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# Introducing the Hero of Stasis: An Examination of Heroism in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*

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Introducing the Hero of Stasis: An Examination of Heroism in

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*

(TITLE)

BY

Gregory Robert Peterson

**THESIS**

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## Introduction

David Foster Wallace is widely regarded as a unique and captivating postmodern (or perhaps post-postmodern) author due to his ability to weave complex narratives that challenge the reader to work their way through his dense, albeit meaningful, prose. Wallace's texts also challenge the reader to consider the existential struggles of individuals living in a world that is beyond postmodern. As Marshall Boswell notes in his text, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Wallace is often questionably labeled a postmodern author (1), and Boswell classifies Wallace as "a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnamable) third wave of modernism" (1). Wallace is primarily known for his novel, *Infinite Jest*, which deals heavily with drug addiction, entertainment, and tennis, but Wallace had an eclectic career as the author of numerous works of fiction and non-fiction. Writing about heroism is not something Wallace is known for, but the evolution of heroism in modern society is a powerful thread of thought that Wallace first addresses in *Infinite Jest* and continues to develop through his unfinished novel, *The Pale King*. Within these texts, Wallace conveys his notion of heroism through the struggles, attitudes, conversations, and writing of his characters. Collectively these fragments show us three types of heroes that are social constructs determined by the contemporary values of a given society. The most significant of these hero types is Wallace's groundbreaking idea of the hero of non-action, which this thesis interprets as a hero of stasis. Wallace's new heroics are exemplified by individuals who are heroic for their ability to conquer their internal struggle and achieve existential equilibrium.

*Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* are Wallace's primary texts that include his exploration and analysis of heroism because they depict the traditional notions of heroism and offer an alternative view of the concept. Though Wallace's ideas about heroism are important in *Infinite Jest*, it is easy for this concept to get pushed to the side in a complex novel that is nearly 1,000 pages long, not including the 96 pages of Notes and Errata. The narrative of *Infinite Jest* is very complicated with scores of minor characters, shifting plotlines, lengthy world-building descriptions, and many notes that interrupt the immediate flow of the story. There are, however, amazing yet easy to overlook instances of Wallace's unique ideas within the incredibly dense and complicated narrative, like Wallace's thoughts about heroism. *Infinite Jest* offers an assessment of America's cultural trends of heroism in the form of a paper written by one of the protagonists, a teenage tennis prodigy and academic whiz named Hal. His essay identifies three types of heroes that are the products of the cultural values of America from a certain point in time (circa 1970s, 1980s, and the near future). These hero types are respectively the hero of action, the hero of reaction, and the hero of non-action (*Infinite Jest* 142-143). Hal's essay is Wallace's primary evaluation of the cultural and temporal factors that determine the identity of a certain type of social hero who happen to be more oriented towards white males. Central to the novel is the heroic struggles of the hero of stasis, Don Gately. Gately's successful struggle with drug addiction and depression through AA, as well as his traumatic and drug-free recovery from a gunshot wound, serves as one of Wallace's models of an authentic hero in *Infinite Jest*. An important aspect of *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's appraisal of the popular notion of heroism and his claim to the validity of a new kind of heroism.

It is fitting that the basis for Wallace's inquiry into modern heroism would be connected to television, as Wallace wrote his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in which he explores how television has affected post-modernity in America. Boswell describes Wallace's essay as one of Wallace's most significant non-fiction texts (9). According to Boswell, Wallace's essay "functions as one of the most direct articulations of Wallace's particular take on postmodernism and the unique challenges facing writers of his generation" (9). Wallace's analysis of the way television affects the culture of the modern world shares similarities to core themes in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which is set in a world where video entertainment has an economically symbiotic but culturally antagonistic relationship (*Infinite Jest* 412-413). Boswell notes the connection that the essay, which was written first, has with *Infinite Jest*, and asserts that the essay "in many ways prepared the way for that career-making book" (9).

Wallace states in his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that "the most dangerous thing about television for U.S. fiction writers is that we yield to the temptation not to take television seriously as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process" (155). Wallace believes that television is an important link to understanding contemporary culture. Wallace openly admits that "TV is the epitome of low art" (162), yet it is an important tool for understanding "what we as Audience want to see ourselves as" (152). Given the value Wallace attributes to TV for its ability to perform "predatory human research" (151) and the fact that Wallace sees television functioning as a social mirror of human desire (152), it isn't surprising that Wallace would use television as a jumping off point to examine cultural heroism since the television heroes would be reflections of what audiences hoped to see as heroes.

Wallace even suggests that television itself has heroic connotations. He acknowledges the “truly heroic contortions of body and mind that must be required for Don Johnson to act unwatched as he’s watched by a lens” (154). Wallace also claims that “television purveys and enables *dreams*, and most of these dreams involve some sort of transcendence of average daily life” (164). The painful monotony of daily existence is another theme in Wallace’s work. His emphasis on heroics in television shows a connection between television, the way television shapes society, and what society considers heroic. Similarly, the essay on television heroics by *Infinite Jest*’s character Hal serves as a real critique of society’s understanding of heroes presented through entertaining cultural media like television.

*The Pale King*, though an unfinished text, greatly extends Wallace’s argument for a new understanding of heroism. Though shorter in length, *The Pale King* is every bit as dense as *Infinite Jest*, and, like its predecessor novel, sheds light on difficult and often overlooked challenges that individuals face in modern society. Marshall Boswell notes in an introduction to an issue of *Studies in the Novel* focused on Wallace’s writing that *The Pale King* is “Wallace’s attempt to deal with such weighty issues as boredom, information overload, civic responsibility, taxes, and the significance of human dignity in the digital age” (367). The IRS setting in the novel serves as the perfect backdrop to address these topics in a comprehensive and creative manner, and Wallace shows how heroism can occur in the most mundane and unrecognized places of society. *The Pale King* augments Wallace’s assertions by illustrating a civic quality of heroism, specifically pertaining to a form of the hero of stasis. This text exemplifies how even low-level employees at the most hated organization in American truly can be considered as heroes.

The idea that the hero of stasis possesses a civic quality is demonstrated through the work of these heroes because their work is for the greater good of the citizens. It is done without praise or recognition, and they also perform undesirable tasks that are done under circumstances of extreme duress. *The Pale King* bolsters Wallace's movement away from cinematic heroics and towards real-life small-h heroes, as the novel suggests the idea that the underdog hero is actually more heroic and authentic than the popular and publicly celebrated heroes of society. Examining *Infinite Jest* alongside *The Pale King* creates a connected line of thought about what authentic heroism truly is in Wallace's eyes.

Heroes of stasis are not like the traditional or romantic heroes of past fiction and popular culture. Heroes of stasis are not necessarily rich, talented, beautiful, or socially recognized. Heroes of stasis are, however, through their attitude and accomplishments, just as heroic as any traditional hero, and arguably even more so due to their lack of social elevation. This thesis presents the hero of stasis as an interpretation of Hal's concept of the hero of non-action from *Infinite Jest*. A hero of stasis is an individual who is able to find a heroic balance amongst the many social stimuli that overwhelms our society. Wallace uses various forms of evidence to show that finding this equilibrium is a difficult and heroic struggle. The hero of stasis does not exist in a single rigid form, though Wallace's writing implies that heroes of stasis are typically white males. While Wallace's textual examples show that a hero of stasis could be anyone from a hospitalized recovering drug addict to a low-level employee of the IRS, his lack of racial and gender diversity in his writing on heroism suggests that Wallace sees the hero of stasis as a white male figure. Wallace's texts also work to inform readers about how the identity of heroes is created, as well as the possibilities for the existence of multiple types



of heroes. Wallace is concerned with investigating how traditional and contemporary heroes have come to be and with exploring the new possibilities of identifying an authentic hero: the hero of stasis.

Critics and scholars have identified individual heroes in Wallace's writing, but there has been no significant study of Wallace's conception of heroism. Most critics identify Don Gately as the hero of *Infinite Jest*, but no one delves deeper into an examination of what precisely makes him heroic or what kind of hero he truly is. This thesis will argue that Wallace's texts explore a multi-faceted understanding of heroes in American society. It will build off this cultural foundation and use close reading, literary analysis of Wallace's work, and scholarly criticism to illuminate Wallace's conception of heroism. It will be the goal of this thesis to show that Wallace is not merely condemning an older way of envisioning a hero and espousing a newer interpretation. Wallace dissects American notions of heroism, highlighting the values and limits of the traditional notion, while submitting an alternate way to view the concept.

## **Chapter 1: The Heroes of Action, Reaction, and Non-Action (Stasis)**

The key to understanding Wallace's notion of heroism lies in an essay written by one of his characters in *Infinite Jest*. The essay is written by Harold "Hal" James Incandenza, who is a central character of the massive novel and arguably the novel's co-protagonist. Hal is a boy genius and drug abuser who, in a creatively exaggerated way, echoes Wallace's own obsession and skill with words, grammar, and writing. In Hal's world, the world of *Infinite Jest*, the nations of North America have united under a single government, and the president is a former Las Vegas crooner obsessed with cleaning politics and the nation, which has resulted in the northeastern part of America and

southeastern part of Canada becoming a massive waste dump. In this world rife with addiction and entertainment overload, individuals struggle to find meaning in their lives as their culture slides into hyper-commercialization. This cultural decline is highlighted by the fact the calendar years are no longer numerical but are instead advertisements companies bid for. Wallace accents how ridiculously commercialized this world is with the examples of year names that occur in the novel, which include: Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, and the Year of the Trial-Sized Dove Bar, to name a few.

This untitled essay is Hal's critique of television heroes of past decades whose television performances represented their heroic nature. The majority of the essay focuses on a comparison between *Hawaii Five-0's* Chief Steve McGarrett and *Hill Street Blues'* Captain Frank Furillo. McGarrett represents the "hero of action" (*Infinite Jest* 140) from the 1970s, and his style of heroism is characterized by saving the day by always taking action in front of the audience. Furillo is the incarnation of the 1980's "hero of reaction" (141), a hero who must save the day by properly reacting to the overwhelming pressures of his job. Hal draws connections between the dramatic style of each television hero's respective show and the qualities that make the television characters heroes. The essay also offers a short conclusion that predicts the emergence of a new kind of hero: "the hero of non-action" (142). The hero of non-action will represent a new style of heroism that is based on the hero's ability to refrain from action. Hal's essay on television heroism is Wallace's playful way of suggesting a way to understand heroism that differs from traditional depictions in popular culture.

Hal respectively describes the heroes of action and reaction as representing the “B.S. 1970’s era” (*Infinite Jest* 140) and “B.S. 1980’s era” (140) of heroism. Readers of the novel will know that B.S. in the world of *Infinite Jest* means “Before Subsidization” (Dowling et al. 296), which refers to the time period in the novel before time became subsidized. In the novel, the subsidization of time occurred after the year 2000. This is significant because “Subsidized Time doesn’t just represent a new way of counting time, but a whole new way of dealing with social reality” (28). This is important for understanding the heroic nature of the hero of non-action. The society of *Infinite Jest* has recently undergone a shift in social perception and social values. The hero for this society will represent a drastic shift from the norms of previous generations. Wallace also implies a double-speak with the abbreviation “B.S.” The abbreviation has a specific meaning in the novel, which is made clear to readers, but Wallace is also playing on his readers’ prior experiences. Most North American readers will culturally identify the initials B.S. with the term bullshit, a term that denotes filth and falseness. The connection is not coincidental. Hal demonstrates how the circa B.S. hero examples perform a style of heroism that is meant for a television audience and thus is deceptive and somewhat nonsensical, which could be considered by readers as “bullshit.” The Hero of non-action would not emerge before subsidization, but the hero of non-action is sort of a B.S. hero, in that he is the playful assumption of a brilliant 7<sup>th</sup> grader. In fact, the hero of non-action first appears as the most B.S. hero. However, Wallace takes the idea of a hero who takes no actions (the character literally does not move) and demonstrates through the arcs of characters in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* how non-action can be just as heroic as action.

Unfortunately, the ideas put forth in Hal's essay are not given the recognition by literary scholars that they deserve. There has been very little critical writing that connects Hal's essay to larger ideas in *Infinite Jest* or Wallace's work in general. The only source I have found that even references Hal's essay is Toon Staes' essay, "Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*." Staes only mentions Hal's essay on heroism as a minor point in his goal of examining the relationship of an author, the narrator of the author's novel, the text itself, and how the author's poetics are translated into the author's writing (410). Staes mentions Hal's essay on heroism, but he takes the document at face value as a self-description of Hal. Staes says, "The mysteries surrounding Hal Incandenza can illustrate this principle quite well. The representation that we get of the unresponsive and uncommunicative protagonist in the first few pages of *Infinite Jest* ties in, for example, with Hal's own portrayal of the new hero in fiction as [Hal's hero of non-action]" (418). Staes' interpretation is both shallow and incorrect, which I will explain in greater detail in the second chapter of this thesis. But the greatest issue is not Staes mistaking Hal as the hero of non-action; it's the fact that he does nothing to connect Wallace's conception of heroism with Wallace's larger scope of ideas and texts. Staes mentions the essay in support of a minor point, and he moves on without acknowledging the deep connection the ideas of the essay share with Wallace's work.

One of the aims of this thesis is to show that Hal's ideas about heroes are an extension of Wallace's conception of heroism, an idea that runs through numerous texts of his. Wallace doesn't assert one type of heroism as being the true or best type. Instead, he shows how heroism depicted in culture has changed with the values of the times, and

Wallace challenges the way society views heroes by showing examples of unconventional acts of heroism. Wallace's hero of non-action is presented humorously in Hal's 7<sup>th</sup> grade essay, but Wallace also exemplifies the valid heroic possibilities of heroic non-action through other characters and ideas in his writing. The hero of non-action is Wallace's new vision of a hero who is heroic in their ability to endure their plight and find an internal stasis, which is why this thesis interprets Hal's hero of action as a hero of stasis.

### **1. Analyzing Hal's Essay on TV Heroism**

Hal's essay is introduced in the middle of an eclectic group of communication documents from the world of the novel that range from a drunken brick layer's insurance claim to a published article written by a cross-dressing secret agent. Like many parts of *Infinite Jest*, this essay finds itself in the midst of creative chaos. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that Hal's essay is a significant segment of the novel (aside from it merely being included). In a brief paragraph that explains the entry of Hal's essay, it is revealed that the essay was written "FOUR YEARS AFTER THE DEMISE OF BROADCAST TELEVISION" (*Infinite Jest* 140) and just "ONE YEAR AFTER DR. JAMES O. INCANDENZA PASSED FROM THIS LIFE" (140). Hal's interests in broadcast television are a clear trend in his writing, but what is more significant is the essay's timing in relation to the death of Hal's father. The paragraph also mentions that this essay is "HAL INCANDENZA'S FIRST EXTANT WRITTEN COMMENTARY ON ANYTHING EVEN REMOTELY FILMIC" (140). The fact that Hal's father was a highly revered avant-garde filmmaker and the fact that the essay was written a year after his father's death are clear indicators that this essay represents Hal's attempt to connect

with his father's field of expertise, and by extension, his father as well. The essay's connection between the anniversary of Hal's father's death and the subject matter's connection to his father's work is sufficient evidence that this essay is important to Hal, thus making it important to the novel and not just a sample of flavorful text to add more background to the world of *Infinite Jest*.

Once the significance of Hal's essay is understood, it is important to observe the validity of Hal's essay. It is made explicitly clear in *Infinite Jest* that Hal is a brainiac of the highest degree. Hal's amazing tennis talent is equal to, if not surpassed by, his reading and writing skills. His uncle, C.T. describes Hal as "having credentials out the bazoo" (*Infinite Jest* 15), and C.T. states that "the boy reads like a vacuum. *Digests* things" (15). Hal's writing ability gains further credence from the praise of the Deans on the University of Arizona's admissions committee. During Hal's interview, a dean mentions "the matter of not the required two but *nine* separate application essays, some of which of nearly monograph-length, each without exception being [...] the adjective various evaluators used was quote 'stellar'" (7). It is also noted that Hal's admission essays are extremely diverse in content. The Board of Deans are suspicious about whether Hal is the only author of these papers, but Hal makes it clear that "The essays are old ones, yes, but they are mine; *de moi*" (9). There is still clear evidence in the novel that Hal's writing is extremely advanced and credible, and that Hal is not a typical teenage student, but rather an O.E.D. memorizing (29) boy-genius who corrects even professionals on their use of language (9). It is safe to accept that Hal's writing is the work of brilliance. But on the other hand, one must realize that Hal is just a kid and as such, Hal cannot be expected to have the same meta-cognition and professional tone that an adult writer might have. This

is what makes Wallace's example of heroism so playful. He challenges the way a hero is defined but does so through the essay of a nerdy 7<sup>th</sup> grader. Hal's essay deserves to be taken seriously, but in order to fully understand its significance, one must realize the playful nature of the essay—it is actually quite funny. The hero who Hal posits as a future possibility is a “catatonic hero” who is “carried here and there across sets by burly extras” (142), which is a ridiculous notion of a television hero. However, Wallace uses characters from *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* to show that this eccentric form of heroism has very real possibilities for taking shape in the worlds of the novels, and for those who might perform this style of heroism in real life.

## **2. The White Male Emphasis of Wallace's Writing**

Wallace offers Hal's essay on the television heroes of action, reaction, and non-action as a way of understanding the unconventional type of heroic non-action that exists in the novel, but it is also important to note that the heroes depicted in both Hal's essay and Wallace's texts are very conventional in the sense that they follow the tradition of depicted heroes as white males. I see this as more of a flaw of Wallace's writing than of Hal's. Hal is citing popular television shows that depict heroic white men as examples to get the point across for his perceived evolution of heroism in modern society. Hal is working with what he has available regarding pop-culture heroes that can be recognized by a wide audience. It is more contemporary society's fault, not Hal's, that there are not easily referenceable television or film heroes of color or female heroes that could be used to demonstrate his point. Hal's predicted hero of non-action has no clear signifiers of race or gender, though the argument could be made that due to the prevalence of white male-centric heroes in modern culture, a hero of non-action may be more likely than not to be

white and male. The real fault for oversight is on Wallace's shoulders for his inability, or outright refusal, to write about female or non-white characters with heroic qualities. This is sadly an overarching blemish on Wallace's fiction and non-fiction texts. Numerous critics, including David Mura and Sean Gandert, have taken Wallace to task for his negligence of writing positive female and/or non-white characters, as well as Wallace's own issues for dealing with and writing about female and/or non-white people. This thesis does not seek to defend or excuse Wallace for these shortcomings, but it asserts that Wallace's shortcomings as a person and as an author do not necessitate a shortcoming in the concept of a hero of stasis. Though it is true that Wallace's heroes in his texts are all white men, his idea for the hero of stasis is not necessarily limited to only white men. While there is potential for people who are not white males to achieve the form of heroism Wallace explores in his writing, Wallace indicates through his lack of diversity in his novels and his exclusive white male examples that he seems to envision incarnations of his new style of heroism as being white males.

