench he's dug for himself. Giving in to his every compulsion becomes Lenz's ideal form of rehabilitation.

Randy Lenz, unabashed in his strangeness, allows others to think what they will about his impulses and bizarre conduct. At Ennet House, he builds a reputation around his peculiarities which "include the need to be north, a fear of disks, a tendency to constantly take his own pulse, a fear of all forms of timepieces, and a need to always know the time with great precision" (Wallace 279). For some time, Lenz is able to hide his substance abuse and propensity for violence in plain sight, letting his eccentricities run wild in public settings. His "panoply of strange compulsive habits" and repute as "that creepy Randy guy" around Ennet House reaches such an extent "that a request for SteelSaks barely raises a brow on anybody" (Wallace 533, 542).[8] The want for secrecy in the act of consumption or fulfillment actually unites otherwise dissimilar characters like Hal and Lenz along the spectrum of lonely addicts in *Infinite Jest*. Again however, what distinguishes Lenz in his want for seclusion is that this urge is not rooted in shame. Instead, Lenz expresses a genuine desire to be away from others, especially while completing a compulsive act—cocaine ingestion, the killing of animals. Lenz flies solo in his nightly pet-killing-sprees not because he is ashamed, but because he knows that if anyone discovered his horrifying vice, their immediate reaction would be to force him to quit his behavior. Hal feels empty and is compelled to convince others he is real; Lenz sees himself the only sane man in a world of robots and air-heads.

Lenz spits on authority and shoves aside addicts and recoverees. Repulsed by the emptiness he finds in everyone around him, Lenz jumps at any opportunity to self-isolate. But, certain entities who inhabit his exterior world make it difficult for Lenz to achieve his precious seclusion. Few characters are as antithetical to Lenz's dream of deranged escapism than Geoffrey Day. An Ennet House bunk mate and intellectual nemesis of Lenz, Day becomes the rambling

[8] SteelSaks are the extra strength garbage bags Lenz has fellow residents procure for him on cigarette runs to a local grocer. Lenz uses the bags to asphyxiate stray cats for his personal pleasure.

embodiment of every moral and social precedent Lenz reels from. According to a narrator who adopts the free indirect speech of Don Gately, "Geoffrey (not Geoff, Geoffrey) Day" was a "red-wine-and-Quaalude man […] Who taught something horseshit-sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college up the Expressway in Medford" (Wallace 272). Although both share a mutual aversion to "the system of clichés" and banal platitudes adopted by rehabilitation communities like Alcoholics Anonymous, Day and Lenz differ significantly concerning class and intellect. The narrator explains, for instance, that "Randy Lenz has issues with Geoffrey Day because Day is glib and a teacher at a Scholarly Journal's helm. This threatens the self-concept of a Randy Lenz that thinks of himself as a kind of hiply sexy artist-intellectual [...] For occupation on his Intake form Lenz had put *free lance script writer*" (Wallace 279). Randy Lenz is a character whose solipsism is perpetuated by the promotion of an unrealistic "self-concept." He loathes Geoffrey Day because Day's presence at Ennet House is a threat to the false reality Lenz projects for himself.

Although Geoffrey Day is pretentious and largely disliked among Ennet House residents, Lenz understands that Day, the antithesis of a "hiply sexy artist-intellectual," possesses the sort of scholastically gained knowledge capable of undermining the academic-of-the-streets-type persona Lenz had sought to cultivate. The incompatibility of Day's personality with Lenz's reaches as far down as their respective preferences in chemical relief—Day preferring depressants like red wine and Quaaludes over Lenz's cocaine-based stimulants. Wallace positions Day as Lenz's cerebral foil to demonstrate the psychological machinations behind Lenz's self-imposed dive into violent isolation.[9] His interactions with certain characters,

[9] Wallace manifests Day and Lenz's antipodal relationship immediately in *Infinite Jest*. Lenz's first appearance in the novel is an offhanded aside in response to a blabbering Geoffrey Day: "Day is not done talking [...] Randy Lenz says, 'I ain't got time for this shit'" (Wallace 271).

specifically with Day, are a way for Wallace to reveal the delusion in Lenz's egocentric notion that he occupies a state of metaphysical solipsism.[10] Lenz maintains a sense of fabricated superiority that feeds his disturbed self-image and belief system. For instance, Lenz claims to have once regenerated a severed pointer-finger like a "lizard tail," an event which taught him to accept "that he was somehow not like the run of common men, and […] to accept his uniqueness and all that it entailed" (Wallace 557). Lenz acts as if his life force was deliberately bestowed for a divine purpose. For Lenz, fantasy and delusion replace shame as the root cause for the want for isolation typically found among the addicts in *Infinite Jest.*

