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"Cowboy, Paladin, Hero?": Being Boys and Men in David Foster Wallace's The Pale King

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Abstract

Often aligned with post-postmodernism, David Foster Wallace's later work retreats from the ironic detachment and cynicism of postmodernism in favor of a more sincere approach to writing. This is especially evident in his posthumous novel, *The Pale King*, a work dealing with what it means to be human in the Information Age. After locating the novel's setting within a recent history of American masculinity and work, this paper examines several of the novel's male characters as they struggle to be fully realized boys and men, concluding that *The Pale King* is Wallace's final statement that enduring the ennui of modern life is admirable, even heroic.

David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, masculinity, manhood, work, boredom, suffering, contemporary literature

I. Introduction

In the opening paragraph of "*The Pale King*, Or, The White Visitation," an essay on David Foster Wallace's complicated engagements with the work of Thomas Pynchon, Brian McHale confronts the daunting prospect of critically examining a text which is both posthumous and incomplete: "Anything one ventures to say about the lost whole that *would* have been *The Pale King* will inevitably be speculative. Where does one even begin?" (191). Indeed, the novel's variegated world of IRS jargon, awkward conversations, adolescent nightmares, 1980s politics, tax theories, and civic anxieties poses quite a formidable challenge to readers (even by Wallace's infamous standards), but much of *The Pale King*'s appeal lies in its very open-endedness. Although Wallace's long-time editor, Michael Pietsch, writes in his foreword to *The Pale King* that the deceased author's left-behind "hard drives, file folders, three-ring binders, spiral-bound notebooks, and floppy disks" made up an "astonishingly full novel," he also admits, perhaps understatedly, that putting together a publishable work from the rubble "was not an easy task" (vi-vii). Wallace himself, Pietsch notes, "described working on the new novel as like wrestling sheets of balsa wood in a high wind" (v). Understandably fractured and incomplete as it might be, *The Pale King*, which Pietsch considers "as deep and brave as anything David had written" (vii), undoubtedly demands close critical attention as well as a bit of investigative puzzle-solving. After all, as Marshall Boswell notes in his introduction to a special *Pale King*-themed edition of the journal *Studies in the Novel*, "Wallace's longer work achieves its effect through accumulation and collage" (368).

Ask any critic or everyday reader what *The Pale King* is all about, and you will likely get a one-word answer: boredom. Boredom as a concept and a condition to be examined is present at virtually every turn in the novel; it is the gray sky under which Wallace's characters struggle to

live, work, and interact with one another. Considering that the novel is largely set in mid-1980s America—a major time in the development of the Information Age—it is imperative to note that Wallace's uses of boredom stem from the social and economic climate of that era and beyond: "What Wallace does in *The Pale King*," Ralph Clare writes, "is conduct a thorough analysis of how boredom has functioned, and continues to function . . . in the age of neoliberal capitalism, which dawned in the mid-1970s and is currently in crisis" (429). Clare posits in "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" that Wallace explores the various ways of understanding and coping with boredom in both the novel's form and content, and, in doing so, he "offers a possible solution to the apparent malaise of post-industrial life" (428-29). Where better to investigate the boredom that comes with the post-industrial world of Reaganomics, automation, and bureaucracy that was the mid-1980s than in the dreary halls and offices of the Internal Revenue Service? Additionally, if Clare is correct that Wallace is trying to somehow solve the condition of boredom, our dreaded "modern problem" (Clare 430), what better way to do so than by examining those who seemingly suffer from it most intensely?

Although it contains a few notable female characters, *The Pale King* is largely a novel of boys and men, and, perhaps more specifically, a novel of transitioning from awkward male childhood and adolescence into even more complicated, demanding adulthood. Set amid the backdrop of the aforementioned late-twentieth-century America, Wallace's male characters in *The Pale King* suffer conspicuously: some endure strange and painful bodily phenomena— voluntary contortions, excessive sweating, and "fact-psychic" visions of contextless external information, to name a few—while others, Wallace writes, go through daily life much like cattle, "essentially soft or softened in some way, desperate in a resigned way, their stride not quite a

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trudge, their eyes empty and overmild with the weary stoicism of young fathers" (13). We also, for example, read about a man dead at his desk for days before being noticed, and we are privy to men's strained conversations about masturbation, women, and drug use. Wallace's varied and troubling depictions of boys and men in *The Pale King* will be at the heart of this paper, which will examine how some of them fit into the novel's broader topics—the boredom, anxiety, and tediousness of the Information Age, for instance—hoping to get a sense of Wallace's impression of the state of masculinity toward the end of his life.

To return to McHale's question: where, then, to begin? Since its 2011 publication, there has not yet been an explicit study of masculinity or the male experience in *The Pale King* (or, for that matter, in any of Wallace's works). Clare Hayes-Brady comes close to taking on such an endeavor, however, with her 2013 essay, "'. . .': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace." In it, rather than addressing femininity or masculinity as distinct factors in his work, she seeks to define the space between the two, exploring the ways in which power relationships between masculinity and femininity develop from Wallace's approach to language, gender, and power (131-32). Hayes-Brady also notes a known absence of "well-developed" female characters in Wallace's work, writing that his "masculine figures" are "physically solid, vibrant, and vocal" as opposed to his "archetypal" females (131). She argues that while some may call Wallace misogynistic because of this stark divide between his male and female characters, the situation likely has more to do with alterity, the state of being different, than antipathy: "[Wallace's] hyperawareness of gender difference, paradoxically, paralyzes his authorial capacity for empathy, leaving oblique engagement with femininity the only available means of exploring gender issues" (131-32). While Hayes-Brady raises important and well-founded points about the power dynamics in Wallace's fiction's male/female dialogue, her

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notion that his female characters are somehow less developed or opaque is hardly irrefutable. As has been mentioned, *The Pale King* is indeed far from abundant in women, but one could write at length upon such fascinating female characters as Toni Ware and Meredith Rand. To her credit, Hayes-Brady is correct in writing that Wallace's male characters *are* his most fully rendered, but she fails to include that they are also conspicuously broken and, as a result, by far the bigger players in his novel about overcoming post-industrial malaise. Their unique troubles seem to stem, at least in part, from their being male, a condition made increasingly difficult by the ennui of the times. This paper, then, will focus on *The Pale King*'s male characters, not particularly in relation to power dynamics or their interactions with female characters, but instead on how they inhabit the world of the novel as themselves—as boys and men.