David Mura addresses Wallace's questionable history with non-white people through an academic talk Wallace wrote about having with some of his non-white students. Mura takes the details of Wallace's student-professor talk from Wallace's essay, "Authority and American Usage," in the collection, *Consider the Lobster*, where Wallace describes this talk in writing. Mura details how Wallace ineloquently labels the students' dialect as Standard Black English (SBE), and Wallace unceremoniously instructs the students to learn and implement Standard White English (SWE) in order to be successful in his class and in life. Mura stated, "[Wallace] assumes there is one version of the "truth" and that he has simply laid down that "truth" to the student of color—and to



whatever colleagues who find him “racially insensitive” (7). Mura is correct that Wallace’s approach, whether well-intended or not, is single-minded and lacks any sincere empathy for his audience. What makes it worse is that Wallace fails or refuses to see that his truth comes from his own social perspective as a white male professor. He treats his stance on adhering to SWE as being objectively correct because it is the truth as he sees it, but Wallace seems to view the notion that it’s insensitive for him to lay down his SWE truth as a subjective interpretation. As Mura states, “Wallace makes a fundamental mistake that is part of any basic instruction in rhetoric—you must be aware of your audience and how your message will be received by that audience” (9). Mura further notes that Wallace’s account of his talk with students of color is the only time in Wallace’s non-fiction writing where he mentions writers of color at all (8). Though Wallace never directly disqualifies individuals who are not white males from being heroes of stasis, he does choose to only write about heroic incarnations who are white males, which could be due to Wallace’s tendency to speak his personal truth through his white-male lens of experience. Wallace’s lack of empathy and understanding of non-white people was not limited to his classroom; he shows his flaws through his omission of non-white writers throughout his extensive non-fiction works. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that Wallace’s works of fiction typically portray people of color in negative, menial, or stereotypical incarnations, which exposes Wallace’s ignorance as a person and as a writer.

Wallace’s flaws on this issue are consequential to his written works and his legacy as a writer; however, these flaws are not uncommon for white male writers. Mura references Wallace’s lack of introspection into the possibility that Wallace’s thinking, as

a white male, may be influenced by his white male privilege, which Mura reasons is because “Wallace thinks he, like so many white liberals, has escaped all that. Your average white writing instructor just knows he or she cannot be guilty of racism or racial bias; that is impossible” (13). Not only does Mura point out a valid critique of Wallace, he also acknowledges that Wallace’s attitude towards race as a white male academic is common. Mura further ponders the cause of Wallace’s tone-deaf approach to people of color, stating: “Is it because he was considered a white genius dude? Probably not, since the qualities he exhibits are those shared by many liberal white professors, the vast majority of which are not geniuses” (14). Mura’s assertions further show that Wallace is far from alone in his flawed view of non-white writers. This doesn’t excuse Wallace, but it does signify that the problem goes beyond him. Mura’s analysis reveals that many white liberal professors are in the same flawed boat as Wallace, which indicates that the insensitivity towards non-white writers is a systemic issue. During Mura’s critique of Wallace’s academic talk with non-white students, Mura extrapolates: “In short, aside from some of its faulty premises, Wallace’s whole spiel is wrong-headed in tone and approach. And he is completely unaware of the possibility of this” (8). Wallace’s lack of empathy and understanding with non-white writers is damaging, but not malicious. As Mura asserts, Wallace’s flaws are born out of ignorance.

In his text, “A Short Meditation on the Whiteness of David Foster Wallace’s Writing,” Sean Grandert addresses Wallace’s lack of positive non-white characters in his works of fiction. Grandert describes Wallace’s texts as “whiter than an arctic fox” (par. 3) and a “wall of incandescent white” (par. 9). Grandert indicates that Wallace’s issue goes beyond the omission of people of color in his works when Grandert states, “worse than

that, sometimes [Wallace's work is] (unintentionally, I would hope) simply racist— primarily in his masterwork *Infinite Jest*" (par. 3). Wallace's works aren't completely devoid of non-white characters, but such characters often serve as background noise to create a world that appears somewhat authentic at first blush. Grandert describes *Infinite Jest*'s racial issues as: "the almost unassailable epic that's nonetheless riddled with unnecessary racial slurs and a complete lack of non-white point of view characters despite a sprawling cast so large that, having read through the book half a dozen times, I still find myself forgetting dozens of minor characters" (par. 6). Grandert also characterizes Wallace's lack of meaningful non-white characters as a weakness in Wallace as a writer due to Wallace's deficient imagination for people of color. Grandert states, "Wallace doesn't seem to be able to imagine a world without diversity, but he also seems fundamentally incapable of imagining non-white characters in any but subservient or otherwise racist roles" (par. 6). It is surprising that a deeply introspective author like Wallace could be so oblivious to his lack of empathy with non-white people and his inability to portray non-white characters in meaningful ways. Grandert states, "Wallace recognizes racism and that this is a hateful, harmful thing, but doesn't question its existence, doesn't problematize its role in the world. Instead, he recreates it" (par. 8). Wallace is wise enough to know that racism exists and that it is bad, but he failed to see that he did nothing to combat it. Grandert, like Mura, holds Wallace accountable for his deficiencies for dealing with race but also recognizes that Wallace's problem is far from uncommon. Grandert states, "While I want everyone to be able to write characters of races other than their own well, to give them depth and acuity and intelligence and humanity, the reality of the situation is that for some people that may not be possible.

Unfortunately, I think Wallace was one of those people; quite possibly almost all of us are” (par. 11). Again, we see the reasoning that Wallace, and many other white writers, are guilty of building white-centric texts due to their inability to see, or perhaps change, their flawed *modus operandi*.

Despite all the literary value Wallace offers in his texts, they represent a sort of white boys’ club of fiction, where readers don’t have to be white men to enjoy the work, but all the significant characters come from a white male perspective. We can only speculate why none of his key characters are non-white, but as readers we can see that there was certainly room in *Infinite Jest*, among other works, to include meaningful non-white characters. Don Gately, a central character in *Infinite Jest* who is considered a hero by numerous critics, is certainly a character that did not need to be white. But whether it was due to Wallace’s inability as a writer, his fear of writing unauthentic characters, some below the surface prejudice, or another unknown reason, we are left with the white, and predominantly male, characters in his works. Like Hal having to choose from a selection of white male TV heroes to make a point about the evolution of heroism in contemporary culture, this thesis must work with the examples Wallace has laid out for his conception of heroism. The examples aren’t perfect, but they are still valid for the purposes of this thesis’ interpretation of the hero of stasis. Though Wallace’s writing is diminished for its lack of diversity, his concept of heroic non-action does not have to be because often the ideas of authors transcend the authors themselves. Just because the only examples Wallace shows of heroic non-action comes from white males, does not make that an inherent condition. It could be argued that it is easier for a white male to achieve this type of heroism due to the economic and social advantages white males may have

over their non-white and non-male peers, but that does not preclude non-white or non-male individuals from becoming heroes of stasis through their own internal struggle of heroic non-action. While it is important to acknowledge that Wallace's heroism isn't intrinsically limited to white males, it is equally important to acknowledge that Wallace only depicts his heroism through the white male perspective and the heroism Wallace espouses is more accessible to white men than any other demographic.

### 3. The Television Heroes of Action and Reaction

There is also a potential complication to consider regarding the credibility of Hal's essay on heroism in the world of the novel. Along with the background of the essay, the informative paragraph about the essay also includes the essay's grade as well as some of the instructor's comments. Hal's essay is evaluated as:

A SUBMISSION RECEIVING JUST A B/B+, DESPITE OVERALL POSITIVE FEEDBACK, MOSTLY BECAUSE ITS CONCLUDING [paragraph] WAS NEITHER SET UP BY THE ESSAY'S BODY NOR SUPPORTED, OGILVIE [Hal's instructor] POINTED OUT, BY ANYTHING MORE THAN SUBJECTIVE INTUITION AND RHETORICAL FLOURISH. (*Infinite Jest* 140)

At first glance, the essay's evaluation may seem to demean its value, rendering this artifact of Hal's writing subpar and insignificant. However, there are several important clues that vouch for Hal's ideas and explain the absence of an A/A+ grade. Hal's essay is regarded positively by his instructor, and Hal's command of rhetoric is clearly praised. However, a B/B+ for Hal is a severely below average grade for a student who generally receives A's with an excess of pluses, which causes University of Arizona's Director of Composition to exclaim that "Most institutions do not even *have* grades of A with

multiple pluses after it” (6). The essay’s B/B+ grade can be attributed to the essay’s shortcomings in form not content. It is not so much that Hal’s ideas are incorrect but that his ideas are not fully developed in the essay. The conclusion of Hal’s essay is not supported by any textual evidence, and it has little logical backing outside of Hal’s intuition (140). This is a significant problem for a paper written for a class, but for the purposes of the novel and this thesis, the ideas of the essay are relevant despite that absence of a well-formed concluding paragraph. The essay’s conclusion is the only part of the essay that mentions the hero of non-action. It is critical for understanding Wallace’s new notion of heroism. The essay’s conclusion may be deemed as an underdeveloped subjective prediction, but the ideas contained within the conclusion are the product of Hal’s genius intuition (140). Hal’s essay of heroic types may not be an excellent paper, but it serves as a powerful prophecy for an idea that Wallace evolves throughout his work.

The introduction of Hal’s essay informs readers that the purpose of the paper is to compare two television heroes from different decades in order to understand “how our North American idea of the hero changed” (*Infinite Jest* 140) from one generation to the next, starting with the hero of action. Hal describes *Hawaii Five-0*’s Chief Steve McGarrett as “a classically modern hero of action” (140). McGarrett is the perfect hero of action because taking action is the essence of his character. As Hal puts it, “He acts out. It is what he does. The camera is always on him” (140-141). Through Hal’s analysis of *Hawaii Five-0*, it is clear that he doesn’t see the show as much more than perpetual close-ups of McGarrett taking action. Hal believes that it is the action in itself that is the core of the heroism. To be more specific, Hal asserts that “Homing in is the essence of what the

classic hero of modern action does” (141). Hal makes this assertion because he believes that the entire purpose of *Hawaii Five-0* is to watch the hero of action as he acts throughout various scenes and situations. As Hal puts it, “there is no mystery, there is only Steve McGarrett” (141). The hero of action is the representation of modern values. The hero of action is inseparable from the heroic actions he performs. They are one and the same: taking action because he is heroic and being heroic because he is taking action. The nature of McGarrett’s show is depicted as: “The audience knows what the case is and also knows, by the end of Act One, who is guilty,” (141) which signifies that it does not matter what action McGarrett takes. There are no surprises for the audience. McGarrett is just there to take action. Just like Steve McGarrett, a hero of action is a glorified lone wolf type of hero whose value is determined by their ability to act.

The example that Hal uses to exemplify the next type of heroism is Captain Frank Furillo from *Hill Street Blues*. In contrast to the modern hero, McGarrett, Furillo is considered by Hal to be “a ‘post’-modern hero” (*Infinite Jest* 141), which he defines as “a hero whose virtues are suited to a more complex and corporate American era. I. e., a hero of reaction” (141). Considering the distinct differences in the styles of the television shows *Hawaii Five-0* and *Hill Street Blues* is helpful for understanding the differences between heroes of action and heroes of reaction. *Hawaii Five-0* is much more focused on the isolated hero and his all-absorbing, single-focused quest, whereas *Hill Street Blues* is more focused on how one overwhelmed hero is able to stay afloat amidst endless quests. Hal observes that “Furillo is beset by petty distractions on all sides from the very beginning of Act One” (141). Furillo and heroes of reaction live in a much different world than McGarrett and heroes of action. McGarrett’s world is focused on the

individual: the individual problem, the individual hero, the individual action. Furillo's world is bustling with people, problems, choices, and an overwhelming sense of confusion that blurs the lines between all competing stimuli. Hal even notes how their different type of worlds can be noted by each lawman's respective office: McGarrett's office looks like a secluded library, while Furillo operates out of a bustling cubicle (141). Furillo's post-modern world calls for a new type of hero with new traits. Hal sums up Furillo, the exemplary hero of reaction, by saying, "He is a bureaucrat, and his heroism is bureaucratic, with a genius for navigating clustered fields" (141). The hero of reaction is not a lone wolf like the hero of action. The hero of reaction is not alone in the spotlight. He is in the center of chaos, a chaos that he must attempt to tame and organize as an act of heroism.

There is a stark difference in the heroic nature of the hero of action and the hero of reaction. Almost nothing about them is similar. On screen, the hero of reaction is "one part of a frenetic, moving pan by the program's camera" (*Infinite Jest* 142) while the hero of action's screen appearance "seems more reminiscent of romantic portraiture than filmed drama" (142). The trademark physical appearances of the heroes are even significantly different. The hero of action is described as "the jut-jawed hero" (142), while the hero of reaction is described as "the mild-eyed hero" (142). Even though both examples of the heroes of action and reaction are white men, they differ in their physical appearance, social perception, and style of heroism. The two examples do, however, share a significant connection in their loneliness, a connection that may well be fostered by their social positioning in terms of both race and gender. Hal depicts McGarrett as "the lone man of action" (142), emphasizing his lone figure that dominates the screen.



Hal also comments that “Furillo’s is a whole different kind of loneliness” (142).

McGarrett possesses the loneliness of individualism. He is alone in the spotlight with his own actions. Furillo on the other hand, is surrounded by others, but through his bureaucratic heroic duty to react, he is isolated by the pressure of his work.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Hal believes that the transition from the hero of action to reaction is a form of heroic evolution and not a mere change or shift. The term evolution implies that the heroes are becoming better, improving their nature. The evolution of the heroes can be inferred by Hal’s clear preference of the hero of reaction over the hero of action. Hal states that “Frank Furillo retains his sanity, composure, and superior grooming in the face of a barrage of distracting, unheroic demands that would have left Chief Steve McGarrett slumped, unkempt, and chewing his knuckles in administrative confusion” (*Infinite Jest* 141). Hal seems to think that heroes of action are incapable of meeting the demands of heroes of reaction. The comparison of McGarrett failing to perform the work of Furillo demonstrates how reactionary heroism dwarfs heroism of action. It is clear that Hal believes that the work of the hero of reaction is more difficult, if not better, than the work of the hero of action. However, Hal seems no more satisfied with the hero of reaction than he is with the hero of action. Hal observes that “we, as a North American audience, have favored the more Stoic, corporate hero of reactive probity” (142), which he speculates could be due the audience being “‘trapped’ in the reactive moral ambiguity of ‘post-’ and ‘post-post’-modern culture” (142). Hal seems to think that society is stuck in a reactive mode, unable to take the next step in a culture that is becoming something beyond postmodern, “‘post-post’-modern culture” (142). The description suggests that not only does the American hero in media

continue to be a white-male figure, this conceptual hero is also awaiting the next step in his heroic evolution, and the next step is for the hero of reaction to evolve into the hero of non-action.

#### 4. The Predicted Hero of Non-Action

The prediction of the hero of non-action appears in Hal's concluding paragraph. Hal offers little information on the hero of non-action, as it is more prophesy than description. Hal's essay ends by stating: "But what comes next? What North American hero can hope to succeed the placid Frank? We await, I predict, the hero of *non*-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus, carried here and there across sets by burly extras whose blood sings with retrograde amines" (*Infinite Jest* 142). This short paragraph is all that Hal states about the hero of non-action, but there is a lot of information in this short passage. For starters, Hal's implication that the new hero will replace Frank Furillo, the model hero of reaction, strengthens the argument that Hal believes that heroes are evolving.

Wallace's suggestion that the role of the hero evolves with the times is supported by critical texts focused on examining heroes in fiction. In H. H. Boyesen's 1889 essay, "The Hero of Fiction," Boyesen asserts that the core nature of the traditional hero does not change despite the many different manifestations that have been created throughout history (594). Boyesen says of heroes: "For most of them have not only their prototypes, but their exact counterparts, in the ages of the past" (594). He acknowledges that as the times change, external qualities of heroes change as well; however, he states: "But in their inner-most core the characters remain essentially the same" (594). Boyesen even goes on to assert that, "The fundamental traits of human nature, transmitted by

inheritance from generation to generation, seem capable of but a limited amount of variation, and it would seem as if the novelists had already reached the limit" (594). It appears that Boyesen does not see the traditional hero as evolving through time, but merely heroes change their adornments and language to go with the current culture. Though Boyesen does not see an evolution, it is important to note that he does see a drastic shift in the identity of the central character of the novel.

Instead of interpreting the shift from the traditional hero to a new type of protagonist, Boyesen interprets the shift as essentially the death of the hero and the rise of a new central character. "The latest development of the novel breaks with this tradition. It really abolishes the hero," (598) states Boyesen. Of the hero's replacement in literature, Boyesen states: "this central character founds his claims upon the reader's interest, not upon any brilliancy or attraction, but upon his typical capacity, as representing a large class of his fellow-men" (598). Like the previously mentioned issues of race and gender tied to heroes portrayed in the arts, the new central character hero Boyesen speaks of would undoubtedly be more related to white men than women or non-white men. It is reasonable though to assume that this new central character hero Boyesen references would still be more relatable for people other than white men than the high-status traditional heroes. Though the non-white-male readers may not be able to easily see themselves as the new kind of hero, women and non-white readers may very well have at least known someone (be it a relation, a neighbor, or an employer) who would be similar to the central character hero, whereas they are much less likely to have met someone similar to the traditional hero like a military leader or a member of the aristocracy. There is certainly still an identity barrier, but the incarnations of the new central character hero

Boyesen references are still much closer to the world and daily experience of non-white-male readers than the incarnations of traditional heroes. Boyesen's description of the abolishment of the traditional hero in favor of the protagonist of interest who the audience can better relate to is very similar to the transition of heroes from the McGarrett hero of action era to the Furillo hero of re-action era. Boyesen asserts that traditional heroes are figures of strength, skill, and/or beauty who "thrill the soul, and kindle, by admiring sympathy, the heroic possibilities in our own hearts" (595). This is a fitting description for Steve McGarrett, whom Hal posits as always being present in front of the action, entertaining the audience by his actions. Boyesen describes the modern hero as having "much business of a practical sort to attend to," (600) which connects directly with the image Hal depicts of the hero of re-action being swamped with bureaucratic challenges in his cubicle.