Lenz achieves status as the sole coke-blasting captain of his own tooth-grinding universe by constructing his reality around an intricate web of lies. He is a man so utterly ravaged by addiction and consumed by obsessive compulsion that he is powerless to confront his ostracized existence, psychopathic thoughts, and delusions of grandeur. Lenz's false intellectual self-image is one of the many fabrications he has constructed to provide his solipsistic existence with meaning. Early in Lenz's introduction to the novel as a resident at Ennet House, the reader learns "he makes a show of what he reads. For the first week [at Ennet House] in July he'd held the books upside-down in the northeast corner of whatever room" (Wallace 279). This quote in particular highlights the falsity in Lenz's hallucinatory existence. While Lenz believes himself to be successfully projecting a persona of mysterious intelligence, everyone else can see he's holding the book upside down and not reading. However, it is while maintaining this charade of public reading that Lenz accidentally stumbles on a piece of literature whose significance inadvertently cuts to the core of his psychological distress.

[10] The variety of solipsism where one's mind comprises all the universe and nothing is said to exist externally to it. Ludwig Wittgenstein refined this philosophy in his "*Tractus Logico-Philosophicus* which Wallace regards as underlying the neoliberal worldview" (Steinhilber 104).

A book by philosopher and psychologist William James entitled *Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, becomes inseparable from Lenz's person after he accidentally reads a passage he finds personally significant. True to Wallace's knack for subtle character exposition, the book's symbolic nature and literal text help the reader contextualize Lenz's character as his narrative role in *Infinite Jest* expands. Besides the "gargantuan Large-Print" doubling as his "private emergency stash" of coke concealed "in a kind of rectangular bunker razor-bladed out of three hundred or so pages," *The Gifford Lectures* provides Lenz with perhaps his only genuine moment of clarity and self-reflection in the novel (Wallace 543). While "lying on Day's mattress with his shoes on and trying to fart into the mattress as much as possible," Lenz uncovers an illuminating passage from James' book (Wallace 546). At this point having already dipped his toes into the realm of nocturnal mammalian disembowelment, Lenz reads "some line in the book […] about the more basically Powerless an individual feels, the more the likelihood for the propensity for violent acting out—and Lenz found the observation to be sound" (Wallace 546). For the reader, *The Gifford Lectures* become Wallace's key to the depths of Lenz's psychology. The profundity Lenz extracts from the text supersedes his usual aversions to academic thought. Lenz holds the book sacred because it illuminates a basic motivation behind his violent actions. This revelation allows Lenz to paint himself a victim whose powerlessness, not unlike that of the drug addict or recoveree, is the sole reason for his neglect. Lenz finds comfort in the words of William James whose message he misconstrues thinking that because he feels powerless, his violence is now somehow scientifically justified. Nevertheless, he deems James' revelatory remark as simply a "sound observation" before resuming with a certain cold reptilian propulsion, his abuse of cocaine-based stimulants and household pets.

Alexander Moran reads *Infinite Jest* as a text "replete with attempts to numb or escape from psychic anguish, whether through opiates, tennis, entertainment or other means" (Moran 286). There is certainly a numbness to how the reader observes Lenz perceiving his world. Lenz's misguided meditation on James' work and his immediate instinctive return to depravity serve as examples of this numbness. Wallace may have intentionally desired this effect to be mimetic of the narcotizing effects of cocaine, Lenz's drug of choice. Some common side-effects of cocaine use include but are not limited to "compulsive tooth-grinding, megalomania, […] delusions of persecution and/or homicidal envy" (Wallace 1037n232). Wallace forces his readers under the skin of his characters, often the ones he knows readers will find the most disturbing. From heavy cocaine ingestion and kleptomania to the bloodletting of urban pets, Wallace's readers are forced to be present for every horrifying moment. Another excerpt from James' *The Gifford Lectures* provides relevant context to Lenz's violent compulsions, as stated in this endnote:

> 'that latent process of unconscious preparation often preceding a sudden awakening to the fact that the mischief is irretrievably done,' the line that actually snapped Lenz to what he was up to when he chanced to read it in [...] something called *Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, by William James [...] a volume that's come to mean a great deal to Lenz. (Wallace 1037n224)

Seeing his own mischief also become "irretrievably done," Lenz interprets this line as an invitation to lean further into his deranged nightly activities. Besides being written in compelling prose, the true intention of Wallace's inordinate focus on Lenz's violent hobby is to address a certain psychosis plaguing late 20th century America's collective unconscious. Henry believes "we are meant to elevate Lenz's trouble, both his addiction and seemingly sociopathic

compulsion to harm, to the angst of a more cosmically beleaguered 'sick soul'" (Henry 487). Just as Hal could represent the cosmically sad "empty soul" haunting modern America's youth, Lenz epitomizes a diminutive but dangerous potion of the America's dark subconscious. He is a warning for the contently addicted and cheerfully wanton.