Wallace's later work is often aligned with post-postmodernism, an almost-movement emphasizing a retreat from the ironic detachment and cynicism of postmodernism in favor of sincerity. He admired postmodernism and engaged with it in his earlier work, but by the writing of his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in 1993, he had come to believe that "irony was defeatist, timid, the telltale of a generation too afraid to say what it meant, and so in danger of forgetting it had anything to say" (Max 156). Wallace even wrote in "E Unibus Pluram" that the next generation of worthy American writers would consist of those "who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching" and "who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (81). Clearly, at least in terms of *The Pale King*, Wallace strived to be one of these post-irony writers. He once told Larry McCaffery in an interview that fiction's real purpose was to influence readers' emotions, to create a sense of universal human camaraderie:

Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of *generalization* of suffering. [. . .] We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. (22)

With respect to the idea of Wallace as a writer determined to bring literature's focus back to real human emotion, and in light of his above comments on suffering, this paper will examine just how he uses some of *The Pale King*'s male characters to explore the various forms of modern suffering, ultimately concluding that the novel is Wallace's final statement that enduring the ennui of everyday life is admirable, even heroic.

II. Masculinity and *The Pale King*

      An informed paper on the condition of male characters in *The Pale King* will certainly benefit from a brief overview of men's and masculinity studies as an interdisciplinary academic field, as well as from some considerations as to how the novel and its setting are situated within the recent history of American masculinity. A relatively young area of study, men's and masculinity studies has, in part, emerged from the popular contention that gender is a social construct and a "central component of social and political life" to show that gender "shapes not only women but men as well" (Armengol 76). In the introduction to their seminal anthology of previously published works related to men's and masculinity studies, *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, Rachel Adams and David Savran concisely explain the goals of the field and the scope of its concerns:

> Taking its lead from feminism, masculinity studies is thus dedicated to analyzing what has often seemed to be an implicit fact, that the vast majority of societies are patriarchal and that men have historically enjoyed more than their fair share of power, resources, and cultural authority. Focusing critical interrogation on men, patriarchy, and formations of masculinity, scholars have sought to . . . [demonstrate] that masculinities are historically constructed, mutable, and contingent, and [analyze] their many and widespread effects. (2)

The field has developed as a kind of faction within the wider arena of gender studies since the 1970s, drawing on the work of scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. Australian sociologist R. W. Connell is a major figure in the field; she is particularly known for her 1995 book, *Masculinities*, in which she famously expands the concept of hegemony, the "cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life," to include "hegemonic

masculinity," which Connell defines as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees . . . the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Contrary to Connell's assertion of a social and political "dominance" of men (a central component in the development of men's and masculinity studies), one could argue that *The Pale King*'s male characters do not exist in or benefit from any kind of "dominant" position at all. If anything they are constantly being dominated by forces that are beyond their control—bureaucratic hierarchies, anxieties of all kinds, soul-crushing boredom and repetition—therefore an examination of the troubled state of Wallace's male characters must look at how they exist in relation to themselves and one another, dominated rather than dominating.

Michael S. Kimmel, another influential figure in the field, writes in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* that "we continue to treat our male military, political, scientific, or literary figures as if their gender, their masculinity had nothing to do with their military exploits, policy decisions, scientific experiments, or writing styles and subjects" (2). His assertion stems from the argument that, rather than "gendering" men and addressing masculinity as a visible and viable subject for analysis and critique, "men have been constantly universalized"; that is, "in Western patriarchal discourse, the universal person and the masculine gender have traditionally been conflated" (Armengol 76-77). This universalization, as well the social and economic changes that come with deindustrialization, the movement away from traditional emphases on industry, contributes to what is known as the recent and ongoing "crisis" of masculinity. Contrary to the traditional feminist notion that masculinity is defined by "the drive for power, for domination, for control," Kimmel suggests that it is potentially much less self-assured, that additionally "manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating

us, having power or control over us" (4). He writes, "Throughout American history American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened. And men have been afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man, afraid of failure" (4). Kimmel is writing about American men in general here, but he may as well be summarizing the predicament of the large majority of *The Pale King*'s male cast. They are forever wary of being overtaken—by embarrassment, indifference, boredom, etc.—and their struggles stem largely from their need to be capable, responsible, and self-confident boys and men in an increasingly indifferent and automated modern environment.

Yet while it is clear that Wallace's boys and men feel unable to, in Kimmel's terms, "measure up" to various criteria, it is not necessarily true or even useful to label them as "in crisis." In *Cultures of Masculinity*, yet another important work in the field of men's and masculinity studies, Tim Edwards contends that what is meant by a "crisis" of masculinity "remains unclear" (6). He navigates through several aspects of the modern male experience typically identified as roots of the "crisis"—for example, higher unemployment rates due to a decline of manufacturing work, higher occupational insecurity due to increased focus on the market across many sectors, fewer manual-labor jobs due to advances in technology, and heightened anxiety and competitiveness due to a greater, albeit needed emphasis on sexual equality in the work place—to conclude that "none of this . . . would seem to constitute an *overall* crisis of masculinity so much as *tendencies towards* crisis for some men" (7-14). The question of whether or not an official "crisis" exists in the world of *The Pale King* is less important than simply examining how Wallace's boys and men deal with their own, to use Edwards's words, "tendencies" toward crisis.