Despite Boyesen's semantics in referring to abolishing the hero rather than the hero evolving, Boyesen sees a distinct shift in how new heroes are depicted in literature. Boyesen even notes that new hero characters come from less exciting social positions like merchants and farmers (600), and he notes that these heroes are shown amidst the bustle of their profession rather than just their leisure time (600). Considering Boyesen's essay was published in 1889, there is a clear record of theory that the role of the hero in fiction has been shifting away from the solitary traditional hero (i.e. hero of action) to a more relatable and more productivity-focused hero (hero of re-action).

Hal is a careful rhetorician, and his careful word choice is significant. Hal uses hyperbolic language, like "catatonic," (142) "beyond calm," (142) and "divorced from all stimulus" (142) to emphasize the hero of non-action's heroism. These words, however,

offer a double-speak description of the hero of non-action. The word “catatonic” reflects an extreme state of non-action, but it also reflects “A form of insanity” (“Catatonia,” def. n.1). The insanity of the hero of non-action is a symbol of his position in society. The hero of non-action stands in opposition to the standard values and practices of Hal’s society. The burly extras that carry around the hero of non-action represent the average stock male. They move and take action while the hero remains heroically still. Hal offers a very loaded statement when he says the hero of non-action is “divorced from all stimulus” (*Infinite Jest* 142). The use of the word divorce shows that the separation from stimulus is both formal and intimate. It symbolizes a permanent separation of two entities that were once entwined. Using the technical term stimulus also hints that Hal is breaking down the distractions that heroes face to the smallest unit possible. A hero that is divorced from stimulus cannot be made or triggered to act. He is resolute in non-action.

Hal’s phrasing also suggests that the hero’s identity goes beyond the feats of the hero. Hal claims that the extras that move the hero of non-action around possess “blood [that] sings with retrograde amines” (142). Hal’s inclusion of the images of blood and amines creates a connection between the hero’s identity and his physical makeup. The word retrograde conveys a meaning of movement in the reverse order of normal operations, and it has a specific connotation with pertaining to the sky or heavens (“Retrograde,” def. 1.a.). Retrograde also suggests a decline or de-evolution, which further accents the superior nature of the hero to the average person characterized as the burly extras.

Understanding how non-action can be considered heroic requires a look at the change from the hero of action to the hero of re-action. Hal’s essay marks a change of

going from the isolated individual hero to the hero bogged down in bureaucracy. The changing of the eras of heroes indicates a movement towards stimulus, which is hinted at being overwhelming. If the hero of non-action is the hero of the future, it is logical to assume that the future involves an increased proliferation of information, distractions, and choices (i.e. stimulus). We don't even have to solely rely on the cultural progression described in Hal's essay to assume that Wallace sees the future as getting busier and riddled with overwhelming tides of stimulus. Wallace touches on these ideas in his *Kenyon College Commencement Speech* (Wallace 5). If we can accept that the future is predicted to be busier than the world of the hero of reaction, it makes sense that the heroism of the future would change to meet this challenge, just as the McGarrett archetype evolved into the Furillo archetype. The hero of nonaction has evolved to a level that does not require action or the action of a response (re-action) to address the tribulations of his world. The hero of non-action is able to overcome by not taking action. As I will further demonstrate throughout this thesis, it isn't that the hero of non-action never acts, but the heroic underpinnings of the hero's non-action is their ability to choose when to withhold action.

The heroic nature of the hero of non-action falls in line with observations of social heroism noted in the 2011 essay, "Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism" (Franco, et al), which examines the theoretical underpinnings of social heroism. The essay immediately asserts that "Heroism is a social attribution, never a personal one; yet the act itself is often a solitary, existential choice" (99). The essay acknowledges the ever-changing nature of heroism in society by stating: "[heroism] is historically, culturally and situationally determined, thus heroes of one era

may prove to be villains in another time when controverting evidence emerges; yet some heroes endure across the centuries” (99). These assertions from Franco, et al match the observations Boyesen writes about the hero of fiction as well as the heroic evolution depicted in Hal’s essay.

The Franco, et al essay goes on to make observations about different types of heroism in society, one of which is social heroism. Social heroism, unlike civil heroism and martial heroism, does not have the immediate implication of physical peril as a prerequisite, but social heroism does risk important stakes like financial and social wellbeing (100). The essay asserts that, “The goal of social heroism can be seen as the preservation of a community-sanctioned value or standard that is perceived to be under threat. In some cases, the actor is actually trying to establish a set of *extra*-community standards—pushing towards a new ideal that has not yet found wide acceptance” (100). While the hero of non-action does not practice a form of heroism that is typical in literature or popular culture, the Franco, et al essay lays out clear guidelines that can be used to legitimize Wallace’s hero of non-action. In a world of information and entertainment overload, the ability to willingly refrain from action and re-action in response to said stimuli is the new ideal that the hero of non-action pushes towards. The Franco, et al essay further states that, “Social heroism is typically less dramatic, unfolds over a much longer period of time, and is frequently undertaken in private rather than public settings” (101). Non-action is much less dramatic than action or re-action, which Hal humorously highlights by his image of the hero of non-action having to be carried back and forth to different scenes by members of the film crew (*Infinite Jest* 142). The hero of non-action is connected to a very real sense of heroism, and Wallace shows how

that form of social heroism takes shape through characters in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

As the next step in Hal's evolutionary chain of heroism, the hero of non-action is very different from the heroes of action and reaction. And as the future evolutionary step, Hal appears to favor the hero of non-action's style of heroism. The hero of non-action need not be "jut-jawed" like the hero of action. This is demonstrated by the emphasis on the burly extras who are bigger than the hero of non-action yet remain inferior. The hero of non-action is also described as being "the one beyond calm" (*Infinite Jest* 142) versus the hero of reaction who merely appears "as placid under pressure as a cow's face" (142). Heroes of reaction, like Furillo, struggle to appear calm and remain calm. The hero of non-action rests at a state of being beyond being calm. The hero of non-action is above being calm and above the hero of reaction and the hero of action.

It is Hal's hero of non-action, or more accurately an interpretation of his hero, that I will use as the model for Wallace's notion of heroism: heroism of stasis. Wallace demonstrates this new type of hero through his heroic characters in fiction and the existential notions of his non-fiction. I interpret Hal's hero of non-action to be heroic not because they merely refrain from action, but because their non-action signifies their ability to endure the grueling challenges of life without the need to take action. Wallace shows us these feats on non-action through the struggle of characters like Don Gately (*Infinite Jest* 814) and Drinion (*The Pale King* 485), which will be further analyzed in chapters two and three of this thesis. The hero of non-action is not literally a physically catatonic hero, but instead a hero who is able to endure and sustain through physical, mental, and existential turmoil.



A mundane example of heroic non-action could be found in a trip to the dentist's office. A patient lying vertical in the dentist's chair waiting to receive fillings for cavities can perform a very mild feat through non-action. The goal of the trip to the dentist is to fix the patient's teeth and improve his health. However, most of the success of this endeavor rests in the trained professionals. The only thing that the patient can do is be still and let the professionals work. Essentially, the patient must open his mouth and commit to non-action. However, there is more to it than simply not taking action. There is a plethora of diverse and overwhelming stimuli at the dentist's office. The patient is inverted in a foreign position. There is always a bright light overhead that radiates brightness with the same nauseating quality as fluorescent lighting. The act of filling in cavities also requires the patient's mouth to be filled with various instruments and fingers that come and go as the professionals see fit. Touch is not the only sensation that is overloaded during this experience. The patient must hear everything: the high-pitched drill crunching through bone, the hose that sucks down the residual saliva, and of course, the social banter between the dentist and dental hygienist. The patient must even confront an onslaught of odors that range from latex gloves to freshly drilled, rotted tooth bone. The sense that gets any reprieve is sight, and even that cannot save the patient from the sensory overload. To achieve heroic non-action, the patient must calmly endure amidst the unpleasant stimuli. The patient must sit perfectly still as the dentist prods too hard, as a stream of saliva rolls over their cheek and down their neck, and as a dozen other horrible sensations happen at once. In this example, it isn't the patient's ability to not act that is important. It is the struggle to endure and sustain that makes this feat significant.

Wallace's examples of heroic stasis are much more impressive than a trip to the dentist's office; however, the simple example demonstrates that the hero's struggle is more significant than the non-action of the hero. As Wallace develops his notion of heroism in his texts, he illuminates that the heroism of the hero of stasis goes beyond the self. Wallace makes it clear that being a hero of stasis very much involves an internal struggle, but Wallace develops his view on heroism, especially in *The Pale King*, to show that the self-serving struggle of heroes of stasis can result in a civic benefit for society. Wallace's new concept of a hero is innovative because it defies the common notion that heroes must achieve greatness by acting or facilitating action. The validity of the hero of non-action is proven through its manifestation in Wallace's characters in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. The heroes of non-action, as represented via Wallace's characters, are not people who simply withdraw from action all together. They are heroes who are able to find equilibrium amongst the overwhelming stimulus of life by enduring through stimulus that threatens to distract them from their specific heroic goal. For this reason, I interpret Hal's rough sketch of the hero of non-action to be the hero of stasis because it isn't the non-action of individuals that is important, it is the stasis they are able to achieve through non-action that creates a heroic result. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how a select few of Wallace's characters become heroes of stasis through their heroic non-action in pursuit of a personal equilibrium that allows them to overcome their struggles.

## **Chapter 2. The Heroic Evolution of Don Gately: Hero of Recovery and Stasis**

David Foster Wallace's greatest example of the hero of non-action in *Infinite Jest* is Don Gately, the recovering drug addict co-protagonist of the novel. Like the examples of the heroes of action and reaction from Hal's essay in *Infinite Jest*, Gately is a white male, and whether Wallace intended the connection or not, Gately's identity, like all the other heroic examples Wallace gives, imbues Wallace's conception of the hero of non-action with an emphasis on being white and male. It is common for critics like Petrus Van Ewijk, Allard Den Dulk, Catherine Nichols, and Mark Bresnan to focus on Gately as *Infinite Jest*'s central character. The term hero, however, is used casually, if at all, when referring to Gately. And when critics do refer to Gately as a hero, it is often with little effort given to distinguish what kind of hero Gately is. Gately is accepted as *Infinite Jest*'s co-protagonist, but no critical texts on Wallace's work connect Gately to Hal's high school essay on heroism.

Most critics who consider Gately to be special, or even heroic, do so for a singular and specific reason. Allard Den Dulk praises Gately for his ability to take action in his life and transform from "a 'failed,' alienated self" into the "'moral hero' of the novel," and "live a meaningful life, taking care of others as a live-in staffer at Ennet House" (428). While Dulk acknowledges Gately as a hero of the novel, he uses the term more as a complement to protagonist, and Dulk does little to analyze Gately's heroics within a larger framework of Wallace's ideas of heroism because Dulk is more concerned with using Gately as a "'case stud[y]" (413) for how young American fiction writers have, over the past several years, begun to portray the concept of "the self" (413) and "how that self can come to lead a meaningful existence" (413).

Similarly, Catherine Nichols sees Gately's struggle to stay sober as "a commitment to self-disclosure rather than self-fashioning" (13), which is why, for Nichols, Gately is one of the few "seeds of redemption within Wallace's unflinching portrayal of late-twentieth-century culture" (13). Nichols is also unconcerned with exploring Gately's heroic roots, as the focus of her analysis of Gately is aimed at his ability to combat the cultural escapism in which many characters of *Infinite Jest* find themselves hopelessly stuck (13). Nichols is more focused on the "carnavalesque qualities of postmodern culture" (3) that Wallace showcases in his writing by presenting the act of facing reality, instead of avoiding the confrontation, which serves as "a radical act of dialogue appropriate to late-twentieth century life" (4). For Nichols, it's Gately's ability to experience life without relying on "deliberate alterations of perception" (14) to feel an authentic and unexplored human experience that makes Gately special, not Gately's evolution into Wallace's unique concept of a hero of post-modern culture.

It is not surprising that critics' conceptions about Gately's heroism are diverse since Gately accomplishes many different heroic feats in the novel. However, all of the critics I've examined focus on single aspects of Gately, and they neglect to observe the significant heroic evolution that Gately undergoes throughout his life. Don Gately is not a one-dimensional hero: he isn't heroic because of a single action, a single ability, or a single facet of his personality. Don Gately is heroic for many reasons, but what I find to be most important is Gately's evolution into the hero of stasis. Gately's evolution also demonstrates the validity of each type of heroism that Hal analyzes in his essay and illuminates the value of Wallace's unconventional notions of heroism.

Don Gately does not evolve from one type of hero to another in a clear linear sequence. As Philip Sayers notes, “*Infinite Jest* is by no means a chronologically linear novel, and its progress is therefore not identical with a linear movement forwards in time” (356). Much like the novel’s progression, readers do not experience Gately’s heroic growth in a straight line. Throughout the novel, Gately grows as an individual through his downward spiral of drug use, his involvement in recovery, and the interactions he has with the people he meets along the way. Gately’s interactions may result in heroic consequences, but Gately is not a hero in every moment in the novel. The novel’s narrator informs readers that in high school, Don Gately “wasn’t kindly or heroic or a defender of the weak; it’s not like he stepped kindly in to protect wienies and misfits from the predations of those kids that were bullies” (*Infinite Jest* 903). It is easy to try and romanticize Gately into a kind of hero he isn’t. Indeed, as Bell and Dowling assert in their *Reader’s Companion to Infinite Jest*, “the point of *Infinite Jest*’s portrayal of Gately will be to reverse our normal understanding of heroism” (92). The very notion of heroic stasis, as opposed to the common notion of heroic action, constitutes such a reversal. Gately is not a mythic hero like a knight in shining armor. He is a recovering drug addict with many problems and flaws. Overcoming these obstacles allows Gately to be a sort of small-h hero, but he is far from a traditional romantic or epic hero.

### **1. Sir Osis: Gately’s Misguided Childhood Introduction into Heroics**

Despite being an unlikely hero, Don Gately was teeming with heroic connections even at an early age. When Gately was younger, he used to pretend to be an Arthurian knight of his own invention. This character was born out of a misunderstanding Gately had concerning his mother’s illness. Gately’s mother had been diagnosed with cirrhosis

of the liver and “Gately had gotten the Diagnosis mixed up in his head with King Arthur” (*Infinite Jest* 449). King Arthur is a figure in culture who represents a classic and romantic style of masculine heroism. The novel’s juxtaposition of Arthurian myth and childhood fantasy could suggest that Wallace sees a connection between the two, thus exposing that the chivalry of knights only exists in myths and fantasy. Bell and Dowling interpret Gately’s childhood persona differently. They interpret Gately playing as Sir Osis as evidence that there are epic or chivalric elements rooted in Gately (91). Bell and Dowling believe that Gately’s chivalric elements “emerge” (91) at crucial points in Gately’s narrative. I agree that Gately’s childhood persona of Sir Osis is important for measuring Gately’s growth as a hero. However, I hold that Gately’s childhood persona is a phase of Gately’s heroic evolution rather than a representation of Gately’s existential core. As Hal’s critique of heroism via television shows, Gately’s incarnation of an Arthurian knight is Wallace’s playful way of making a significant statement about heroism. Wallace is showing how silly the idea of chivalric heroes is in a real-world setting, which is highlighted by the ludicrous origin of Sir Osis and the rag-tag attire Gately dons when playing that hero.

Bell and Dowling, on the other hand, assert that “Gately really is a kind of Arthurian Knight, with a purely instinctive sense of fairness or decency that never vanishes even when he has reached the nadir of his decline” (94). Don Gately has always been a relatively good person, in that he never intentionally hurts innocent people nor wishes harm to others. It is dangerous to fixate on Gately’s identity as Sir Osis when considering Gately’s heroism because it not only represents an invalid hero created out of a mistaken interpretation, it also limits the depth of Gately’s heroic arc. Bell and Dowling

complicate matters further by asserting that “Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately never at some level ceases to be Sir Osis of Thuliver” (94). I believe that Gately’s creation of Sir Osis is significant for creating a connection between Gately and the idea of heroism as well as revealing the artificial heroics of Arthurian hero in a modern-day setting. Bell and Dowling overplay the significance. Sir Osis is a stepping stone for Gately, not his core. It is also an overstatement to call someone described as “he wasn’t a bully. [...] He just had no interest in brutalizing the weak” (*Infinite Jest* 903) Arthurian. Gately is a good-natured human being, but it is too much of a stretch to picture him as a knight in shining armor.

When Don Gately is first introduced in the novel, he is clearly a drug addicted criminal who knows how to get revenge. An Assistant District Attorney with a grudge against the career criminal has Gately locked up on bogus charges, which forces Gately to undergo “a nasty impromptu detox on the floor of his little holding-cell” (*Infinite Jest* 55). To get back at this A.D.A., Gately stages a burglary at the man’s house, stealing only a few valuables, but leaving his sick revenge: after the commotion of the burglary dies down, Gately sends the A.D.A. and his wife a package that contains brochures on dental health and “two high-pixel Polaroid snapshots, one of big Don Gately and one of his associate, each in Halloween mask denoting a clown’s great good professional cheer, each with his pants down and bent over and each with the enhanced-focus handle of one of the couple’s toothbrushes protruding from his bottom” (56). There is absolutely nothing chivalric about a toothbrush in the rectum. Undeniable revenge, yes, but Gately’s actions are not in line with a hero of myth or Arthurian legend.