Randy Lenz's blood-and-cat-hair-soaked nightly walks through the cold streets of metro-Boston become a reaction to his perceived helplessness and want for isolation. Although he appears perfectly capable of graduating from the demapping of dogs and cats to the murder of a larger hairless bipedal quarry, the following passage marks the highest surge of that diabolical craving in Lenz:

> Then once near Halloween in an alley behind Blanchard's Liquors off Allston's Union Square Lenz comes across a street drunk in a chewed-looking old topcoat in the deserted alley taking a public leak against the side of a dumpster, and Lenz envisualizes the old guy both cut and on fire and dancing jaggedly around hitting at himself while Lenz goes 'There,' but that's as close as Lenz comes to that kind of level of resolution. (Wallace 546)

Whether with drugs or acts of violence, Lenz's need to release certain impulses must be fulfilled. Henry claims "it is relevant to notice Lenz's craven compulsion, if not to consume drugs, then to feel 'resolution' through violence. His 'catharsis of resolving' is marked by his choice [...] to resolve himself by means of pain or sadism" (Henry 489). Henry touches an important caveat to Lenz's troubling behavior by mentioning his reverence for "choice" as it relates to his vile catharsis. The desire for choice is a pervasive theme throughout *Infinite Jest* and is understood by the book's Canadian terrorist cells as the most highly exploitative weakness in the American subconscious. Americans in the novel have the ability to choose from an infinite selection of

cerebral and bodily pleasures. Canadian terror groups like the A.F.R. are right, in Wallace's estimation, to assume many Americans will choose immediate pleasure in the face of certain death. Randy Lenz's choice to seek catharsis either through chemical relief or physical violence is evident of this flawed and uniquely American obsession with choice.

The United States' Office of Unspecified Services, *Infinite Jest*'s O.N.A.N.ite version of the C.I.A., is equally concerned with the pliability of the American collective unconscious. Working closely with confidential informants in various Canadian terrorist cells to uncover a master cartridge of Incandenza's deadly "Entertainment" before an epidemic of mental annihilation befalls the U.S.A., Unspecified Services agent Helen/Hugh Steeply acts as Wallace's vessel for clarifying these cavities in the U.S.'s greater subconscious. Steeply explains a key trend in American culture to his Québécois informant Rémy Marathe, an inclination which seems to perpetuate the creation of deranged solipsists like Randy Lenz. Steeply argues that "in our U.S. values system, anybody who derives an increase in pleasure from somebody else's pain is a deviant, a sadistic sicko, and is thereby excluded from the community of everybody's right to pursue their own best pleasure-to-pain ratio. Sickos deserve compassion and the best treatment feasible. But they're not part of the big picture'" (Wallace 424-5). According to Steeply then, persons such as Lenz who derive pleasure from inflicting pain are automatically ostracized by common Americans as "sickos" and "deviants." Lenz continues on his "sick" path to gratification because his abhorrent predilections have barred him by ordinary society from the pursuit of a normal pleasure-to-pain ratio.

Lenz's venomous contempt for others is best exemplified at the fever pitch of his own delusion following his expulsion from Ennet House. After robbing two small Chinese women of their shopping bags in the streets of South Boston, Lenz finds himself running through a back-