Kimmel notes that during the 1980s-spanning Reagan presidency, the naive running idea was that "American men would awaken to a new, recharged manhood for a new, ambitious, and aggressive era" (192). "We've often thought of the 1980s," he writes, "as a decade of the reassertion of pride, the retrieval of political and metaphorical potency for America and, hence, for the American man" (192). The 1980s of *The Pale King*, however, is nothing like this. Beyond its more regular dealings with themes of boredom and anxiety, the novel also wrestles intensely with what Wallace calls in a preliminary note (included in the appendix to *The Pale King*) "being an individual vs. being part of larger things," a struggle which emerged from the radical shift in economic and civic priorities during that decade. The novel's male characters are ever skeptical about what it means to be a citizen, what it means to be civically involved, etc.[1] Their manhood is not "recharged"; on the contrary, Wallace's men are caught in the middle of what Kimmel calls the "competing images" of the 1980s era: the ultra-manly "schoolyard bully" figure à la Reagan and Bush, and the wimp of Dukakis and Clinton. This dichotomy, Kimmel writes, "indicated just how confused we had become as men" (196).

So what does this all mean for an examination of the state of masculinity in *The Pale King*? The field of men's and masculinity studies is, like any academic area, diverse and ever-evolving. Some of the aforementioned aspects of the field provide a framework in which masculinity and the male experience can be studied in literature in general, while others (particularly those dealing with a masculinity "crisis," and, of course, those on the American male experience in the 1980s) are more *Pale King*-specific, heavily informing how various characters and ideas in the novel get presented and understood. *The Pale King*'s boys and men

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[1] In §19, for example, a group of mostly unidentified characters converse about politics and the implications of being civic-minded; one says, "Americans are in a way crazy. We infantilize ourselves. We don't think of ourselves as citizens—parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities" (130).

certainly suffer to varying degrees and from various malaises, but to what end? Another preliminary note by Wallace suggests that he had some grip on the novel's intended scope: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (546). Can Wallace's "central deal" be read as reflective of his conception of the late-twentieth-century American male experience: inescapably real, monotonous, and unfulfilled? And if Wallace's vision of the last several decades is so bleak, how does *The Pale King* work as an example of what Wallace once called "good art," which "locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" ("An Expanded Interview" 26)?

III. Boys in the novel

  In "Forever Overhead," one of the opening stories in Wallace's 1999 collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, the narrator addresses a nameless boy on his thirteenth birthday: "Happy Birthday. Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is the chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you" (4). He then reviews the various physical changes the boy has experienced with the onset of puberty, such as his growth of "hard dangerous spirals of brittle black hair" and a voice "rich and scratchy" which "moves between octaves without any warning" (4). What follows for the rest of the brief story is an account of the boy as he attempts to plunge, exposed out in the open and under the shining sun, into a crowded public swimming pool. The end of the diving board he stands on is marked with two dark spots of the remnant skin of those who have gone before. He hesitates—there are too many people waiting on the ladder's rungs behind him to turn back, yet there is also a too-large and frightening leap ahead to comfortably continue. Wallace's narrator leads the reader to believe the boy eventually jumps, writing, "The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud-blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear," and then the story concludes with a one-word paragraph: "Hello" (13). This minimal closing word to the boy is the narrator's way of welcoming him to a scary new world of experiences, responsibilities, and physical and emotional changes. In his interview with McCaffery Wallace said that this story grew out of a real experience of his own, and that the birthday boy's diving board "becomes very heavily a symbol for initiation into adulthood" (42). "Welcome to the machine," Wallace added, "you've got to dive off" (42).

"Forever Overhead" is a good starting point for an examination of the younger male characters in *The Pale King*, as it illustrates the very pre-adulthood limbo they inhabit. Each one suffers on his own "diving board" between childhood and adulthood differently, and some also return later in the novel, giving the reader a chance to see what becomes of them after they, as Wallace put it to McCaffery, "dive off." While their afflictions—Leonard Stecyk's excessive and obsessive brown-nosing, David Cusk's inhuman sweating, the kissing boy's equally inhuman contorting—are often ridiculous to the point of being hilarious, undercurrents of intense sadness (Wallace's specialty, one might argue) abound in their respective sections. As Hayes-Brady notes, Wallace's male characters are simultaneously "richly interiorized" and "profoundly physical" (138), and the *Pale King*'s boys are no exception. A closer look at them here will lay the groundwork for a greater understanding of their adult forms and *The Pale King*'s other grown-up male characters. It will also become clear that these boys' seemingly debilitating issues are often painful to read about and continue into their experiences as grown men, and Wallace writes of them with a deep reverence. They are, after all, examples of the "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions" he thought all great literature ought to return to investigating. The boys prove heroic in their own ways by pressing on in the face of the difficulties that hinder or even hurt them.

The earliest appearance of the first of *The Pale King*'s three main boys, Leonard Stecyk, is in §5, the introduction to a multi-part account of his lifelong pursuit of perfection. To say that young Stecyk aims to please is a dramatic understatement—Wallace spends the entire section listing the boy's good deeds, careful considerations, and instances of outrageous proactivity. The extent to which Wallace goes to achieve his effect makes it virtually impossible to recount the section meticulously, but some details are worth isolating, as they illustrate just how intensely

Stecyk overcompensates for his feelings of inadequacy. We learn, for example, that in the mornings Stecyk "shepherds the lower grades' kids through the crosswalk" after he has already volunteered to deliver charity breakfasts to nursing homes (29); he is grateful for his father's offering of ice cream but would "like it even more if they took the money his father would have spent on the ice cream and instead donated it . . ." (30); and while he patrols Carl P. Robinson Elementary as hall monitor, he "gives far more official warnings than actual citations"—after all, "he's there to serve, he feels, not run people down" (30). Stecyk also pioneers a recycling program and "is healthy and scrubbed and always groomed" (31). Relentlessly prepared to assist, donate, impress, and correct, young Stecyk in part appears to be the ideal kid to any parent or teacher. The list of his endearing qualities is so extensive, however, and his good nature is so over-the-top that right away it is clear Stecyk is not all he immediately appears to be.