The heroic moment that Bell and Dowling mention, when Gately steps up to defend a helpless and unworthy charge of his, proves that Gately is just as un-Arthurian as he is Arthurian. Bell and Dowling describe the encounter as “the extraordinary episode in which Randy Lenz, an Ennet House resident and an irretrievably lost soul, is followed home by three huge Quebecois rowdies whose dog he has killed when passing through the Inman Square area” (95). During this encounter, Gately fights off the three dangerous men and is severely injured in the process. There are mild heroic elements to this scene. Gately, after all, is sticking up for a puny coward. There is also a memorable moment where Gately is outside of Ennet House dealing with the commotion, while his romantic interest, Joelle looks out of the window at him like a classic heroine (*Infinite Jest* 608). However, these Arthurian elements are trumped by a certain point in the mayhem when Gately proves his lack of true chivalry. The fight has essentially been resolved at this point. Gately, with the help of some fellow AA members, has subdued all three of the assailants. However, Gately moves over to one of the disarmed men and “begins stomping on the supine face of the Nuck [assailant] with the heel of his good foot as if he were killing cockroaches” (615). The carnage is highlighted by “The guy’s movable arm” (615), which “is wagging pathetically in the air around Gately’s shoe as it rises and falls” (615). The overkill that Gately commits is hardly akin to the battles and deeds of Arthurian heroes, who fought with chivalry.

Gately’s creation of Sir Osis of Thuliver is more sad and depressing than heroic and hopeful. The persona is derived from misunderstanding and misfortune. It cannot even be said that Sir Osis was created from the dismal circumstances of a character’s life and used to create a greater good in the novel. Sir Osis is not an identity that Gately



created to help himself cope or to cheer his mother up. The persona was purely born out of confusion and play. All that Gately does as Sir Osis is play like a typical child. Gately begins his heroic evolution as Sir Osis, a hero of action of sorts, who, like Mc Garrett of *Hawaii Five-0*, is known just for action. The whole of Sir Osis's knightly activities are summed up as "He'd ride a mop-handle horse and brandish a trash-can lid and a batteryless plastic Light-Saber and tell the neighborhood kids he was Sir Osis of Thuliver, the most fearsomely loyal and fierce of Arthur's vessels" (449). The image of young Gately as Sir Osis, despite being donned in rag-tag attire, is similar to the television hero of action. Hal's hero of action example, McGarrett is often showed performing the exciting actions of a detective but never the complicated and intensive behind-the-scenes investigatory work. Like the television hero of action, Sir Osis is not remotely heroic beyond his actions with his fake sword and steed. There are qualities of Sir Osis that remain with Gately throughout his character arc, like his deep sense of loyalty, but Gately continues to grow as a character and a hero throughout the novel.

Loyalty is an important Arthurian quality that Gately demonstrates throughout the novel. Gately demonstrates his complex loyalty when he finds money that his ex-partner in crime stole from their boss. Gately splits the stash with his current partner, Trent Kite, and Gately returns his half to his boss, Whitey Sorkin. It is made clear that Gately didn't return the money "out of any kind of fear" (918). The main reason Gately turns the money in is the "guilt over having been clueless about his own fellow Twin Tower [partner] screwing Sorkin after Sorkin had been so neurasthenically over-generous to both of them" (918). Gately returns the money out of a sense of loyalty to his employer. He also remains loyal to his current partner in crime and "didn't rat out that Kite had a

whole other half" (918). Gately exhibits loyalty to his friend and employer, but even through his steadfast loyalty, there is a complication. To be loyal to his partner, Kite, he must not be fully truthful to Sorkin, his boss. Gately's loyalty isn't perfect, but he does possess some Arthurian likeness, as King Arthur himself experienced the double-edged sword of conflicting loyalty. These traits, however, grow with the evolving Gately; they do not lock him into the identity of Sir Osis. Sir Osis is ultimately a sad reminder of mortality and misunderstanding, whereas the hero of non-action is an uplifting testament to personal power. Sir Osis is best understood as a baseline for Gately's growth from a mock hero of action to a true hero of non-action. I interpret Sir Osis as a stepping stone for Gately: a heroic phase. The purpose of Wallace introducing Gately's childhood persona is to vaguely reinforce Gately's heroics and to serve as a marker for Gately's growth.

## **2. Don Gately Becomes a Hero of Action and a Hero of Recovery**

It is important to start with Gately's heroic roots, but most critics land on Gately's battle for recovery from drug addiction as Gately's heroic apex. In a novel that is filled with individuals who are hopelessly addicted and depressed, Don Gately stands out as a pillar of recovery and hope because he is able to make ground in his battle for sobriety and even experience happiness that isn't artificially manufactured through drugs or video entertainment, as shown by the joy he experiences being sober, as well as his growing attraction and fondness for Joelle Van Dyne. For this reason, many critics consider Gately to be primarily a hero of recovery. Ewijk, Dulk, and Bresnan all incorporate Gately's recovery through AA as an intrinsic component of his heroism. Ewijk states that "with the help of AA, Gately is not only able to remain sober, but he is also constantly

urged to reach out and connect with other members” (134). Dulk notes “The importance of AA and its requirement of praying to a Higher Power” (425), which allows Gately to shift from “the former focus on his supposed inner self” (425), and this is how Gately is able to start living a meaningful life. Even Bresnan cites “AA’s ‘suggestions’” (66) as the basis for Gately being able to overcome his addiction. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that Gately is a hero to the AA community as well as a hero of recovery; he is even referred to as “some sort of AA hero” (353) for his ability to share his honest feelings. Though I would note that where most critics see a fixed heroic identity, I interpret a heroic phase.

Allard den Dulk asserts that “The halfway house is a metaphor for what *Infinite Jest* has to say about contemporary Western society” (416). Dulk draws on the halfway house because of the chaotic diversity of life, facts, and individuals that Wallace associates with halfway houses (*Infinite Jest* 200). If it is true that the halfway house is a representation of the state of Western society, then Gately’s progression from halfway house resident to employee would make Gately a significant character, as he is able to rise from a new occupant who only chose recovery to avoid jail time to a trustworthy and reliable supervisor. This claim is supported by Petrus van Ewijk’s assertion that “AA is convinced that this [connecting with AA members] will help him battle his addiction and realize that he is not alone in his fight, which eventually enables him to take hold of *Infinite Jest*’s narrative” (134). Ewijk’s emphasis on the symbolic connection between Gately’s AA involvement and his dominating presence in the last half of the novel connects to Dulk’s assertion that the halfway house is a metaphor for society. Both claims emphasize the significance Gately has to society and the novel itself.

In the world of the novel, Gately is seen as a downtrodden outcast. Catherine Nichols states that “Don Gately’s commitment to forgoing his drug addictions ultimately renders him incomprehensible and marginalized with respect to the novel’s dominant culture” (14). It isn’t so much that Gately is no longer addicted to anything and the rest of society is, but more so that Gately is isolated in his attempt to “resist” (13) the “dogged habits of escapism” (13) that society clings to through its pleasure-seeking social emphasis. Gately is an interesting underdog because he remains an underdog before and after recovery. Gately is not rewarded with wealth or prestige for his recovery efforts or his heroic acts, and unlike heroic tales of peasants becoming royalty after their heroic triumph, Gately remains in a low social standing despite his heroism. Before Gately attended Ennet House, he was an outcast due to his drug habits and career as a criminal. After he forgoes drug usage, he remains an outcast because unlike the majority of the nation, he actively “struggles to remain sober in a drug-lubricated society” (13). Gately is also an unlikely candidate to succeed at recovery. Gately does not actively seek out recovery on his own. Instead, he is transported from jail to Ennet House (444). Gately only chose to go to Ennet House because his only other option was jail time (464). Gately also resists the self-help rhetoric of AA, and severely struggles to accept and believe in the idea of a higher power. These qualities serve as fuel for Gately’s heroic growth. Since drug addiction is already incredibly difficult to combat and Gately is disposed to resist treatment procedures, the fact that he can overcome these obstacles demonstrates that Gately’s recovery is an amazing feat because he is able to achieve an incredibly difficult task all while having his own predilections stack the deck against him.

Initially, Gately is resistant to buy into AA's philosophies and practices, but he unintentionally turns his doubts and anxieties into a positive quality. Gately may be a doubter of AA's validity, but he is able to still participate in the program and even openly share his doubts and frustrations with other members. Many new members to AA doubt the system, but Gately is vocal about his doubt and shows his backbone when he is able to "raise his big mitt in Beginner Meetings and say publicly just how much he hates this limp AA drivel about gratitude and humility and miracles and how much he hates it and thinks it's horseshit and hates the AAs" (*Infinite Jest* 352-353). Gately is honest about his intense negative feelings about AA because he was "trying to get kicked out" (353). But Gately is met with a much different reaction by his AA community. Gately's unabashed honesty and his guts for speaking his mind make his community regard him as "some sort of AA hero, a prodigy of vitriolic spine" (353). Gately is by no means a true hero of recovery at this point, as he has only begun his treatment. However, Gately's honesty and his courage to speak his mind reflects his heroic nature. It is important to observe that Gately's heroism is not intentional in this situation; Gately's heroic "vitriolic spine" is a product of his personal traits, being honest and unflinching. Though Gately is respected for his vitriolic spine, it is only the beginning to his rise as a hero of recovery.

Critics interpret the specific heroic qualities of Gately's recovery in different ways. Mark Bresnan emphasizes Gately's personal balance of identity in recovery, and he asserts that Gately's most important revelation is "not the existence of other people, but rather of the multiple 'selves' that constitute his identity" (66). Bresnan shows support for the value of small-h heroes in society, as he believes that Gately is heroic because "he strategically constructs a self that can comply with all of AA's 'suggestions'" (66). Petrus

Van Ewijk focuses on the linguistic strategies of Gately's success in recovery, most notably, Gately's use of the AA "linguistic strategy" (143) that allows Gately to remove his "ironic attitude" (142) and participate in "earnest communication" (142) with other humans. And Allard Den Dulk hones in on AA's ability to make Gately take action and lead a meaningful life (425). Most claims agree that a crucial aspect of Gately's recovery heroics rests in his success in accepting his role as a member of society and starting a life of genuine human interaction and connection. Bell and Dowling comment that "Gately's real heroism has consisted all along in the self-conquest that permitted him to escape the terrifying isolation of his addiction and enter into a human community" (92). Several critics see Gately's recovery as his road to becoming truly human. This sentiment is supported by Katherine Hayles, who states that "Gately's struggle reveals what it means to attempt on a daily basis to shed the illusion of autonomous selfhood and accept citizenship in a world in which actions have consequences that rebound to the self because everything is connected with everything else" (693). In both cases, the emphasis of Gately's growth is on his immersion into a genuine human experience.

Allard Den Dulk offers valuable insight about Gately's heroics in AA. A major problem that Gately and many new AA members encounter is a tendency to overthink everything. New initiates into recovery often find themselves in a destructive loop of personal reflection that inhibits them from making progress in their recovery. Dulk states that "Constant self-reflection ('analysis') makes it impossible for the individual to reach conclusions, make decisions and take action ('paralysis')" (417). Dulk references a condition that is common in the world of *Infinite Jest*: analysis paralysis. The novel defines the term as "the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking" (*Infinite Jest*

203). This condition prevents the addicted individual from progressing in their recovery because they are overwhelmed with thoughts and preoccupied with the act of thinking when they should concentrate on taking action. Dulk claims that “The importance of AA [...] lies in moving the addicted individual away from the former focus on his supposed inner self towards realizing the importance of acting, actually *doing* something” (425). Dulk’s statement inadvertently connects a facet of AA heroism, beating analysis paralysis through action, to the concept of the hero of action. If Gately is heroic in his early struggle to overcome analysis paralysis, then Gately’s initial heroism in recovery demonstrates a valid manifestation of the hero of action because he is able to stop overthinking, overanalyzing, and doubting his chances of success and simply follow the initial actions to recovery by participating in the program. Through his experiences in AA, Gately becomes a hero of action, but as he continues his arc in the novel, he continues to grow as a hero and proves that he is more than a hero of action.

Gately’s identity at this point in the novel as AA’s hero of action is supported by a powerful analogy that Gately experiences with his AA counselor, Eugenio Martinez. Gately’s progression through recovery is slow and arduous. Analysis paralysis plagues Gately’s mind until Martinez explains how to succeed in AA:

He told Gately to just imagine for a second that he’s holding a box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix, which represented Boston AA. The box came with directions on the side any eight-year-old could read. [...] Gene M. said all Gately had to do was for fuck’s sake give himself a break and relax and for once shut up and just follow the directions on the side of the fucking box. It didn’t matter one fuckola whether Gately like *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the

like fucking baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions, and had sense enough to get help from slightly more experienced bakers to keep from fucking the directions up if he got confused somehow, but basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result. (*Infinite Jest* 467)

The analogy of baking a cake and participating in AA demonstrates the connection mere action has to recovery. In order for Gately to begin his recovery and progress his heroic evolution, he must become a hero of action. Like the hero of action, Gately can only be heroic in his situation by following the script and taking action for the sake of taking action. The director of Ennet House even told Gately that “it didn’t matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*” (466). The way that Gately can move forward is by focusing solely on action. It becomes clear that Gately’s new ability to take action is heroic because the formerly disbelieving Gately realizes that taking action actually works. Unlike Gately’s role as Sir Osis, a hero of action for recovery has the potential for a more significant outcome than playful fantasy. After months of attempting to avoid analysis paralysis via action, Gately realizes that recently “substances hadn’t even *occurred* to him” (467). Gately cannot understand how his new tactic is working, and even becomes suspicious of his recent success (468), but Gately continues to grow stronger as he takes on his role as a hero of action. After a while, Gately stops caring about how his new strategy works. Gately instead “stays active” (468) and “no longer much cares whether he understands or not” (468). After a year sober, Gately is a hero of action in the world of recovery. This moment is marked by a rare action that Gately performs when he “cried in front of non-relatives for the first



time in his life” (468) during his one-year anniversary for sobriety. It’s important to note that Gately isn’t heroic because he cries in front of strangers or attends a bunch of meetings. He has become a hero of action for his ability to suspend the doubts of success that weigh heavily on his mind, ignore his past failures, avoid his uncertain and potentially unsatisfying future, and just do the actions required to make keep himself clean and make himself a better person. Gately’s initial recovery heroics are that of a hero of action, yet as the novel progresses, he moves toward becoming a hero of stasis.

Mark Bresnan asserts that “Gately’s success with AA is generated not by the program itself but rather by his provisional and playful approach to it” (65). Bresnan goes on to claim that “Rather than conceiving of AA as an opportunity for revelatory self-examination, Gately constructs the program as precisely the closed ludic space that has eluded the novel’s other characters” (65). Bresnan interprets Gately’s recovery as a form of play, asserting that Gately is playful with his AA treatment by distancing his notion of self from the program, which Bresnan interprets as a game Gately plays where he is going through the motions to achieve a goal instead of seeing himself embarking on a journey of recovery through self-discovery. The idea of Gately being at play in his AA interactions can be problematic. In a way, Gately’s AA involvement could be considered play. For example, the cake mix approach to recovery could be interpreted as playing a game.

Bresnan, however, goes too far when he asserts that “Gately segregates his AA activities both physically and philosophically from his everyday life” (65). Bresnan cites AA’s popular “Fake It Till You Make It” (qtd. in Bresnan 65) slogan as the basis for Gately’s separation of his concept of self from AA activity. It is true that Gately follows

this tactic and that this tactic could be considered play, but it is an extreme overstatement to suggest that there is a physical and mental “segregation” (65) in Gately’s life. Gately may start AA playfully, but before long, Gately’s life becomes recovery. The narrator sums up the busy AA way of life by saying, “Being an active member of Boston AA Group is probably a little bit like being a serious musician or like athlete, in terms of constant travel” (*Infinite Jest* 343). The description of non-stop AA activity paints a bustling picture of constant action and service as members continually travel to, attend, and participate in various meetings (343-344). Time, much like hope, becomes one facet of ““Giving It Away”” (344), an AA slogan that reflects the circular need of giving hope in order to receive hope (344). Members like Gately, who want a chance at being successful, can’t just participate in AA as if it were a hobby.

There are no successful weekend warriors in recovery. AA becomes something that people in recovery live, or at the very least, something that Gately lives. This notion is reinforced by the fact that Gately becomes an employee of Ennet House. His job and continual struggle to stay clean force Gately to make AA, and more specifically recovery, his life. Gately’s need to make recovery his life shouldn’t be confused as replacing an addiction with drugs to an addiction to a program, but rather a commitment to a continual struggle for improvement. He doesn’t crave the recovery lifestyle the way drug addicts crave a fix, but Gately knows that he must fully commit to the program to overcome his addiction.

### **3. Gately’s Next Heroic Phase: Halfway House Hero of Reaction**

As a drug addict turned successfully sober member of AA, Gately becomes a hero of action. He is able to cast aside the thoughts and doubts that previously prevented him from ever becoming clean. As Gately continues to succeed in his sobriety and takes on the responsibility of being a live-in staffer of Ennet House, he emerges into his next phase of evolution: a hero of reaction. As a staffer, Gately is responsible for other addicts as well as himself. It is clear that reaction is a key part of his job when it is made known that “one of Gately’s jobs is to keep an eye on what’s possibly brewing among residents and let Pat or the Manager know and try to smooth things down in advance if possible” (*Infinite Jest* 279). Gately’s job is akin to that of a halfway house bureaucrat. The main difference between Frank Furillo reacting to his precinct and Gately reacting to Ennet residents is that one group are law enforcement and the other drug addicts. There is even a connection between Gately and Furillo in that they are both successful AA members. With Gately’s new responsibility, action alone will not allow him to be heroic. Gately must help watch over the wayward Ennet House flock and react to their actions and complications.