alley-hellscape of crack-smoking children and festering homelessness. Looking every bit as deranged and disheveled as the riff-raff around him, Lenz still "kept them in peripheral view," somehow mentally justifying his place above this street-urchin class of people (Wallace 729). Strolling briskly through the alley "carrying his bags, spine straight and extruding[11] dignified purpose," Lenz comes across "a sexless figure lying back against a maybe duffel bag or pack against a dumpster [...] its shoes two different shoes, its hair a clotted mass around its face, looking up over at Lenz going past in the faint start of light" (Wallace 729). Reacting with repugnance to the scene, Lenz, a man whose favorite pastime involves the ingestion of toxic chemicals and the murder of domestic pets, "whispered to himself 'Jesus what a lot of fucked-up ass-eating fucking *losers*'" (Wallace 729). To the reader, this excerpt confirms Lenz's unwavering content to exist in an empty universe. Lenz's lack of empathy and self-awareness distinguishes him from the other solipsists in *Infinite Jest*. That of all his characters, Wallace chooses to focus so keenly on Lenz's scattered thoughts and sadistic nightly walks, serves only to bolster the notion that *Infinite Jest* acts as a study in various forms of and responses to human loneliness. Wallace cultivates a wide range of characters upon which to demonstrate the symptoms of loneliness and how they vary between different people.

In 1996 during the publication process for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote "David Lynch Keeps His Head," a piece for *Premier* about David Lynch and the director's then new film, *Lost Highway*. Lynch had been a creative inspiration for Wallace, with whose filmic work Wallace was intimately acquainted. As Wallace argues what he believes defines the director's work as "Lynchian," readers familiar with Wallace's fiction may find themselves drawing parallels between Lynchian and Wallacean themes. For instance, Wallace claims "Lynch's characters are

[11] *Sic.*

essentially alone (Alone): they're alienated from pretty much everything except the particular obsessions they've developed to help ease their alienation (…or is their alienation in fact a consequence of their obsessions?)" (Wallace 190). This precise arrangement of words could also be used to describe consistencies among the characters in *Infinite Jest.* Although Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz never meet and occupy opposing points on Wallace's gradient of American loneliness, both are "essentially alone" except for the company of their respective dependencies "they've developed to" stave off the malignant thoughts corroding their solipsistic lives. It can also be argued that the loneliness of Wallace's characters derives from the same addictive behaviors they have developed to cope with emptiness of their lives. Like the unending circuit of the novel's plot, or the cyclic self-sustaining process of "annulation" in *Infinite Jest* "whose waste is fuel for the fusion," the loneliness in Wallacean characters, like those of Lynch's films, is fueled by obsessive behavior, which itself is also the cause of their aloneness. By transferring this cyclical creative tradition into *Infinite Jest*, Wallace creates a stunning portrait of the contemporary human condition and its overwhelming absurdity. The imposing size of the novel and its overwhelming scope is then itself symbolic of humanity's unsuccessful yet perpetual search for meaning in the current era. The impressive space provided by the novel's massive structure is further necessitated by Wallace's detailed exploration of the modern world's slide towards mass loneliness and isolation. Readers ambitious enough to inhabit the reality Wallace fashions from his own words, may find *Infinite Jest's* fractal plot configuration mimetic of the isolation experienced by the book's solipsistic characters. For Wallace then, the inability for his characters to achieve happiness in a world brimming with detail and multitude, wholly embodies the absurdity of life's perpetual joke.

Works Cited

Bennett, Andrew. "Inside David Foster Wallace's Head: Attention, Loneliness, Suicide, and the Other Side of Boredom." *Gesturing toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, pp. 69–83. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2014383199&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Conversations with David Foster Wallace, edited by Stephen J. Burn, University Press of Mississippi, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/montclair/detail.action?docID=881905.

Cioffi, Frank Louis. "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's '*Infinite Jest*.'" *Narrative*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2000, pp. 161–81. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107209. Accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Curtis, Paul M. "'Yo Man so What's Your Story': The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace's '*Infinite Jest.*'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 37–52. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030596. Accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Dorson, James. "How (Not) to Make People Like You: The Anti-Popular Art of David Foster Wallace*." Unpopular Culture*, edited by Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, pp. 61–80. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv157bjk.6. Accessed 2 Nov. 2023.

Henry, Casey Michael. "'Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done': Epiphanic Structure in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique: Studies in*

Contemporary Fiction, vol. 56, no. 5, 2015, pp. 480–502. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.montclair.edu/10.1080/00111619.2015.1019402.

Lipsky, David. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. United States, Crown, 2010.

Moran, Alexander. "*Infinite Jest* as Opiate Fiction." *David Foster Wallace in Context*, edited by Clare Hayes-Brady, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 283–92. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=202328659864&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Steinhilber, Dominik. "The Solipsism of the Quantified Self: Working Bodies in David Foster Wallace's Body of Work." *Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self*, edited by Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober, Transcript: Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2020, pp. 103–20. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=202226333243&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

United States, Congress, Office of the Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, vol. 2023.

Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. United States, Little, Brown, 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. Back Bay Books, 1996.