Juxtaposed with instance after instance of Stecyk being such a "perfect" boy are asides about just how too-helpful and overbearing he also is, to the extent that other people treat him with dislike and even threats of violence. For example, the administrator of the charity nursing home where he delivers breakfasts "lunges to bolt her office door when she hears his cart's wheels in the hall" (29), and even his volunteer work and special considerations at school prove overwhelming for its administration:

> The principal loathes the mere sight of the boy but does not quite know why. He sees the boy in his sleep, at nightmares' ragged edges—the pressed checked shirt and hair's hard little part, the freckles and ready generous smile: anything he can do. The principal fantasizes about sinking a meat hook into Leonard Stecyk's bright-eyed little face and dragging the boy face-down behind his Volkswagen

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Beetle over the rough new streets of suburban Grand Rapids. The fantasies come

out of nowhere and horrify the principal, who is a devout Mennonite. (32)

Wallace writes that everyone in Stecyk's life hates him with "a complex hatred, one that often

causes the haters to feel mean and guilty and to hate themselves for feeling this way about such

an accomplished and well-meaning boy" (32). Then there is the particularly depressing horror

that is his eleventh birthday party. After sending out hundreds of invitations, some even

considerately audio-recorded for classmates who are blind, only nine guests show up, "not

counting parents or LPNs of the incapacitated" (33). Finally, to close out the section, Wallace

writes that after some older boys "accost the boy . . . and do unspeakable things to him," Stecyk

apologizes to his attackers and accepts all blame for the incident, hoping that they can all one day

be friends (34-35). Unshaken by all the hostility toward him, Stecyk stoically perseveres simply

because he must.

Stecyk's good deeds and attention to detail eventually pay off; much later in the novel

(§39) he ends up saving the day in shop class thanks to his quick thinking and ultra-

preparedness. He is a bit older in this section—this time a student at Charles E. Potter High

School—and the incident is told from an adult Stecyk's perspective. Wallace refers several times

to what happens in the shop class as "the severed-thumb incident," and it is an event "that

transformed L. M. Stecyk into one of the most brilliant and able Service administrators in the

region" (416). In short, a nearly sixteen-year-old Stecyk is seen by both his shop teacher, Mr.

Ingle, and the other boys in the class as an effeminate weirdo: he wears a deadly serious apron

which reads, "Len's the name; wood's the game" (416); rather than having any of the

traditionally "masculine" abilities to cut, sand, and assemble properly, Stecyk only really excels

at measuring and drafting, his specifications for which are "exceptionally" and "effeminately" on

point (417); and his "apparently loose or insufficiently masculine grip" sends an unfinished cigar box shooting across the classroom, prompting Mr. Ingle to tell him that "the only reason he didn't force him and his little apron over to Home Economics with the girls was that he'd probably burn the whole everloving school down" (417). After Mr. Ingle loses a thumb to the band saw, however, and while the other boys either bolt for the door "with their arms up and hands waving in the universal movement of blind panic" or freeze "with their eyes wide and minds in deep neutral," Stecyk remains calm and administers first aid, "there being something both dancerly and maternal and yet not one bit girlish" about the way he bandages and cradles his teacher (418-20). He ends up the hero of the story despite his perceived and looked-down-upon effeminacy, and also as the direct result of his excessive preparedness and ability to remain calm and focused under pressure.

Whereas Leonard Stecyk's anxieties about measuring up eventually prove useful (both during the shop class episode and, as this paper's next section will note, later in his adult life and career), young David Cusk's extraordinary sweating and his anxieties about it prove less directly beneficial to his growing up. This could be attributed to *The Pale King*'s unfinished state; in other words, maybe Wallace intended to include some redeeming scene for Cusk, some way in which his fear of appearing crazy might be useful. Only in §40 is there any hint of Cusk possibly recovering from his sweating, his fears of sweating. His suffering in §13 is not necessarily all bad, however. Again, as Wallace said in his interview with McCaffery, "We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside" (22). The novel shows that Cusk suffers throughout his life from the "attacks of shattering public sweats" (91),

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and while they are unpleasant and a constant source of anguish for him, they additionally reveal that sometimes suffering comes from the erroneous assumption that one is constantly being judged.[2]

Cusk was able to spend his childhood shrugging off his excessive sweating, attributing it to nothing more than a personal, bodily quirk: "Some kids were fat, some were unusually short or tall or had crazy teeth, or stuttered, or smelled like mildew no matter what clothes they wore—he just happened to be someone who sweated heavily . . ." (91). It is not until later in his adolescence, after he has "dived off" into a more self-conscious and grown-up world, that his sweating problem becomes more than just an annoying physical sensation; now it is something that causes the judgmental eyes of other people to turn upon him, or at least that is what he imagines:

> In his seventeenth year, though, it started to bother him; he became self-conscious about the sweating thing. This was surely related to puberty, the stage where you suddenly got much more concerned about how you appear to other people. About whether there might be something visibly creepy or gross about you. Within weeks of the start of the school year, he became both more and differently aware that he seemed to sweat more than the other kids did. (91-92)

That Cusk is "more and differently" aware of his problem emphasizes his growing feelings of alienation on account of the sweating. The phenomenon has moved from being simply a strange occurrence to something that, at least in his newly self-conscious seventeen-year-old mind, draws unwelcome and potentially hostile attention. But unlike Stecyk's very real detractors and

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[2] This idea is reminiscent of a line in Wallace's 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*: "That you will become way less concerned with what other people think of you when you realize how seldom they do" (203).

their threats to his well-being, Cusk's fears of being judged by others, as far as Wallace reveals, evidently never come true.