There is a specific moment in the novel where readers are able to witness the full extent of Gately’s heroic ability to react. Coincidentally, this same moment is what sparks Gately’s transition from a hero of reaction to a hero of non-action. Gately reaches his hero of reaction apex when he defends Ennet House resident Randy Lenz in a grueling fight that leaves Gately severely wounded. Lenz is a despicable character, as well as a bad AA member, and he performs a ritual of slaughtering small animals, generally dogs or cats, while walking home alone from AA meetings. This ongoing activity eventually catches up to him when he kills the pet of Quebecois terrorists. Gately is in the midst of

his many duties when the fight breaks out outside of Ennet House. Gately is immersed in problems. He has to do a head check of the residents, but he also has to make sure every resident with a vehicle reparks their car so it doesn't get towed. This is complicated by the fact that Gately doesn't have a driver's license. So Gately finds himself in a complicated game of wrangling up his charges whilst trying to find trustworthy residents with driver's licenses who can repark the cars, when a chaotic fight breaks out. Gately is in the midst of a logistical nightmare, yet when an even greater threat occurs, he is able to keep his head clear and simply react. Gately exits Ennet House to see two massive Canadians chasing Lenz around a car while a third man holds back the onlookers with a massive .44 handgun. Despite the overwhelming events, Gately "gets very cool and clear and his headache recedes and his breathing slows" (*Infinite Jest* 608). Gately's mindset during this situation is described as "It's not so much that things slow as breaks into frames" (608). Gately is calm and collected as he reacts, which is why he is able to disarm and mortally injure the assailants.

Bell and Dowling interpret this fight as an act of chivalry on Gately's part. They envision Gately defending the helpless Lenz as a noble paladin protecting the weak. However, this is not truly the case. Weak Lenz may be, but he is far from the innocent victim that chivalric knights are typically known to defend. In fact, Lenz is such a horrible person that he probably deserves the worst that the Canadians would do to him. Gately also has an extreme distaste for Lenz (as most residents do), and it is not likely that he would defend him for some moral or sympathetic reason. Gately does not defend Lenz for honor or any lofty ideal. The truth is that Gately is simply reacting to the situation. He sees a threat to the flock he is assigned to watch over, so he eliminates the

threat, pure and simple. Gately demonstrates that he is reacting and not being heroic when he “shrugs at the guy [the assailant] like he’s got no choice but to be here” (*Infinite Jest* 611). Gately at this point is like Furillo; both of them struggle to react to a situation that will always be ultimately out of their hands. Gately’s identity as a hero of reaction is revealed when readers are informed that “Gately’s just one part of something bigger he can’t control” (612). Gately cannot control the situation, but he can react to it, which is what he does.

Bell and Dowling also assert that Gately “single-handedly take[s] on three physically huge opponents” (91), which is factually incorrect. Gately is no longer the lone hero of action, and as such, he is able to rely on his resources. Gately’s fellow Ennet house residents aid him in subduing and attacking the assailant with the gun (*Infinite Jest* 613-614). This occurs immediately after Gately is shot, and the action of his fellow residents has a critical impact on the success of the fight. Their involvement is another clue that Gately is no longer a lone hero of action. Gately’s ability to keep a clear head and successfully react in one of the novel’s most chaotic moments is proof that Gately has become a true hero of reaction.

#### **4. Gately’s Heroic Non-Action as a Hero of Stasis**

Gately’s time as a hero of reaction is somewhat short lived. After being shot, Gately is sent to the hospital where he enters the most intense and significant phase of his heroic evolution. The wound and subsequent infection pushes Gately into the role of the hero of non-action. The physical giant, Gately, is now reduced to lying in his hospital bed, filled with various tubes making him unable to speak or hardly move. Gately’s

situation is described as: “He couldn’t feel the right side of his upper body. He couldn’t move in any real sense of the word” (*Infinite Jest* 809). Gately is trapped in a horizontal position, allowed minimal movement, and no speech due to “something in his raped throat [that] won’t let whatever’s supposed to vibrate to speak vibrate” (813). Gately’s appearance in his hospital bed is nearly identical to that of the television hero of non-action from Hal’s essay. Gately is even surrounded by his own “burly extras” (142), who take shape as “Figures Gately didn’t know from Adam [that] kept popping in and out of fluttery view in different corners of the room” (811). Like the extras in Hal’s predicted show, the numerous visitors bring the unmoving Gately to the action via their stories about themselves and the outside world. Gately’s situation also mirrors his experiences in AA, except instead of talking and sharing his honest stories and opinions, others talk while he is silent. While he is immobile and without proper means for communication, Gately becomes a hero stasis.

It is under these circumstances that Gately fights his most difficult and heroic battle. As a recovering drug addict, Gately is confronted with the heroic dilemma of risking relapse and submitting to his addiction by receiving painkillers (specifically his former drug of choice) or resisting and enduring the painful trauma to ensure his battle with addiction will not be compromised. After staying in the hospital for a while, Gately recalls that “he was offered I.V.-Demerol for the pain of his gunshot wound immediately on admission to the E.R. and has been offered Demerol twice by shift-Drs.” (*Infinite Jest* 814). At the hospital, Gately is immersed in temptation and potential sobriety sabotage. Gately must endure the pain of his physical wound and the pain his addiction could bring if unleashed. Gately shifts back and forth through consciousness, but he is aware of the

feat that he undertakes. Doctors warn Gately that if he forgoes painkillers then the pain “was going to be unlike anything Gately has ever imagined” (814). Despite this horrible obstacle, Gately remains resolute and rebukes every offer of narcotic painkillers. It’s important to note that Gately’s heroic non-action is more about achieving stasis than literally taking no action. His refusal of drugs is clearly an action, as is breathing, but looking at the scale of possible actions, he refuses to give in to the pain and risk relapse. This is taking a small-a action (saying no) to avoid a capital-A action (consuming drugs that will risk all the progress he has made and the potential he has for the future), which I interpret as a form of existential non-action suitable for a hero of stasis.

Gately even proves his heroic power of non-action by forcefully denying narcotic painkillers from an overzealous doctor in a hallucination he has. Gately’s gunshot wound is so severe that he is literally sick with pain: “The dextral pain’s so bad he wants to throw up, throat-tube or no” (*Infinite Jest* 887). During this dream, Gately is struggling to inform the doctor (via poorly drawn messages on a pad of paper) that he cannot take narcotics. The doctor continues to press the issue and eventually Gately feels that “if the Pakistani goes ahead and offers Demerol again [he] won’t resist” (888). Gately is desperate and finds a solution in moving his left arm from the bed and “plunging under the M.D.’s lab-coat and fastening onto the guy’s balls and bearing down” (889). This decision causes Gately’s arm great pain, as well as the doctor’s genitals. However, Gately does whatever it takes to not act on his urge to take narcotics for the pain. With no way to prevent the doctor from giving him drugs, Gately heroically refuses to give up. It is of no real consequence if this battle took place in reality or in Gately’s mind. The important

thing is that Gately, whether conscious or not, is continually in an epic battle to sustain his recovery and endure the pain.

What is even more significant about this encounter is that Gately must rely on himself to prevent the doctor from giving him narcotics. Gately can hardly write clearly as he struggles to communicate with the doctor. There is an absolute language barrier, and no one offers to help Gately with the overzealous doctor. Gately is not alone in his hospital room. In fact, his sponsor, Francis, is sitting in the room for most of the encounter. Gately wishes that Francis would intervene and explain Gately's condition to the doctor (*Infinite Jest* 887), but he never does. Francis puts the responsibility on Gately, stating, "Look kid, I'm gonna screw and let you settle this bullshit and come back up later" (888). When the doctor asks Francis to help him convince Gately to listen to him, Francis replies: "Not my business to say one way or the other. Kid's gonna do what he decides he needs to do for himself. He's the one that's feeling it. He's the only one can decide" (889). Francis helps push Gately to his heroic lengths by informing him that he must make his own decisions and by not depriving him of the chance to do so. In his hallucination, Gately does what he knows he needs to do to stay clean, and he assaults the doctor who tempts him with narcotics to alleviate Gately's immense pain. Resisting the pain medicine and assaulting the imaginary doctor may not be recommended by members of his fellow recovery community, but as Francis notes, Gately must do what he thinks is best for himself, and Gately is a better person for his extreme non-action.

Gately's heroic battle as a hero of non-action is not solely about his struggle with physical pain and drug addiction. As Gately lies stationary in the hospital he is also confronted by an onslaught of stimuli that manifests as disturbing facts, thoughts, and



possibilities. Several AA members, Ennet house residents and staffers come to visit Gately and share news of the outside world. For the most part, Gately can only lay and listen to others. Gately's condition is foreshadowed in the advice a senior AA member gives Gately when the only heroic thing about Gately is his "vitriolic spine" (*Infinite Jest* 353). The AA member tells Gately that "you might try to just simply sit down at meeting and relax and take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth and shut the fuck up and just listen, for the first time in your life really *listen*, and maybe you'll end up OK" (353). As he lies in the hospital bed, Gately finds himself forced into a situational equivalent of the member's advice. All Gately can do in his bed is listen and endure the pain of his recovery.

Some of the stimuli that Gately must cope with are less serious, like when "Gately feels a sudden rush of anxiety over the issue of who's cooking the House supper in his absence" (*Infinite Jest* 826). However, most of the thoughts that circle in Gately's head are very serious, like the fact that he "was on Probie against a real serious bit" (820) and the fight with the Canadians could land him back in police custody. Gately must also worry about his nemesis, the Assistant District Attorney he burgled, and whether the A.D.A. will exact some sort of revenge on the resurfaced and helpless Gately. There is also the fact that as recovering drug addicts, none of the witnesses are very credible in Gately's defense. Gately must also worry about an accidental murder he committed while performing a burglary and whether the crime will catch up to him (59). And to top it all off, there is still the matter of the gun that Gately got shot with, whose "whereabouts are missing" (826). Gately must not only deal with intense physical pain and the fear of

reawakening his drug dependency, but he must also contend with the possible consequences of all the bad news he keeps receiving.

At the forefront of Gately's mental struggle of non-action is an ethical struggle concerning his affections for a fellow resident of the recovery house he works at, Joelle Van Dyne. Gately has been with the AA program long enough to know that it is unethical to start a relationship with another person in recovery, especially for him as he is a supervisor for Ennet House. However, Joelle being new to the program is unaware of her vulnerability and the ethical ramifications of a sexual relationship between her and Gately. Joelle is also attracted to Gately and observes "how heroic or even romantic he looks, unshaven and intubated, huge and helpless, wounded in the service to somebody who did not deserve service" (*Infinite Jest* 855). Gately can only assume that Joelle might share feelings for him, but he is acutely aware that "newly sober people are awfully vulnerable to the delusion that people with more sober time than them are romantic and heroic" (855). Gately has no choice but to struggle with his fantasies about the possibility of Joelle and him having a legitimate relationship. Gately struggles on whether he can act on his feelings for Joelle since the right thing to do would be to commit to non-action. This form of mental pain is on the same level as the physical pain Gately suffers from the gunshot wound. Wallace makes this clear when the narrator states that "His right side is past standing, but the hurt is nothing like the Bird's hurt was" (860). The Bird refers to the pain of withdrawal, a combined physical and mental pain. Similarly, Gately's mental dilemmas haunt him and bring him just as much grief as his physical pain. Also, Gately's mental pain is just as unavoidable as he cannot control his thoughts and dreams that continually focus on his potentially tainted love for Joelle and his potential for relapse.

In his heroic situation, Gately is forced to endure the intense reality of his pain, hopes, and fears. He struggles through every second of painful stimulus, as his right arm is slowly healing from a trauma without anything to compromise the pain. As when Gately was forced to detox cold turkey in a holding cell, in his hospital bed, Gately feels “the edge of every second that went by. Taking it a second at a time. Drawing the time in around him real tight” (*Infinite Jest* 859). Gately must sit back and experience each moment’s full duration as he fights to endure. Gately struggles to sustain himself, knowing that “no single second was past enduring” (890). Gately’s bedridden struggle comprises a large portion of *Infinite Jest*’s latter half. Readers can assume that Gately is victorious in his struggle for stasis, as it appears that Gately remains sober during and after his hospital stay. Bresnan supports this notion, stating, “and though the narrative is ambiguous, he appears to survive his trip to the hospital without being treated with Demerol” (65). The novel never directly confirms that Gately makes it out of the hospital, but there is a crucial piece of information that Hal offers in the beginning of the novel that supports the conclusion that Gately survives his hospital visit. Hal thinks about “John N. R. Wayne, [...], standing watch in a mask while Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head” (*Infinite Jest* 16-17). For the timeline of the novel, this memory of Hal’s would have to take place after Gately’s hospital visit, thus meaning he has survived and is apparently well. A timeline in Greg Carlisle’s text *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* shows that the last action that Gately takes in the novel’s timeline is digging up the head with Hal (497). Due to the novel’s confusing timeline, we cannot be absolutely certain, but it appears that Gately does survive his struggle at the hospital. By being able to endure his thoughts, feelings, fears, and pain in an extreme

situation, Gately becomes a true hero of stasis. Gately's heroic battle shows readers that Hal's predicted hero of non-action already exists in the form of Gately, an individual who is able to achieve stasis by knowing when to act and when to refrain from action.

Toon Staes is the only author I could find who analyzes Hal's hero of non-action, and unfortunately, Staes' conclusion is incorrect. Staes states, "The representation that we get of the unresponsive and uncommunicative protagonist [Hal] in the first few pages of *Infinite Jest* ties in, for example, with Hal's own portrayal of the new hero in fiction as 'the hero of *non*-action, the catatonic hero...divorced from all stimulus'" (418). Staes asserts that it is Hal, not Gately, who is the incarnation of Hal's predicted hero of the future. Staes asserts that the description of the hero of non-action matches Hal's descriptions throughout the novel (418) and cites Hal's mental paralysis during an overly-complicated game he plays with his friends at the tennis academy (418) and Hal's tendency for "lying perfectly still and staring at the ceiling" (419) as proof that readers should interpret Hal "as a hero of non-action" (419).

While it is difficult to deny that Hal does exhibit traits similar to the description of the hero of non-action in Hal's own essay, that does not mean he is said hero. There are numerous descriptions of drug addicts throughout *Infinite Jest* whose behavior would resemble Don Gately's throughout the novel, but that does not put Gately on the same level as the other drug users. As I have previously cited, many critics find Gately's recovery to be quite special despite the flaws and misdeeds he shares with other members of the drug addicted community in the novel. Looking the part is simply not good enough to equate Hal to being a hero of non-action, and it is much more likely that Wallace is using Hal's behavior to show that not all nonaction is heroic because a simple

examination of the results of Hal's catatonic-like behavior shows that there is no greater result or existential reward like Gately achieves through his non-action. If anything, Hal is worse off through his non-action, as his disconnected state leads him to absolutely bungle a college admission interview (*Infinite Jest* 14) and require hospitalization (15). Petrus Van Ewijk's analysis of Gately's increased prominence as the novel progresses also casts doubt on the thoughts of Hal being a hero of non-action. Ewijk believes that Gately "takes over *Infinite Jest*'s narrative from Hal Incandenza, who seems to fade from the novel (caused by his addiction and self-involved attitude)" (143). Hal may very well display behavior that matches the literal depiction of the hero of non-action, but Gately's heroic evolution is in line with the much more powerful figurative interpretation of the hero of non-action because Gately's non-action actually results in a positive achievement: a struggle for existential stasis. Through Gately overcoming his gunshot injury without the use of narcotic drugs, he shows a willpower as strong as the physical strength of any mythic hero. He finds stasis amongst unimaginable pain and temptations, and Gately's non-action is heroic because he chooses to abstain from the one thing that would alleviate his pain but also cast him back into a predatory and criminal life of drug dependency.

Another possible misinterpretation of the hero of non-action could be the victims of the entertainment cartridge that is circulated throughout the novel. In the contemporary world of *Infinite Jest*, videos are disseminated via cartridges. In the novel, there is a specific entertainment cartridge that has very adverse effects on whoever views it. Watching the cartridge, commonly referred to in the novel as "the Entertainment" (*Infinite Jest* 727), causes the viewer to become a completely captive audience. Viewers of "the Entertainment" do whatever they can to continue to passively watch the screen in

front of them. One victim's description shows the passive hypnotism that the cartridge elicits: "He sits there, attached to his congealed supper, watching at 0020h., having now wet both his pants and the special recliner" (54). The image of the victim of "the Entertainment" is dangerously similar to the image of Hal's hero of non-action: a hero who is so still that he appears "catatonic" (142) and must be "carried here and there across sets by burly extras" (142). One might make the claim that the victims of "the Entertainment" are the incarnations of the hero of non-action, and that Hal is being ironic in predicting a hero that isn't actually heroic at all.

It is incorrect to assume that the victims of "the Entertainment" are heroes of non-action because their non-action does not result in anything heroic. If anything, these victims serve as Wallace's antithesis to the hero of non-action. The non-action caused by "the Entertainment" does not aim for any higher purpose; it is merely a blind desire to be entertained. Gately's non-action stands in stark contrast as it is a painful experience. Gately's non-action is also a conscious choice on his part, whereas the victims are seduced by the power of "the Entertainment," causing them to enter a state of total passivity. The victims' non-action stands for no value other than pleasure and a passive state of calmness. Gately's non-action, on the other hand, stands for the values of dedication and will power. The victims serve more as a reminder about how non-action can go wrong by rendering individuals into complete passivity. Gately's non-action redeems the idea and illuminates the possibility for non-action to be heroic. The difference between heroic non-action and non-heroic non-action lies in the purpose of the non-action and the values it stands for.

Gately's role as a hero of stasis through his heroic non-action of resisting narcotic painkillers that would throw him back into his addiction is critically important for the novel and for understanding what Wallace considers to be valuably heroic. Gately has many accomplishments in the novel, but the fact that his biggest accomplishment is refraining from action says a lot about what is truly heroic for Wallace. Gately's evolution through the types of heroism in Hal's essay serves as proof that Wallace doesn't believe in one type of heroism, but instead asserts that there are different types of heroism for different types of circumstances. Through Gately's struggle, Wallace is able to demonstrate a new and unconventional way of viewing heroes and heroism in general. It's safe to assume that most people would not immediately consider a person laying in pain in a hospital to be a hero, but Wallace is able to show not only the depth of Gately's struggle, but the personal power it takes for him to resist taking actions that would ultimately undermine his potential and set him off on a worse path. Wallace's new concept of heroism is a far cry from what we see in media because he paints a picture of heroism that isn't attractive or even intriguing at the surface level. Wallace's unconventional hero is an individual who possesses the awareness of when to act, react, and refrain from action, and has the power to do so accordingly.