§13 ends rather interestingly. Although just before the end Wallace hints that Cusk more or less might be able to superficially cope with his sweating issues and fears of judgement after all ("He could not understand why he was so afraid of people possibly seeing him sweat or thinking it was weird or gross. Who cared what people thought?" [95]), he unexpectedly moves into a new awareness about the very strangeness of his dilemma. After nearly bursting into tears after his mother makes a passing comment about his dating prospects, Cusk retreats into despair. The usual feelings of anxiety about his sweating persist, but he is also newly "bright enough to know there was something sad about it," that is, about his complicated situation (99). This leads to additional and conflicting feelings of relief, guilt, loneliness, creepiness, and disgust; we leave him as he contemplates all this in the bathroom mirror, "whose reflection seemed oblivious to all that he felt as he searched it" (99). The mirror's inability to verify Cusk's fears about how he appears to the world punctuates Wallace's overarching point in this section: one's own internal anxieties are inaccessible to those on the outside, so fear of being judged for them is frivolous. Cusk constantly examines his excessive sweating and the anxieties it causes; his refusal to be dominated by bodily and mental forces beyond his control make him rather heroic in Wallace's eyes (this is even more evident later when we see Cusk return as an adult seeking therapy for his problems).

The last of *The Pale King*'s three main boy characters appears in §36. Referred to only as the "kissing boy," his whole *raison d'être*, we learn, is "to be able to press his lips to every square inch of his own body" (394). There is no given reason why the kissing boy must do this— like Leonard Stecyk and David Cusk before him, he simply must endure the pain and alienation

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that come with his strange condition; he has no "wish to 'transcend' anything" (400). The kissing

boy is different than the other two, however, in that his obsession with kissing every part of his

own body depends on nothing external; that is, he is only in competition with himself. Stecyk is

quite the opposite in his need to exert himself to please others, while Cusk, too, suffers

constantly from the fear that others will find him weird or unappealing. The concern shown by

the kissing boy's father and doctor does nothing to deter his contorting; if anything, the

information and encouragement he receives about proper stretching push him to go even further.

His trip to the chiropractor after injuring himself proves to be "the child's formal introduction

both to incremental stretching and to the adult idea of quiet daily discipline and progress toward

a long-term goal" (396).

Unlike with Stecyk and Cusk, Wallace never provides the kissing boy with any real hint

of redemption later in life, nor one indication that his suffering will somehow pay off and prove

useful. This, however, could very well be the result of *The Pale King*'s unfinished state, and a

scene of the kissing boy actually "transcending" something could have been forthcoming, but

there is no way to tell. There is a sense, however, that the boy's contorting is a strange but

helpful exercise in his own "diving off" from childhood into adulthood. Wallace writes that

boy's goal all along, which is always "beyond his conscious awareness," is to "pierce that veil of

inaccessibility" we all experience with our own bodies, that the boy really just wants "to be, in

some childish way, self-contained and -sufficient" (401). Whereas Stecyk and Cusk obsess over

being able to control their own images and how they appear to others, the kissing boy's dilemma

comes with a deeper, much more personal suffering. He is growing up with only a "nervous

man" of a father, who suffers his own insecurities and anxieties about personal relationships and

who always has a "rushed, fidgety manner that always lent him an air of imminent departure" (398); it is no wonder the boy feels a need to verify his own existence.

Clare Hayes-Brady describes the kissing boy's obsession with mastering his entire body as "a journey toward self-awareness," and a linking of the "inner-consciousness" with the "outer physicality" that provides "a singular portrait of the deforming intrusion of full self-consciousness" (141). "Deforming" is an apt word in this case, as the boy's contortions and limit-pushing eventually cause physical deformities (his lips, for example, become "markedly large and protrusive" due to a complicated stretching exercise involving buttons and string [401]). At the end of the section, too, the boy is left with only the impossible areas of his body, "accessing which appeared to be like asking a blade to cut itself" (407). Wallace abandons the kissing boy forever with a note that, while he does not yet know how it will be accomplished, the boy looks forward to pubescence when "his head would be his" and "he would find a way to access all of himself" (407). As with the nameless boy in "Forever Overhead," this nameless boy can only "dive in" to a new adult consciousness to fully know and inhabit himself. The reader knows, of course, that the boy will never be able to kiss his own *everything*, so whether or not he successfully grows up into himself is left open to speculation. As Brian McHale wonders in "*The Pale King*, Or, The White Visitation": "Whom does the kissing boy grow up to be, if anyone?" (201). And if he does grow up, do his boyish attempts to become physically self-aware evolve into a greater self-awareness in adulthood? Wallace presents the kissing boy in §36 as admirable at least in his enduring the pain of growing up through his (admittedly strange) dedication to self-discovery, but it is impossible to know what exactly Wallace intended to have happen to the boy later.

Each of these three boys in *The Pale King* clearly suffers his own strange anxieties and feelings of inadequacy, perhaps the necessary side-effects of "diving off" into a whole new territory of consciousness and experience. This closer look at exactly how the novel's boys suffer their transitions to manhood has shown that, while Wallace provides us with equal parts humor and sadness, realism and hyperbole, their dilemmas are deserving of readers' utmost respect and deep consideration. These boys and their problems may well be exaggerations of the types of problems readers endure, but that does not make them less effective at showing the positive possibilities that exist when one endures various kinds of suffering—in this case, growing up—in order to transcend it. To simply show how these boys' afflictions might destroy them would not be worth reading; Wallace imbues them each with a sense of purpose and a hint of progressing toward someday transfiguring their pain. The following examination of *The Pale King*'s adult male characters will show that they also suffer from similar feelings of inadequacy and strangeness, but that theirs is a world much more complicated.

IV. Men in the novel

Like their younger counterparts, *The Pale King*'s adult male characters are troubled to say the least. The stressors plaguing each man vary, of course, but quite differently than with the boys, Wallace's men all suffer to a degree from some of the afflictions of modern adult life—feelings of inescapable repetition in the daily routine, inadequacy in the eyes of others, and uselessness in unpleasant jobs and social environments. Whereas the boys struggle to live with their own identities on the "diving board" between childhood and growing up, the men struggle to face the increasingly automated and uncaring world of work as well as the threat of not measuring up to their own expectations of what it means to be grown men. Conley Wouters writes in "'What am I, a Machine?': Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" that the novel's characters "constantly struggle to locate themselves in the face of an excess of material that they can be sure is *not* the self, which, in the late twentieth century, often takes the shape of data, information, entertainment, or some cross-section thereof" (448). In other words, the men are so overwhelmed by the extraneous *stuff* of their lives that they lose themselves in it. This section will review just how some of *The Pale King*'s men suffer from and endure the unsavory conditions of being modern, working adult males—Claude Sylvanshine and Lane Dean have their own issues, but they also look at other men to feel better about themselves; Stecyk and Cusk return, if only to see their childhood quirks continue into their adult lives and careers—finishing with a closer look at §22 wherein Wallace, drawing on his famous emphasis on "paying attention," lays out some of *The Pale King*'s overarching points about the heroic struggles of everyday life through the speech of a Jesuit accounting professor. §22, along with §44 (a kind of distillation of the ideas put forth in §22),

also emphasizes overcoming the contemporary effects of boredom as the "key to modern life" (438).

To borrow again from McHale, Wallace displays in his fiction "a long-term fascination with institutions as microcosms and as world-building engines" (204). Like *Infinite Jest*'s Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic], *The Pale King*'s own Peoria, Illinois, branch of the Internal Revenue Service, the Midwest Regional Examination Center, is a world of its own, loaded with setting-specific jargon, information, expectations, and characterizations. It is in this highly specialized world of work that the novel's adult male characters live, suffer, and interact with one another. A brief look at how manhood has historically related to work will illustrate how the men in the novel exist *as men* in the intensely boring and bureaucratic world of IRS work. In *Cultures of Masculinity*, Edwards examines the man/work correlation of the past, and also how it has changed in the last few decades:

> Historically, work has often stood as the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity, particularly in relation to modernity or, more specifically, advanced Western industrial capitalism. Moreover, it was a key thesis of many of the earliest critiques of masculinity working within the sex role paradigm that work was seen to be the most fundamental element in the formation of successful masculine identity. . . . The primary point here was that work not only matters *to* men, but it is also part *of* them as a key dimension of their identity and masculinity. [. . .] The more contemporary problem in many Western societies is that this ethos is argued to be severely undermined on several fronts . . . (7)

So while the traditional notion was that a man's worth and his very masculinity were dependent upon his work, the changed ethos of recent decades has shattered any such correlation. Contemporary men must now face a changing work landscape—a new one of desks, paperwork, and technology rather than one of more physical demands and rugged environments—and adjust their own conceptions of manhood accordingly.

This is precisely where many of *The Pale King*'s men run into trouble. Rather than somehow actively fine-tuning their more masculine sensibilities when the world of work proves emasculating and overwhelmingly boring, many are shown to just give up. The very worst of these men appear nameless and in the background. In §2, practically the very beginning of the novel, IRS employee Claude Sylvanshine is on an unpleasant flight to Peoria, Illinois, and anxious about an upcoming CPA exam. Passing the exam means automatically advancing two pay grades, but for Sylvanshine it also means catching up to his friend and roommate, Reynolds, who "had passed the exam on his first sit" (9). Sylvanshine quells his feelings of inferiority to Reynolds by considering the sorrier state of the other men all around him. In airports earlier that day, he observed "thirty-year-old men who had infants in high-tech papooselike packs on their backs" at the mercy of their wives, men who looked "essentially soft or softened in some way" (13). As the plane's passengers prepare to disembark, Sylvanshine stands among "paunched and blotchy" businessmen whose description is extensive: there are those "whose soft faces fit their jobs like sausage in its meaty casing," those who "look at their watches out of reflex," and those who are "more scalp than hair, breathing one another's smells," among others (18). Thanks to Sylvanshine's annoying but relatively benign "fact-psychic" intuitions, we learn that there are "two eventual suicides on this plane," one of which will be "forever classed as an accident" (18). A little later, in §7, we find Sylvanshine yet again surrounded by men of unpleasant description.

He is in a van breathing "the yeasty smell of wet men," one of whom is described as rodent-like, perhaps "a sad kind man who lived in a cube of fear" (45).

Like Sylvanshine, Lane Dean also suffers his own feelings of boredom and inadequacy, and he also cannot help but compare himself to the state of all the other men around him. Lane first appears in §6, a rather saccharine episode reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," in which he sits by a lake with his recently pregnant girlfriend. An unspoken potential abortion hangs about the air around them, and Lane's thoughts about the situation are laid out in stream-of-consciousness style. In the panicky short time between the conception and this scene, Lane had convinced the unwilling Sheri to make an appointment for an abortion, about which she is now having second thoughts. Lane sits paralyzed, both physically unable to move and also unable to make a decision: should he continue living the lie that he loves Sheri in order to do the "required" thing and marry her, or should he take her up on the offer he knows she will make, the chance to disappear from her life as she carries and births the child? Revealed to have been at one time very religious, Lane struggles here to seek the usual religious counseling or even to pray personal prayers, and he is unsure that he even has his priorities straight: "He might not even know his own heart or be able to read and know himself" (40). §6 ends with something like an epiphany, an important moment in which Lane realizes he maybe does not even know himself, that he is somehow "not a hypocrite, just broken and split off like all men" (42).