### **Chapter 3. Heroes of Stasis in the Tax Service: Civic Heroes**

David Foster Wallace's novel *The Pale King* evokes a form of heroism that lines up with the style of heroism found in *Infinite Jest*. Though *The Pale King* is an unfinished novel, the text itself offers myriad clues as to Wallace's notion of what modern-day heroism means. The most pervasive form of heroism in *The Pale King* is re-action heroism, which takes shape in a style of heroism that Marshall Boswell refers to as

bureaucratic heroism. Unlike *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King* does not focus as in-depth on a single example of a hero of non-action, but the evidence is more diffused throughout the text. Through Wallace's writing in *The Pale King*, readers get a closer look at what Wallace's reactionary heroism looks like, but the examples are less personalized and more generalized since the reader is shown this idea through a scattershot of characters, scenes, and situations. *The Pale King* does extend Wallace's conception of Heroism by the text's illumination that heroes of stasis can come out of heroes of reaction, which is shown through the special IRS employees who can transcend the boredom of reaction and achieve a greater level of civic heroism.

Despite the fact that *The Pale King* is an unfinished novel, it is a text that significantly develops David Foster Wallace's notions of heroism. *The Pale King* is a document that is more about ideas than a completed story. The hindrance of the text's incomplete status is that it is a narrative that was not fully developed or organized for publication by its author; however, the text still contains many powerful and intriguing ideas that connect to Wallace's work as whole. Marshal Boswell agrees that the novel is rewarding and meaningful despite its unfinished state (369). He asserts that "Wallace knew what he wanted to say in this book, and largely said it" (369). Conley Wouters suggests that "Rather than a novel, it may be helpful to think of *The Pale King* as resembling something closer to an almanac, or a narrative compendium" (461). Wouters also asserts that the "novel builds on thematic concerns established in *Infinite Jest*" (447). Ralph Clare gets even more specific when he claims that *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* are linked together through their exploration of boredom (434). These critics corroborate that there is a significant connection between not only *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*,



but that there is also a strong connection between ideas, like boredom, that I will demonstrate are critical to Wallace's interpretation of heroism. *The Pale King* is a critical artifact for understanding Wallace's unique conception of the heroism of non-action.

Adam Kelly believes that Wallace's ideas have structured his texts and those ideas have developed throughout Wallace's novels (268). Kelly also asserts that critical analysis of Wallace's work rarely looks at the connection between his texts and generally focuses on a single text, namely: *Infinite Jest* (268). Kelly states, "I will examine Wallace's development as a writer with reference to the ideas that influence his novels. I will argue that those novels can be read in dialogue with one another, with each novel addressing conceptual questions remaining behind from the novel before" (268). Kelly also believes that *The Pale King's* demonstrations of Wallace's ideas are less focused than what is found in *Infinite Jest*. He compares writing in *The Pale King* to Wallace's prior novels *Infinite Jest* and *The Broom of the System* and asserts: "We can see a movement increasingly away from the individual characteristics of those articulating the ideas and toward the broader significance of the ideas themselves" (277).

Stephen J. Burn acknowledges the early stages the world of literary criticism is in regarding *The Pale King*. He asserts that the goal of the early criticism should be to "prepare a blueprint for a larger and later critical project" (371) as opposed to categorizing the novel (371). Burn also notes the effect that the incomplete nature of *The Pale King* has on a critical reading of the text and states: "If a full reading of the novel's shape is likely to remain hypothetical, it is nevertheless possible to think about what Wallace was attempting in *The Pale King* by considering a number of patterns that emerge across the published text" (372).

It can be difficult to untangle the intertwined ideas that Wallace puts forth in *The Pale King*. Broad ideas like boredom, civics, politics, and heroism are bound together in both dialogue and existential inquiry. The most commonly referenced themes of *The Pale King* are boredom and civics. These themes are blatant throughout the narrative of the struggle of IRS employees, as Wallace shows the existential struggle that contemporary humans endure through the experience of boredom. Wallace depicts boredom as a primary obstacle to existence that must be overcome or, at the very least, endured. Further, Wallace shows the struggle of boredom in the realm of IRS workers, who have a profession that is meant to keep order for civilians. Under the IRS backdrop, Wallace shows that enduring boredom can take on a civic connotation as well. Other significant themes like politics and heroism, however, are not given as much critical focus. Marshall Boswell draws attention to this when he claims that few scholars, including the text's editor Michael Pietsch, address the political undertones of the novel (465). I believe that a similar claim can be made about the examination of heroism in *The Pale King*. Though Boswell does note "bureaucratic heroism" (465) as a facet of the novel's inquiry, little effort is given to analyze this concept or connect it to Wallace's earlier work.

Like *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King* solely focuses direct attention on heroes who are white males. One could argue that there is potential for women and non-white males to be included as the unnamed, unnoticed small-h heroes of society that Wallace refers to generally in the text, but it's clear that the bulk of characters who are shown achieving some level of heroism, as well as most of the characters in the novel in general, are white males. It is possible that Wallace intended to add more diverse characters to the novel as he developed the manuscript or Wallace may have thought most IRS employees in the

1980s would be white males and focused on white male characters for authenticity. Wallace never directly precludes the possibility of women and non-white males of being heroes of stasis in the novel, but his narrow focus on white male characters and heroes could be interpreted as white males being more likely, at least in Wallace's mind, of being heroes of stasis. The title of the novel even appears to have the potential to indicate a white male authority, but The Pale King in *The Pale King* is just the moniker of the predecessor of DeWitt Glendenning, Jr., the Director of the Internal Revenue Service's office where most of the novel's events are centered around. The predecessor is not even named, and we are left to assume whether Wallace intended to develop that character more had he completed the novel. The title of the novel is asserted to be a reference to Wallace's depression by Wallace's biographer D.T. Max, who states in his essay "The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's struggle to surpass '*Infinite Jest*'" that according to Wallace's journals, the term The Pale King "was a synonym for the depression that tormented him" (para. 85). Though the title has no racial or gender bearing on the heroism in the novel, Wallace's exclusive white male examples are difficult to ignore.

The heroism found in *The Pale King* differs from the heroism of classic chivalry and action TV shows or movies in that it asserts a specific civic connotation. With nearly all of the text focusing on the work and struggles of IRS employees, the heroes of the text are bureaucratic heroes and, according to Wallace, civic heroes as well. They are heroes in that they do a difficult and mind-numbing job that is very much needed to keep order in society. Collecting taxes may not seem heroic on the surface, but it is a difficult job that is necessary. While few people want to pay taxes and many may question what and how our government spends our tax revenue on, it is difficult to deny that the collection

of taxes is essential to maintaining our modern society. The heroism predominantly featured in *The Pale King* is akin to Wallace's notion of the hero of reaction. Much like the hero of stasis in *Infinite Jest*, the hero of stasis in *The Pale King* is a rare and amazing entity. It is clear from the text that not all of the heroes are heroes of stasis: meaning they are not able to use heroic non-action to achieve a greater existential stasis. Numerous IRS employees perform a reactionary form of heroism, but they are not the special new breed of hero that is proclaimed in Hal's essay on heroism from *Infinite Jest*.

### **1. Reactionary Heroism in *The Pale King***

Most of the heroism in *The Pale King* is reactionary. The stress and struggle that these characters undergo and attempt to overcome is very similar to the struggle Hal's archetype hero of re-action, Frank Furillo, faces on a daily basis (*Infinite Jest* 141). It appears from Wallace's writing that though Wallace values the reactionary heroes who perform their own heroics behind closed doors, but he also sees the existence of a special type of hero who is able to ascend to an even higher level of heroism by becoming a hero of stasis. It is important to examine both the heroes of reaction and the idea of the hero of non-action in *The Pale King* to understand not only how the examples connect with Wallace's previous writing, but also to better understand the hero of stasis by seeing how that style of heroism can surpass reactionary heroism. This distinction between reactionary heroes and heroic reaction is important to both the novel *The Pale King* and Wallace's writing as a whole. Through the exploration of heroic non-action and my interpretation of the hero of stasis, it appears that Wallace's new vision of heroism (i.e. the hero of non-action) is more an internal hero, whereas traditional heroes like the heroes of action and re-action conquer the external. By internal, I mean that the struggle

that the hero faces and overcomes is primarily an existential one that deals with their personal thoughts, flaws, and willpower. Though the external effect of heroes of stasis may well be impressive, the really profound achievements, for heroes of stasis in both *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*, are found at an internal level as they balance the competing, distracting, and even overwhelming stimuli of their lives to find a personal stasis.

Though *The Pale King* focuses heavily on civic heroes, heroes of stasis in Wallace's conception of heroism are not required to be civic heroes, meaning their heroism does not have to contribute to the betterment of society, like the IRS heroes. *The Pale King*, however, demonstrates the valuable possibilities of the civic hero of stasis. The idea of the hero of stasis is not tied to one individual in *The Pale King* as it is in *Infinite Jest*. Instead of a unified presentation through an individual character, the evidence is more diffused and is presented through snippets of character conversations and interactions in *The Pale King*. The text shows the heroic nature of employees of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) who take on a necessary job for society that is neither easy nor glamorous. The IRS seems to be the least likely place where society would expect to find a hero, but Wallace makes it clear that heroism exists in that domain. This is shown through little details like the fact that the Service's symbolic figure is the hero Bellerophon, who flourishes on the Service's seal alongside a Latin motto "Alicui tamen faciendum est," which roughly translates to he does a job that is both difficult and unpopular (*The Pale King* 224). The implication is that the men and women of the IRS are heroes because of the nature of the work they do: the difficult and undesired job of handling the taxes of the American people. This idea is strengthened by the narrator of

the text as he professes his admiration of the “small-h heroes” of the IRS who are a different kind of hero that is never congratulated or even recognized positively (*The Pale King* 127).

Marshall Boswell values the civic nature of the novel, but he focuses on the overarching political implications rather than the civic service of the individual IRS employees. In his essay, “Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” Boswell asserts that the novel focuses on real-life political issues, namely civic responsibility and taxes (464-465). Boswell sees a connection between civics and taxes, which he indicates when he mentions the novel’s inclusion of the 80s Reagan era tax cuts and the resulting effect on American society before stating: “it builds its elaborate inquiry into taxes, bureaucratic heroism, and civic responsibility atop this decisive event that, in the words of Dewitt Glendenning, might very well ‘bring us down as a country’ and signal the ‘end of the democratic experiment’” (465). Boswell references the “Notes and Asides” included in *The Pale King*, and he points out that there are two broad arcs laid out in that section of the novel, the second one being a focus on being an individual versus being a part of larger entities vis-à-vis paying taxes (Boswell 465). Boswell goes on to say, “This second ‘broad arc’—which the novel treats as unavoidably political—has thus far received very scant attention” (466). Boswell references an interview from 2003 with Wallace in *The Believer*, where Wallace expresses distaste at political discourse of the time that only focused on rigid and oversimplified partisan assertions (466). According to Boswell, “*The Pale King* directly seeks to address this massively complicated and not sexy issue in a way that does not devolve into the childish delusion he outlines above” (466). For

Boswell, the most important civic aspect of the novel is Wallace's method of showing the importance of complexity in civil ethics and politics. Boswell states, "In other words, complexity, which requires attention and threatens boredom, is antithetical to both the Laffer Curve and the Spackman initiative. Conversely—and this point is key—complexity is absolutely essential to the governing ethics of *The Pale King*" (469-470). The Spackman initiative serves as the novel's version of the real-life Laffer Curve, which is an over-simplified method of weighing the government's return on taxation against rates of taxation through a rudimentary curved graph. In the novel, the Spackman initiative represents an attempt to use a simple approach to address a complex system (i.e. taxes). Boswell is more concerned with the bigger-picture political assertions in *The Pale King* that are represented by the trends started in 1980s America to try and treat complexity with simplistic solutions. This thesis is less concerned with the meta-level politics and more concerned with the focus on individuals who through their work in a complex and boring system like the IRS find a way to achieve a new and authentic form of heroism.

The heroes of stasis are not confined to a hospital bed, fighting a personal battle of ethics and addiction like Don Gately. In *The Pale King*, the heroes of both re-action and stasis remain stationary, crammed into small cubicles where they spend hours upon hours intensely examining data for the greater good of the community because our advanced society requires people to examine the complex financial data that allows the American economy to grow and ensures our society continues to keep running. As a substitute teacher in *The Pale King* puts it, "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is" (229). This description of IRS heroics hearkens to the

description of Gately confined to his hospital bed as he battles his pain on a moment-by-moment basis. The heroes of reaction and the heroes of stasis in *The Pale King* are connected to the heroes in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's writing in *The Pale King* not only connects to his previous textual assertions about heroism, it also extends the significance of Wallace's notion of the hero of stasis and heroism in general.

In *The Pale King*, there is a meaningful scene where Wallace draws from the ideas in Hal's essay regarding the evolution of heroism through an accounting lecture. One of the central characters of the novel, Chris Fogle, stumbles into a lecture on advanced accounting that is delivered by a Jesuit substitute teacher. This lecture directly addresses the heroic nature of the IRS as it relates to the hero of re-action. The substitute states, "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" (232). The substitute's statement captures the essence of what Hal asserted in his essay about the change from the hero of action to the hero of reaction. The description of society's heroes of the past matches very closely to Hal Incandenza's description of the hero of action in *Infinite Jest*. Note that both sources refer to this type of hero as a thing of the past. The substitute teacher does not directly call the past hero archetype a hero of action, but all of the verbs he uses to describe the hero are words of action. The emphasis is always on being in control and taking action.

The substitute's lecture moves on to describe the hero of the present as he sees it. He asserts, "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. Classification, organization, presentation,” (232). This statement corroborates Hal’s theory that the notion of heroism and the role of heroes changes over time. The substitute’s remarks also imply that there is no room for heroes of action. Their work is done, and now the times have called for a new form a heroism. The substitute states, “You have wondered, perhaps, why all real accountants wear hats? They are today’s cowboys. As will you be. Riding the American range. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data” (233). The cowboy hat is a general symbol of men of action and masculinity, while the accountant’s hat the substitute has is described as “a dark-grey fedora, old but very well cared for (233), evokes a professional and arguably more modern and civilized image. The imagery the substitute conjures up also reflects a white male hero, as both cowboys and 1980s accountants are predominantly portrayed as white men. It is also worth noting that the male substitute is telling a room full of students whom he addresses as “gentlemen” (233) about this new style of masculine heroism. The substitute’s comments are also a playful way of Wallace poking fun at the idea of accountants and pencil-pushers being modern day cowboys. The substitute’s comments further show that the hat changes as does the hero, but the idea of the hat-wearing hero carries through, which signifies that though the notion of heroes and heroism changes with the times, heroism continues to exist. We can be sure that that hero the substitute is discussing is the hero of reaction due to the similarities in how the description of “the heroic frontier” (232) matches Hal’s description of Frank Furillo’s television heroism: “A hero whose virtues are suited to a more complex and corporate American era” (*Infinite Jest* 141). The substitute’s remark, “To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail from within the teeming wormball of data and rule and exception and contingency which

constitutes real-world accounting – this is heroism” (*The Pale King* 231) makes an unequivocal connection between accountants and heroes of reaction as described by Wallace in *Infinite Jest*.

The lecture given by the substitute instructor is more than just a mouthpiece for Wallace to express his ideas on modern heroism. The message espoused by the substitute has a direct effect on Chris Fogle, the character who relays the story. Fogle states:

“It wasn’t so much the rhetoric about heroism and wrangling, much of which seemed a bit over-the-top to me even then (there are limits). I think part of what was so galvanizing was the substitute’s diagnosis of the world and reality as already essentially penetrated and formed, the real world’s constituent info generated, and now a meaningful choice lay in herding, corralling, and organizing the torrential flow of info. This rang true to me, though on a level that I don’t think I even was fully aware existed within me. (*The Pale King* 240)

The existential “ah-ha” moment that Fogle has after hearing this lecture seems to give credence to the truth of the substitute’s claims. Fogle now realizes the way the world is, and though he balks at the notion of heroism, he does recognize the value in the work that a hero of reaction does. It is important to realize that though Fogle may seem to dismiss the idea that the work is not heroic, he is more so dismissing the hyperbolic way the substitute conveyed the idea. Fogle’s final sentence also conveys the idea of the possibility of heroism or greater potential, at the very least, existing inside someone without their knowledge. Just like how Don Gately never intended to be or knew he could be a hero of action, reaction, or stasis, individuals may not be aware of the heroic

potential they have in them. The lecture that Fogle recalls the substitute giving goes even further into describing the real-world struggle of a hero of reaction. Instead of relying solely on the television description of Furillo as a hero of reaction or Don Gately's short stint as a hero of reaction, Wallace gives us a chance to see the front lines of what it is like to be a hero of reaction in a real-world setting.

The substitute espouses that tedium is the enemy of heroism and that overcoming tedium is the work of heroes of reaction. He states, "... here is a truth: Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today, in this world neither I nor you have made, heroism" (*The Pale King* 229). The substitute is advocating for a reactionary heroism, which he sees as an authentic type of heroism in the data-driven world of accounting. He further states, "Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real" (231). The substitute also takes great care to demonstrate that the obstacles facing heroes of reaction are not just inconveniences, but they truly are difficult challenges and terrible enemies of the hero of reaction.

The substitute's comments on the difference between real and artificial heroism directly connect to a key part of Wallace's novel, *Infinite Jest* where the character, Hal Incandenza writes an essay that focuses on the examination of heroism via television heroes. It is clear to the substitute that there is a difference between real heroism and play heroism. He states, "I mean true heroism, not heroism as you might know it from films or the tales of childhood [...] The truth is that the heroism of your childhood

entertainments was not true valor. It was theater” (229). His remarks here are important for several reasons. Wallace separates the idea of the substitute’s style of heroism from the “B.S. 1980’s era of ‘Hill Street Blues’” (*Infinite Jest* 140) that Hal references. It is clear that Wallace is talking about a very real heroism instead of an exaggerated example from television. The substitute’s use of the word “entertainments” must certainly be a direct nod to *Infinite Jest*, which focused heavily on the idea of entertainment and the danger of entertainment. This does not make Hal’s essay from *Infinite Jest* any less valuable. Hal was very aware that the television examples were symbolic embodiments of heroism as dictated by the time period. What this remark does is clue the reader that Wallace is going from the abstract idea of heroism to a heroism that really does exist in our world.