The real "broken and split off" men come later in the novel and in life for Lane, however, when in §33 he finds himself at work some time later at his Tingle table, dreadfully bored, watching a clock that just will not move. Apparently that week he had not understood an office joke about IRS rote examiners being like mushrooms ("Both kept in the dark and fed horseshit"),

which leads to an aside that "Sheri's cooking wasn't what you would call at the level of adding mushrooms," suggesting that while things were not perfect, Lane and Sheri had married after all (377). Rather than pointlessly checking the clock again and again, Lane had lately been passing the hours working at his coffee- and soda-less Tingle table by considering the sad state of his male coworkers:

> Try as he might he could not this last week help envisioning the inward lives of the older men to either side of him, doing this day after day. Getting up on a Monday and chewing their toast and putting their hats and coats on knowing what they were going out the door to come back to for eight hours. This was boredom beyond any boredom he'd ever felt. This made the routing desk at UPS look like a day at Six Flags. (377)

Compared to Wallace's description here of the job's permeating and inescapable boredom, Lane's girlfriend's pregnancy problems suddenly seem much less menacing. The horrors of such boredom at work are enough to make Lane realize that "never before in his life up to now had he once thought of suicide" (378). The face of the infant son he and Sheri had kept after all keeps Lane sane enough to go on, and he notices that neither of the men beside him fidgets or makes any unusual movement; they are "like machines" (381). What follows is a strange, dreamlike sequence in which Lane zones out and is visited by a ghost who recounts a sort of history of boredom as a concept, as a word. In the end, "no time had passed at all" during the ghost's monologue (385), and Lane is left presumably either to resign himself to the prospect of spending a long, unhappy career sorting returns, or to commit suicide. His fate depends on how he handles the soul-crushing boredom of his work; he can either endure heroically or succumb like many the men before him.

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Leonard Stecyk and David Cusk both return later as adults, albeit in different ways. Cusk's reappearances show that he continues to struggle to cope with his excessive sweating and anxiety about it. In §24, for example, in which the so-called real, "living author" David Wallace arrives for his training in Peoria, Cusk suffers immensely in "air-conditioning [that] was more like a vague gesture toward the abstract idea of air-conditioning" (263). David Wallace and Cusk are riding together in the van, where the former describes the latter as

> . . . a long-jawed younger man in a gray polyester sport coat and tie, maybe roughly my age, his feet on the medial hump and knees thus up almost to his chest, who was already sweating prodigiously, and who kept surreptitiously wiping his shirt with a motion that looked strangely as if he were pretending to scratch himself under his sport coat rather than wipe off his wet fingers. [. . .] His smile was an anxious and totally false rictus, his profile a branching mass of running droplets, some of which were actually falling onto his sport coat and dappling the lapels. He gave off a palpable aura of tension or fear. . . . (268)

Cusk suffers similarly later during a Rotes orientation in §27, in which, rather than bursting into a full-on attack, he spends the length of the very boring presentation trying *not* to sweat, "which in certain ways was worse because it could go either way" (328). He is additionally troubled by the arrival of a woman (Toni Ware, we learn) behind him. There is, however, an indication that he heroically presses on in his attempts to overcome his problem. In §40 he visits a psychiatrist and enumerates for her a long series of things he fears—the reader has not seen these before. Spiders, dogs, mail, spiral notebooks, very specific kinds of fountain pens, disks, drains, and spirals all show up as things that set Cusk on edge (423-24). At the very end, however, just when it looks like he will keep going with the listing, forever searching for the reasons behind his

sweating, there is an indication that he is making progress: "He had a fine sheen of sweat on his upper lip, but could tell by feel that the forehead was staying dry, hanging in there" (424). Cusk's sweating anxieties could very well be directly caused by other, more routine fears, but it is most important to note in this section that Wallace leaves Cusk for good with a hint that he still presses on, refusing to be overcome by his problems. Cusk, whether mentally troubled or reacting to various outside stressors, is heroic in his continued grappling with his sweating.

Stecyk, still eager as ever to please, introduces himself to new neighbors in a very brief §12, "his smile so wide it almost looked like it hurt" (90). He is apparently to start work at the novel's Peoria IRS REC. Additionally, in the "Notes and Asides" appendix to *The Pale King*, there is a note from Wallace on §12 that reads, "Stecyk flown in via Lehrl's design to help drive examiners crazy" (540). Merrill Lehrl and/or the other higher-up at the branch, DeWitt Glendenning, appear to be, according to Clare, in some kind of scheme to bring together employees with an unusual ability to concentrate (441). In an additional note by Wallace in the appendix, part of a list of loosely gathered character notes, Stecyk is written to be "an examiner totally devoted to his job—hated, an abstract application of probity and virtue—constantly on the lookout for ways to help" (547). While his eagerness to please appears to continue unappreciated in adulthood, and while the novel's incompleteness denies the reader the chance to see exactly what kind of heroic acts (like the saw incident of §39) he might have gotten into, Stecyk appears to grow up more or less mastering his obsession with perfection; it has not failed him yet.

Chris Fogle is a man in *The Pale King* who, while he is technically an adult in his appearances in the novel, sort of straddles the worlds of childhood and adulthood. He is also unique in that, unlike Sylvanshine and Lane, his relationship with disinterest and boredom moves in the opposite direction: the other two men grow more weary of the boring world of work, while

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Fogle, who had spent his young life as "the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who isn't even aware he's a nihilist," and "like a piece of paper on the street in the wind" (154), converts from a lifelong boredom to a new love of IRS work. The novella that is §22 is told from Fogle's perspective; it is a long, detailed account of his life as a "wastoid," his parents' falling out and his father's death, and his own inconsistencies at college and growing up. Toward the end of the section, Fogle finds himself on the last day before exams having "mistakenly ended up across the transom in the final-class session of Advanced Tax," a subject foreign to Fogle, who is used to taking humanities courses (224-25). Fogle is unique here in that, rather than being bored while sitting through a portion of a class on an unfamiliar subject, he undergoes what Boswell calls "a conversion experience, even a religious one" ("Trickle-Down" 474). The substitute Jesuit professor of the class he mistakenly has joined launches unexpectedly into a long inspirational speech: "Before you leave here to resume that crude approximation of a human life you have heretofore called a life, I will undertake to inform you of certain truths" (227).