According to the substitute, the kind of heroism that he believes is authentic is devoid of an audience. He states that the false heroics of childhood were “all designed to appear heroic. To excite and gratify an audience” (*The Pale King* 229). He makes it clear that there is no audience for his interpretation of the heroes of the real world, stating: “Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality—there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you” (229). The substitute further asserts that not only is modern day heroism unnoticed by the masses, the masses do not care about it either. He builds on his previous statement: “Here is the truth—actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested” (229). This closing sentence adds an interesting element to the substitute’s conception of heroism. He makes it clear that heroes are not simply behind the scenes, and thus their works of heroism are not noticed. He informs that people are not interested in real heroism. As the substitute’s

lecture continues, he asserts that it is not possible for individuals to have an audience and also be a hero: “True heroism is *a priori* incompatible with audience or applause or even the bare notice of the common run of man” (230). The substitute also suggests that areas of work and labor that are not exciting or engaging are more likely to be the place where the potential for heroism is found (230). It is significant that the substitute mentions the attentions of the common man as impervious to the occurrence of heroism. It not only continues the trend of Wallace and his characters to show heroism through a white-male lens, it also shows that it is possible to find and appreciate heroism, but most people, the kind of people who believe that television depicts a true reality, will not see it.

Heroism as depicted by the substitute has an interesting relationship between the individuals and society as a whole. The heroics are to the benefit of society, but it is an exclusively individualized struggle, according to the substitute. He says that “True heroism is you, alone, in a designated workspace. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer” (230). The substitute has made it clear that hard work and enduring tedium is the work of heroes, but this statement shows a very lonely connotation to the identity of the hero of reaction. Not only must the hero of reaction struggle against the insufferable enemies of tedium and boredom, but there is the pain of loneliness within the struggle of their job. This extra layer of mental anguish illuminates the complexity of the internal challenges that heroes of reaction face. The substitute’s depiction of the difficult and lonely struggle of heroism connects very closely with the image of Don Gately’s struggle in the hospital bed. Though Gately is continually surrounded by a variety of real and imagined visitors, it is only he who can struggle with the mental and physical pain he

is in. Gately also notes how he feels the pain of each second go by much like the description the substitute gives of the hero in his designated workspace.

## **2. The Importance of Boredom in Reactionary Heroism**

Boredom is an important concept in *The Pale King*, and we can infer that it was an important idea to Wallace. In a way, *The Pale King* serves as Wallace's literary attempt to show the interesting side of what most people might consider to be boring. It is a novel about taxes, tedium, and the mundane routine of IRS employees. Throughout *The Pale King*, Wallace takes an abstract concept like boredom and paints a specific picture of how this abstract concept looks in our everyday lives. He shows us the shapes boredom takes, the way it affects people, and how individuals are able to overcome it. The pervasiveness of this theme and the different facets of boredom that Wallace illuminates for the reader make it clear that Wallace believes that this is an important concept for his audience. Many different works of critical theory about *The Pale King* address the importance of boredom in the novel.

Ralph Clare points out in his essay, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," that boredom is "a modern problem" (430). He adds that "[Boredom] is something *The Pale King* attempts to investigate in all of its facets" (430). Clare notes the depth of the analysis of boredom in *The Pale King*, and he compares the text to Reinhard Kuhn's *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature*. Clare states, "Unlike Kuhn's work, *The Pale King* refuses to privilege one type of boredom over others and, in fact, embraces the common forms of boredom..." (431). Clare further asserts that there is a deeper connection between the myriad forms of

boredom that Wallace demonstrated when Clare states, “*The Pale King* documents a variety of boredoms—from the existential life-crises to those of the daily grind and to those resulting from stultifying political and economic systems—and suggests the links between them” (431). It’s also worth noting that though boredom is a real threat to contemporary Americans, it is as much a First World problem as it is a modern problem. *The Pale King* is focused entirely on a contemporary American setting, and thus the challenges and heroism it explores is First World-oriented. This is consistent throughout *Infinite Jest* and Wallace’s other works, as nearly all his texts explore the struggles and experiences of modern First World people.

In addition to Clare’s assertion that the different forms of boredom in *The Pale King* share a connection, Clare also believes that Wallace depicts boredom in the novel as not an ageless phenomenon, but a contemporary issue (431). Through his analysis of the political and historical construction of boredom in the novel, Clare notes that *The Pale King* does show the value of boredom. Clare states, “While boredom in *Infinite Jest* leads almost exclusively to existential terror, addiction, and solipsism, the expanded notion of boredom in *The Pale King* holds out the possibility that boredom can lead to something positive, perhaps even constructive...” (440). Not only does Clare make a direct connection between two of Wallace’s novels via the issue of boredom, but he also agrees that boredom in *The Pale King* can be used as a means to a better end, which this thesis will show is the transcendence of the hero of stasis. Clare also notes that Wallace shows that concentration is the key to overcoming boredom, “The hope that boredom can be converted into something product is entangled with the novel’s preoccupation with

concentration” (440). Clare’s observation connects to this thesis’ assertion that concentration is a key component of the stasis achieved by heroes of stasis.

A difference between the assertions of Clare’s essay and this thesis is that Clare does assert that the novel is “full of characters that have an extraordinary ability to concentrate, no matter how much they struggle with it, and who demonstrate an awareness of the qualities of this ability” (440). Though I think that *The Pale King* does a great job of showing the range of skill different individuals have with dealing with boredom, I don’t believe many of the characters possess extraordinary abilities in this regard. This thesis demonstrates that it is the select few who are potential heroes of stasis who possess the extraordinary ability to deal with boredom. What is more is that though many characters in *The Pale King* do appear to be aware of their boredom, none of the characters with exceptional abilities appear to be aware of their extraordinary abilities to deal with that boredom (*The Pale King* 485). Despite the aforementioned difference between Clare’s essay and this thesis, Clare does accurately address Wallace’s textual demonstration that “To be able to reach a state of total concentration means gaining the possibility of transcending boredom,” (441) and Clare goes on to say that “It is unclear what this entails exactly, but Wallace perhaps had something mystical in mind” (441). Though this thesis is more concerned with interpreting the heroic qualities of the transcendence of boredom, it is undeniable that Wallace includes mystical qualities, like levitation (*The Pale King* 485), to illustrate that transcendence.

Stephen J. Burn also notes the focus on concentration in *The Pale King* in his essay “‘A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness’: Closing Time in *The Pale King*.” Burn states, “Bearing in mind the work carried out by Wallace’s accountants and the



overall thematic focus on attention, the term that I would best suggest characterizes *The Pale King*'s treatment of time is *concentration*" (385). Burn also contends that a major factor that ties *The Pale King* together is Wallace's fascination with consciousness, which Burn asserts is a fascination that Wallace has addressed and explored throughout his career (373). Burn notes the importance of boredom in the novel, but he is also keenly aware that there are other important themes at play, and those themes are illuminated by the IRS employees and the work they do in the novel. Burn states, "The role of accountants and accounting in *The Pale King* is much fizzier, and the buzzwords that have appeared in many reviews—boredom, attention—while no doubt relevant, do not exhaust the subject. On closer examination, Wallace's accountant seems to perform multiple roles in *The Pale King*" (375). Like Burn, I agree that *The Pale King* is a novel of many big themes, where the characters represent numerous ideas. And this thesis holds that one of the multiple roles the accountants serve in the novel is to give a deeper understanding of Wallace's concept of heroism—both bureaucratic (re-active) and the heroism of stasis (non-action), which is showcased in the ability of certain accountants to find stasis in the ongoing battle of boredom and complicated work.

Not only does Conley Wouters believe that boredom is a central theme of *The Pale King*, he also asserts that the exploration of boredom creates a connection between *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*. In his essay, "'What Am I, A Machine?': Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," Wouters states: "*The Pale King*, overtly concerned with the meaning and consequences of all-pervasive boredom, ask many of the same questions concerning the self and the subject, and I will argue, in a different ontological arena than the one in which *Infinite Jest* is set"

(448). Wouters is also keenly aware of how the setting of the novel affects the existential struggle of the characters. Wouters states, “*The Pale King*’s characters constantly struggle to locate 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). This description falls right in line with Hal’s description of the hero of re-action. Wouters also sees the characters in *The Pale King* as living in a world similar to Frank Furillo of *Hill Street Blues*, Hal’s archetype hero of re-action. Wouters even recognizes, in an indirect way, the characters’ ability to find stasis while facing the struggle of boredom and the overflow of information. Wouters states, “Additionally, I argue that despite the multiple examples of humans in danger of becoming machines, and the characters’ varying reactions to this contemporary vulnerability, the book’s singular structure overrides the fears and anxieties that appear throughout the narrative, suggesting through its very existence that humans and information can and do coexist naturally, in some kind of millennial harmony” (448). The “millennial harmony” that Wouters writes about is the same as the stasis the heroes in *The Pale King* achieve. Harmony being a synonym of balance perfectly captures the existential accord the novel’s characters are able to achieve. His use of the word millennial also denotes a timeline progression into a new era, which connects to Hal’s vision of the hero of non-action as the hero of the future. Wouters, however, is referring to more of the general characters in the novel who find harmony amongst the struggles of their profession, while this thesis focuses on more intense instances of this harmony found in the heroes of stasis. That being said, it is clear that Wouters sees the same

positive result stemming from the personal balance achieved in a world of information overflow.

*The Pale King* makes it clear that the type of work performed by the IRS is something that is antithetical to the human condition in the modern age of the novel. Wallace describes a painful moment of travel as “Men who cannot bear to wait or stand still forced to stand still all together and wait” (18). Wallace is careful to show humanity’s aversion to tedium even in the most simple and essential acts, like travel. The character, Claude Sylvanshine grapples with boredom as he simply embarks on a flight that takes less than an hour. Wallace shows his struggle as, “There was nothing to do and nothing would hold still in his head in all the confined noise [...]” (6). Sylvanshine worries that after he has finished his airline peanuts, there will be no escape from the boredom, so he considers looking out the window (6).

Wallace even playfully puts us in the driver’s seat of a boring moment in the IRS office in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter, which consists of approximately three pages of double columned play by play of IRS workers turning pages and looking at files (*The Pale King* 310-313). The chapter starts:

‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a Page. Matt Redgate turns a page. ‘Groovy’ Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. (310)

The chapter continues in that fashion, depicting a hyper-realistic and detail-laden experience of people performing a boring and repetitive task. The chapter is painfully dull to read for the purpose of showing readers the reality of boredom and making them battle their way through tedium. Wallace makes readers live just three pages of the endless minutes that the IRS employees live in order to make readers feel the struggle for themselves.

Lane Dean Jr. is a character that Wallace uses to show us the arduous, and often unsuccessful, battle against tedium. In his intense state of boredom, Dean imagines himself performing the high-energy task of having copious quantities of coffee and running around, shouting like a maniac. His next thought is: "He knew what he'd really do on the break was sit facing the wall clock in the lounge and despite prayers and effort sit counting the seconds tick off until he had to come back and do this again. And again and again and again" (*The Pale King* 379). Dean's break time/boredom dilemma sheds an interesting light on the relationship Wallace sees us having with tedium. Dean's behavior suggests that we are crippled and depressed by tedium, but we are also pulled into it. When given an opportunity for respite, Dean does not choose to read a magazine or pace around outside. Instead, he fixates on the impending doom of tedium, which becomes a tedious task of minute counting in itself. Time counting is a common occurrence in *The Pale King*. Dean, like many IRS employees, obsesses over time, whether it moves fast on a break or creeps by during worktime. One example is when Dean thinks: "In four minutes it would be another hour, a half hour after that was the fifteen-minute break" (379). I think that Wallace intentionally uses the peculiar four-minute marker to show that Dean isn't checking time by normal conventions of fifteen minutes, ten minutes, or

even five minutes. Four minutes is an unusual measuring stick for time, and it shows that every minute is counted by Dean, which suggests that just like how Don Gately feels every minute of pain in his hospital bed, Dean feels every minute of work as something that must be endured.

Wallace goes as far as to portray Dean's tedious job as being a realistic hell. After Dean contemplates his break-time misery, the narrator informs, "[Dean] felt in a position to say that he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops." Dean's vision of hell is described as:

Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. Tell him to pucker his butt and think beach when he starts to get antsy, and that would be just the word they'd use, *antsy*, like his mother. Let him find out in time's fullness what a joke the word was, that it didn't come anyplace close. (379)

Not only is the tedium-soaked work environment of the IRS directly compared to hell, but Wallace also makes numerous explicit connections between boredom and death. The narrator gives us a glimpse into Dean's thoughts of suicide, "He had the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor. Never before in his life up to now had he once thought of suicide," (378). Dean's misery working at a tedious job is linked to death, suicide, and insanity

multiple times throughout the text. At one point, Dean considers multiple ways to kill himself with Jell-O amid his work-related stress and thoughts of boredom.

The thoughts of suicide that Dean experiences are not the only connection between tedium and death in *The Pale King*. There are two ghosts who haunt the IRS' Post 047's wiggle room. The narrator confirms that the ghosts are not hallucinations. One ghost is described as: "Blumquist is a very bland, dull, efficient rote examiner who died at his desk unnoticed in 1980" (315). Wallace is surely being humorous by depicting a human who is so unassuming at a job that is so overwhelmingly boring that his death can just go unnoticed, with his slumped over body being the equivalent of a stack of papers on a desk. Wallace makes much out of Blumquist's death. One of the chapters is an article from the *Peoria Journal Star* that is titled "IRS Worker Dead For Four Days" (27). The article notes that Blumquist was dead and sitting at his desk for four days before anyone asked him if he was alright. The article reveals that Blumquist died at the age of 53 from a heart attack, and that his death was only discovered when a custodian questioned how Blumquist could be working with the lights off. Blumquist's supervisor is reported remarking, "[Blumquist] was very focused and diligent, so no one found it unusual that he was in the same position all that time and didn't say anything. He was always absorbed in his work and kept to himself" (28). I interpret Wallace's inclusion of Blumquist's ghost as a comical way of showing that the boredom of the job is a real threat with overtones of potential mortal ramifications. Not only did Blumquist die while performing his difficult and boring job, but also his coworkers see his corpse as similar enough to the posture of the living, working Blumquist to assume he is just hard at work.

The other IRS ghost is named Garrity, and he lived in an earlier historical period than Blumquist (315). Garrity, though not an IRS employee, also had a very mundane and tedious job inspecting mirrors for flaws. His work is described as, “In essence, Garrity sat on a stool next to a slow-moving belt and moved his upper body in a complex system of squares and butterfly shapes, examining his face’s reflection at very close range. He did this three times a minute, 1,440 times per day, 356 days a year, for eighteen years,” (316). Wallace shows that Garrity’s work becomes his life: “Toward the end he evidently moved his body in the complex inspectorial system of squares and butterfly shapes even when he was off-duty and there were no mirrors around.” Garrity’s painfully tedious job also leads to his demise. The narrator informs, “In 1964 or 1965 he had apparently hanged himself from a steam pipe in what is now the north hallway off the EEC Annex’s Wiggle room” (316). The deaths of both Blumquist and Garrity are deeply related to the monotonous work they performed, if not caused by that work. By including both of the character’s backstories in the text, Wallace draws a direct connection to tedium and death, as well as making a point to show just how high the stakes are for human beings who must constantly endure a repetitive and complex task for most of their working lives. Wallace shows that victims of tedium have more to fear than just an excessive yawn.

Though *The Pale King* paints a dreary depiction of the reality of boredom with all of its pain and danger, the text also asserts that being able to resist boredom is an empowering ability that will allow individuals to accomplish truly impressive feats. The unnamed narrator gives readers a very direct address about a skill that Wallace believes is important and has developed throughout *The Pale King*:

The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air. The Key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable. I met, in the years 1984 and '85, two such men. It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish. (438)

The quote both shows the possibility of overcoming boredom and using an indifference to boredom as a powerful asset, but it also indicates that only a few rare individuals will be able to achieve that feat. The kind of person who is able to do such a thing represents Wallace's hero of stasis.

### **3. The Hero of Stasis at the IRS**

There may be a few candidates who could become heroes of stasis, but there is at least one certain example of a hero of stasis in *The Pale King*. The character Shane Drinion is an example of what I interpret as Wallace's hero of stasis. Wallace gives readers an interesting comparison with the characters Sylvanshine and Drinion, both of whom possess interesting, though not very useful, powers that are associated with concentration. Drinion is able to levitate and Sylvanshine has a form of ESP that continually informs him of random facts, most of which are not remotely relevant. The interplay between Sylvanshine and Drinion is even more interesting because Sylvanshine actively tries to get better at focusing his attention and seems to continually fail, whereas Drinion seems to come by his fantastical ability to concentrate naturally. What is more is



that Sylvanshine cannot forget about his ESP. It is an unavoidable reminder of interrupting facts that actually harms his ability to focus on a single task. Drinion, on the other hand, is not even aware of the levitation he is able to achieve while in deep concentration (485).

Though Sylvanshine does not achieve the status of a hero of stasis, or really even come close for that matter, he does have a sense of awareness of what is required to be the kind of person that Wallace sees as a hero of stasis. Wallace often uses Sylvanshine as a mouthpiece for what needs to be done in order to be an individual who is able to overcome distraction, boredom, and tedium and perform an important and complex task. Sylvanshine's thoughts on that challenge are not belittled by his own inability to achieve them. During a bout of trying to concentrate despite his random fact ESP distractions, Sylvanshine performs a stretch that he earlier mentions is a useful exercise for deskbound individuals: "For a stretch of one, hundred, Sylvanshine tried flexing first one buttock and then the other instead of both buttocks as once, which required concentration and a strange type of noncontrol, like trying to wiggle your ears in the mirror" (10). Sylvanshine regularly thinks about the value of noncontrol and selective attention. He notes, "There is an anti-stress technique called Thought Stopping" (15), which is especially important for Sylvanshine given the flood of data he gets from his fact ESP ability. Just one page later, Sylvanshine informs, "The trick was homing in on which facts were important" (16). Though Sylvanshine is unable to regularly enact his own advice, he is aware of what it takes to be successful in a fact-wrangling world.