What follows is a monologue on the "calling" of the accounting profession, during which the professor also claims it is a fact that accounting is "heroic" (228). The professor's speech outlines one of *The Pale King*'s pervasive message: suffering through tedium, unthanked, unappreciated, is what real heroism is, it is what "real men" are called to do. He equates the class of young men to "latter adolescents who aspire to manhood," offering them a truth: "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is" (229). After listing the "true hero's enemies" as "routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, [and] ennui," the professor goes on to back up his claims, providing those students still listening with the connection between the traditional, masculine "hero" and modern society's overload of excess information:

Cowboy, paladin, hero? Gentlemen, read your history. Yesterday's hero pushed

back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made,

brought things into being. Yesterday's society's heroes generated facts. For this is

what society is—an agglomeration of facts. [. . .] But it is now today's era, the

modern era. [. . .] In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant

facts have been generated. Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering

and deployment of those facts. (232)

This is the professor's survey of the post-industrial working man's landscape, the very landscape

in which *The Pale King*'s men endure their troubles. Whereas the "cowboys" and "paladins" of

the past worked with the tangible, material world, today's "heroes," the new men of offices,

suits, and automation must transcend the unending, monotonous demands of the daily grind in

order to survive and thrive in a vastly different cultural landscape. As Conley Wouters writes,

perhaps "*The Pale King* suggests that with the right political-philosophical tools, we might be

able to retain a traditional, liberal-humanist selfhood in the face of informational avalanches"

(449). These "tools" might include, at least in Wallace's conception of the world, the ability to

remain aware and focused in a modern environment increasingly resembling a machine—

automatic, uncaring, unrelenting.

The professor's points are echoed in §44, a short section in which an anonymous narrator

reveals the life-changing knowledge he gained after a brief stint as an IRS cart boy. He

acknowledges that he was lucky to learn so young, "at an age when most guys are starting only

to suspect the basics of adulthood," a handful of some of the hardest truths of adult life, among

them "that life owes you nothing" and "that suffering takes many forms" (437). He also notes

that "the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy," a truth "the ignorance of which causes

great suffering" (437). Additionally, §44's narrator essentially rehashes the professor's cautionary advice: "It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish" (438). One wonders if, had the novel been completed and all its missing links been drawn, there would not be some concrete connection between Fogle's awakening at the professor's speech in §22 and the "truths" stated outright in §44.

To reiterate, *The Pale King*'s men take on the challenges of remaining conscious, vibrant human beings in the face of uncaring work environments, increasingly tedious life routines, and excesses of information, coping in several different ways. Some of the characters—perhaps the anonymous majority—are broken-down and listless, unwilling cogs in the machine, while others—Sylvanshine and Lane Dean—are constantly in search of their true selves. There are also those—Stecyk and Cusk—who never really wake up from their adolescent nightmares, forever anxious about being perceived as inadequate or strange. And occasionally there is a man like Chris Fogle who, by some seemingly random chance, undergoes a positive transformation from the bored existentialism of young adulthood to the "heroism" of taking on the bombardment of information and noise of the times. Wallace uses their pain and degradation as characters to make a broader statement to the reader that, while ours is a weird age of drudgery, boredom, and irony, there is something sacred and profound about the very things that make us uncomfortable, something that if endured and understood can bring about a new sense of peace. Writing on John Barth's disdain for modernism's tendency toward inaccessibility, Robert L. McLaughlin observes in "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World" that "to have an impact in the world beyond the campus quad, literature must reach the so-called common reader" (57). *The Pale King* does just that. By imbuing the novel's boys and men with an exaggerated sadness and self-consciousness, Wallace ensures that their suffering also

becomes the readers', making us feel, as he told McCaffery, "less alone inside" (22). Our

suffering becomes easier to bear when we see what potentially lies beyond it.

V. Conclusion

If it is true, as Edwards contends, that "we are aware of masculinity in the twenty-first century like never before" (1), clearly now is the time to begin looking for its ripples in our literature. Kimmel writes in *Manhood in America* that "the history of American manhood is many histories at once"; he lists a few of these diverse stories—technological, militaristic, inspiring, physical—but adds to quite an impressive group one of modern tragedy, "the story of ordinary men in ordinary circumstances shouldering the responsibilities of quotidian routine, seeking moments of comfort and solace in the face of their personal daily grind" (5-6). Wallace's boys and men in *The Pale King* embody the equally heroic but opposite story of the modern American man: they do the best they can against the cruel and uncaring forces at play in a difficult, increasingly illusory world of systems, automation, and indifference.

In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace likened the previous few years of the postmodern era to a house party in high school where things get a bit out of hand: "For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat's-away-let's-play-Dionysian revel" (52). After a while, however, things get out of hand and "you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house" (52). This is precisely the point at which—via a more sincere, traditional emotion-based approach to writing fiction—post-postmodernism is supposed to swoop in and rescue books from damaging, unbridled irony. McLaughlin believes that Wallace really thought returning to a pre-postmodern literary climate in the U.S. is unlikely if not impossible, but that he as a writer wanted to break through to the other side, and that he struggled for most of his career "to write through the postmodern dead end" ("Post-Postmodern" 65). When one reads a work such as *The Pale King*, however, and more closely examines the plights of its boys and men, there is a very real sense

that Wallace *did* believe a more honest, even redemptive approach to writing is possible. The novel makes a sincere attempt to go beyond the irony of recent decades, nourishing readers by offering hope where postmodernism only offered indifference.

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