It appears that Sylvanshine is an exaggeration of the common person's dilemma to isolate and focus on what is important in a world that proliferates facts and stimuli by the

second. In the unfinished novel, Sylvanshine does not seem to overcome his challenge of developing an extreme ability to concentrate that could allow him to be a hero of stasis. Sylvanshine's thoughts and goals, however, line up with exactly what Wallace asserts is important about attention and concentration in the text. Sylvanshine thinks, "It was true: The entire ball game, in terms of both the exam and life, was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not" (12). His thoughts mirror not only Wallace's ideas that are developed throughout *The Pale King*, but they are nearly identical to Wallace's advice in his Kenyon College Commencement Speech, which is a serious, albeit humorous, text of straightforward advice for young scholars who are going forward into the post-university world.

Drinion's identity as a hero of stasis is hinted at and demonstrated through his supernatural-like abilities for concentration: "Drinion is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed; it's very slight, and no one can see that his bottom is floating slightly above the seat of the chair," (485). The fantastical nature of Drinion's super concentration is a clue that he is special and the developed themes throughout the novel show that his exceptional concentration is heroic. It is even mentioned that "One night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion floating upside down over his desk with his eyes glued to a complex return" (485). What is very interesting about Drinion's power is that he is not aware of it. The levitation does not appear to be his heroic power, but an unnoticed side effect of his extreme ability to concentrate despite the tedium and get his work done effectively. The text reveals that "Drinion himself [is] unaware of the levitating thing by definition, since it is only when his attention is completely on something else that the levitation happens" (485).

Readers are able to experience Drinion's concentration-induced levitation through a conversation he has with the character Meredith Rand. As the conversation carries on and Drinion becomes more focused on Rand's rambling story, he continues to levitate higher and higher. At the start, his position is described as: "Drinion's bottom is hovering very slightly—perhaps one or two millimeters at most—above the seat of his wooden chair," (468). At one point in the conversation it is noted that he "appears considerably taller than he had when the tete-a-tete started," (494). Drinion is later described as hovering nearly 1.75 inches off of his seat with his feet swinging just above the tile floor (497-498). Wallace even notes, "Were it not for the sport coat hanging off the back of the chair, Beth Rand and others would be able to see light through the substantial gap between the seat of his chair and his slacks," (498). Towards the conclusion of the conversation, Drinion is said to completely obscure a display of hats behind him except for the bill of a hat on the topmost row (504-505).

It is also interesting that Wallace makes a point to state in the notes that Drinion is happy, and that his ability to pay attention is connected to his happiness. His happiness is described as a refreshing result of enduring pain, which is overcome and transformed into bliss. The notes of *The Pale King* roughly outline Drinion's temperament as:

"Drinion is happy. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like

stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert.

Constant bliss in every atom.” (546)

Unfortunately, it seems that *The Pale King*'s incomplete nature deprives readers of further development of Drinion, the novel's most remarkable hero. There is, however, enough evidence in the text to conclude that Drinion is a hero of stasis, and that Wallace believes that what Drinion is able to achieve with his heroic concentration is important for our society.

In the notes of the novel, Wallace brings attention to the importance of being able to concentrate and pay attention. He also asserts that not only are those skills valuable, but there are exceptional individuals who are able to perform and sustain those skills with a high level of precision. Wallace notes, “They're rare, but they're among us. People able to achieve and sustain a certain steady state of concentration, attention, despite what they are doing” (547). The notes of the novel inform that the character Eric Stecyk has been tasked with finding those exceptional people in order to perform a man versus machine test at the IRS. The notes show Stecyk's first experience with that kind of individual: “An Asian kid in one of the reading chairs that looks a great deal more comfortable than it really is, slumped back and legs crossed ankle to knee, reading a statistics textbook.” Stecyk, intrigued by the student, checks back on him after 20 minutes have passed and then after an hour has passed, to find that the student has remained in the exact same posture of concentration while making significant progress in the text (547). The notes also detail a security guard who “Can't read or chat” (547) and has to stand watching people come in and out of the store he guards all day. Stecyk goes in and out of the store

several times, which raises the attention of the guard. The conclusion is that “He’s able to pay attention even in what has to be a staggeringly dull job” (547).

Wallace’s notes also mention a “Midwest meditation semifinals,” (547) where victory is determined by who can maintain theta waves the longest (547). His final example of a possible hero of stasis is a female who is working on an assembly line repeatedly counting numbers of loops of twine on a bale of twine. When the work shift ends, she is the only one who doesn’t immediately leave because she is so “immersed in her work” (547). Wallace’s notes state, “It’s the ability to be immersed” (547). This note, and the word “immersed” are very poignant when considering Wallace’s conception of heroism. Wallace’s new hero, which I’ve interpreted as the hero of stasis, is a move away from heroes who are measured by their external deeds, and they are instead valued for their internal strength through their ability to achieve an existential stasis by finding themselves and their ability to overcome the obstacles before them despite the myriad challenges and distractions. Wallace clearly sees boredom as a very prominent obstacle in this internal struggle heroes are able to overcome, and his use of “immersed” showcases a type of person who doesn’t rely on taking empty actions to be heroic or simply respond to the challenges thrown at them. Wallace’s new conception of a hero is someone who becomes in tune with the obstacle, and through amazing aspects of willpower, like concentration and determination, are able to do what they need to in order to succeed.

Though *The Pale King* focuses on civic heroes of reaction and the ideas of what makes up a civic hero of stasis, the text also suggests that heroes of reaction are certainly not limited to the IRS, and potential heroes of stasis could be hiding behind desks and

working important jobs that require intense attention and dedication. It is also clear that heroes of stasis are rare. The unnamed narrator muses:

“I suppose what I’m saying is that there are other kinds. I wanted to be one. The kind that seemed even more heroic because nobody ever applauded them or even thought about them, or if they did it was usually as some enemy. The sort of person who’s on the Clean Up Committee instead of playing in the band at the dance or being there with the prom queen, if you know what I mean. The quiet kind who cleans up and does the dirty job. You know.” (*The Pale King* 127)

These kinds of people are referred to as “small-*h* heroes” (127) by the narrator, but through the way Wallace portrays their civic significance and existential wherewithal, he seems to value the small-*h* heroes just as much, if not more, than traditional displays of heroism.

*The Pale King* fleshes out ideas about heroism that Wallace started developing in *Infinite Jest*, but *The Pale King* also makes readers more aware of the amazing number of heroes that exist in our world without us knowing it. Wallace also shows that the internal-focused heroism of stasis can also have very real and positive effects on society through the civic quality he links to his notions of heroism. Just like Don Gately, the heroes of stasis in the IRS must overcome the overwhelming internal and external obstacles and direct their attention to the greater task at hand, but unlike Gately, the feats of the IRS heroes have a direct effect on society by contributing to the organization and maintenance of valuable financial data that is needed to move our society forward. Whereas you could argue that Gately’s heroics of stasis primarily serve himself, Wallace uses the heroic

struggle of the IRS workers to show that his notion of heroism can truly have a valuable, albeit unnoticed or underappreciated, impact on society. Not everyone has what it takes to be a hero of stasis, but Wallace clearly believes that many people perform the job of a small-h reactionary hero in our society by doing the un-fun, unrecognized task that is difficult due to its tedious and boring nature and allows the rest of society to keep moving forward.

### **A Heroic Conclusion**

Heroic non-action exists, and the hero of stasis is very much alive in the spirit of David Foster Wallace's fiction and non-fiction writing, as well as our everyday lives. It does not take a Wallace expert to see that Wallace was a deeply introspective writer whose writing was very concerned with internal struggle and a search for meaning in a very busy and changing world, a post-postmodern society. It might be tempting to dismiss Wallace's concept of heroism as not being very heroic, since stasis implies that such a hero doesn't do much of anything, but that would be a mistake. The heroism Wallace depicts is just as meaningful and impactful on the lives of others, but it is just not as cinematic.

Wallace's heroism is certainly unconventional to both modern and traditional expectations of a hero's deeds. Contemporary audiences expect heroes to be front and center, whether they're the focus of action (like the hero of action) or the protagonist with a plan who can react to any problem (like the hero of reaction). After all, what is exceedingly exciting about a recovering drug addict who decides not to take drugs despite suffering a gunshot wound? And IRS workers who continue to grind away with

complicated and mind-numbingly boring work for the betterment of society won't make a great super hero movie or TV show, even if an especially exceptional IRS worker is able to focus so intensely that it causes him to levitate a few inches. This new type of heroism that Wallace explores isn't sexy and it isn't very entertaining on the surface, and it may appear to some that these feats aren't heroic at all, but Wallace shows through his continual and expanding analysis that this concept of small-h heroism is important to his work and our society.

Wallace first laid the blueprint for his conception of heroism in *Infinite Jest*. Through his character, Hal's essay on television heroes, Wallace starts to analyze traditional heroes of culture and explore the possibility of a new type of hero. Using television as a lens for cultural examination is fitting for Wallace, who in his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" examined the effect television has on culture and expressed the importance of taking television as a serious cultural institution (155). Wallace starts his inquiry into modern heroics with the prediction of a new kind of hero, who is heroic through their non-action. Through *Infinite Jest* characters like Don Gately, Wallace explores with and plays with the shifting traditional ideas of heroes as well as his own developing ideas of his new kind of heroism, but it isn't until later in his texts that Wallace really begins to give heroism a larger focus. In some ways, the narrative approach to *Infinite Jest* challenges readers to overcome the imposed literary obstacles and focus their prowess for being attentive as they trek their way through the complex and tangent-abundant narrative.

In the text, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell describes the reading process for *Infinite Jest* as a novel in which readers "can, and even must, devise



some way to read through the book that allows them to keep their focus on the story while also mining the notes for all their information, comedy, and readerly pleasure” (120). Even though Wallace doesn’t give a more direct focus to the examination of modern heroics until his later writing, he begins his inquiry in *Infinite Jest* and styles the novel’s narrative in a way that challenges the readers, in a literary sense, to engage in the sort of internal struggle for attentiveness and balance he would later develop in his work.

It is nearly impossible to predict how much further Wallace could have developed his thoughts on heroism had he lived to finish *The Pale King* and even write other fiction or non-fiction texts that could have expanded his ideas. Readers and critics are left to speculate based on the ideological artifacts Wallace left behind. What we can see, however, is the development of specific themes in Wallace’s writing, specifically from *Infinite Jest* to *The Pale King*. Though he was not able to finish the text, Wallace signifies that he continued to develop his concept of heroism through his writing in *The Pale King*, which explicitly examines unconventional heroism, frequently denoted as “small-h heroes” (127). *The Pale King* mentions heroism far more than any other of Wallace’s texts, and most of the discussion of heroes are the small-h variety, which Wallace describes in the novel as “The quiet kind who cleans up and does the dirty job” (127) and “The kind that seemed even more heroic because nobody applauded or even thought about them, or if they did it was usually as some enemy. The sort of person who’s on the Clean Up Committee instead of playing in the band at the dance or being there with the prom queen” (127).

With the novel’s focus on civic heroism, the passage from *The Pale King* showcases small-h heroes who, like IRS employees, are working to keep society going.

Though the small-h heroes in the novel are more civic-oriented, small-h heroes don't have to be civic-oriented. After all, heroes of stasis like Don Gately are small-h heroes because their heroism will go unnoticed and unrecognized by nearly everyone else. What Wallace is ultimately doing through his writing that touches on heroes and heroism is challenging the cinematic perception of heroism society has, and Wallace is asserting that small-h heroes are not only a critical part of society, but possibly more authentically heroic than the hero in the spotlight. Wallace proposes the value of small-h heroics in his non-fiction work as well.

A critical text that exists in Wallace's bibliography in between *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* is his "2005 Kenyon College Commencement Speech," which has also been referred to (and posthumously published as) *This Is Water*. The now famous address that Wallace gave to the Kenyon College graduates occurred roughly three years before Wallace took his own life, and it can be assumed that Wallace developed the ideas for the speech during the same rough time frame that he was also working on *The Pale King*. Though it is unclear when exactly Wallace started composing *The Pale King*, Michael Pietsche, Wallace's editor and the compiler of *The Pale King* manuscript that became the novel, has given some insight that it was a lengthy creative process for Wallace. In his Editor's Note at the beginning of *The Pale King*, Pietsche confirms that Wallace started working on *The Pale King* after the success of *Infinite Jest*, and that he had been working on the project for several years with vague and brief mentions of Wallace's unfinished project coming up over the year before Wallace's suicide (*The Pale King* v-vi). While it would be foolish to make the blanket assumption that the ideas of Wallace's commencement speech are directly connected to his ideas in *The Pale King* just because

they were authored in the same timeframe, it is not unreasonable to believe that the socially significant themes Wallace had marinating in his brain while work on *The Pale King* could have influenced the motivational and reality-checking address he would deliver to young intellectuals who would soon enter the post-college world.

Aside from the timing of the authorship of the texts, there are clear similarities between the themes of the commencement speech and Wallace's novels, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. Wallace's shared themes of attention and internal struggle in his novels and his commencement address show that Wallace was legitimately interested in and concerned about the individual struggle humans grapple with in their existence. Heroic non-action in Wallace's work was not just a few character examples tied loosely together in the background of his texts. Wallace's work shows a continued focus on the internal stasis humans can achieve and the small-scale heroics that make a real, albeit overlooked, difference in people's lives. Not all of Wallace's internal struggle work is about heroic non-action, but the core of heroic non-action is the internal human struggle that Wallace focused on throughout his career.

In his "Kenyon College Commencement Speech," Wallace begins with a kitschy joke that he rhetorically utilizes to prove a larger point about life human experience. The simple joke is about two young fish who pass an older fish who asks the younger fish how the water is. The punchline is that the two younger fish don't know what water is. Wallace states, "The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance, or so I

wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning” (1). Given the audience that Wallace wrote this text for, the emphasis he makes in the opening remarks signals what he thinks young minds need to know or should at least consider: obvious truths and important actions and events in life are not always immediately clear and they are seldom discussed, let alone glorified.

In his speech, Wallace makes it very clear that there is real and significant value in an individual’s ability to direct their own internal processes. Wallace asserts early in the speech that the true value of education is more about your ability to choose what to think about, not your refined ability to think (1-2). Wallace acknowledges the common platitude that the value of college is teaching students how to think. In classic Wallace fashion, he takes a cliché that he acknowledges is flawed and shows how the cliché still has meaningful and accurate underpinnings. Wallace says that particular cliché really means you are taught “To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties” (3). Wallace adds, “Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded” (3). A reoccurring plea that Wallace elicits throughout his speech is for members of society to be aware of and attempt to thwart what Wallace calls people’s “default setting” (3). Wallace describes this setting as a way of viewing the world as “everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realist, most vivid and important person in existence” (3). Wallace explains that the default setting is natural since people can only experience the world and everything in it from their own perspective (3), but Wallace asserts that the

value of the audience's education is that they can resist and deter their natural inclination to live life within the bubble of their personal experience.

It's clear that Wallace puts great value in having control over one's own attention when he states, "Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education -- least in my own case -- is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me" (4). Wallace showcases the value of attention control in *The Pale King* as he shows how boredom is the enemy of attention and focus (*The Pale King* 292). Of course, the type of attention that is shown primarily in *The Pale King* is centered around the struggle to focus on tedious work, but Wallace also shows a deeper level of attention that is internally focused, just like the self-awareness attention he advocates for in the commencement speech.

Another connection between the ideas in Wallace's commencement speech and *The Pale King* is the obstacle boredom and other factors play in the struggle to focus. Wallace states in his speech, "As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head (may be happening right now)" (4). *The Pale King* illuminates the painstaking struggle of keeping one's attention focused on a boring task in an existence filled with external and internal distractions through the example of IRS employees hard at work (*The Pale King* 379). Wallace takes the same principal and professes in his speech that everyone feels this struggle to stay alert and attentive to the things that truly matter most. Wallace is giving a fair warning that though humans may take

consciousness for granted, we should not take our attention for granted because being able to keep our attention sharp and focused is a very real and very common struggle.

Wallace sees the solution to this struggle is “learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think” (4.) Wallace goes on to define breaking the default mode as: “It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience” (4). Wallace acknowledges that this is not something everyone can achieve all the time, and he even admits that people like him won’t even have the desire or energy to break their default setting some of the time (7). While the advice that Wallace gives the audience of graduates may not seem that life changing or significant, Wallace challenges the way we view the mundane routines and experiences that privileged people repeat on a never-ending basis. Like Wallace’s white male examples of heroism in his texts, Wallace is speaking to an audience of college graduates who also experience a heightened degree of social privilege. It’s important to note that while boredom and the struggle to focus your attention are very much first-world problems, many people, even in the first-world, have struggles that are so severe they cannot avoid paying attention to them. Just as Wallace’s critique of heroism focuses on a predominantly white male American audience, Wallace’s advice to college graduates is much more applicable to the more socially privileged in society.

Boredom and the struggle to focus your attention on what is important may be a struggle for the privileged, but Wallace clearly sees the struggle as a significant threat that his readers will experience. Wallace’s fiction writing, along with his inspirational speech, show the value he puts on an individual using their internal strength to overcome

what he sees as a growing modern problem. Wallace states, “But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down” (7-8). This is a deeply important passage when considering Wallace’s work as an author because it encapsulates his value of the everyday existential grind. He demonstrates that there can be significant glory in the unseen and undervalued victories that may not be cinematic but do carry with them an important change.

Though Wallace doesn’t use the word hero once in his commencement speech, a careful reading reveals that Wallace is offering wisdom that is at the very core the same value he sees in the small-h heroes he writes about. The ability to shake one’s default mode and the ability to acutely focus one’s attention on what is truly important is a form of how heroes of stasis are able to overcome their internal struggle. The wisdom that Wallace imparts on the graduates is advice to take heroic non-action. To not act on their natural impulse to view the world only through the ME lens and to be able to have the willpower to decide what you need to focus on, what has meaning, and what does not have meaning. As Wallace makes clear, it is not an easy feat, and it requires continual effort. Wallace describes being able to successfully focus your attention as, “The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness” (8). Wallace’s advice is similar to the wisdom Don Gately from *Infinite Jest* enacts from his AA knowledge when he has to build a wall around every minute of his physical pain and internal struggle during his withdrawal after being shot.

“Not all heroes wear a cape” is a popular cliché that I’m sure Wallace could have squeezed much value from. We may not be able to be heroes of stasis, but after taking Wallace’s writings into consideration hopefully those who are socially and internally able can become or at least appreciate small-h heroes. It’s clear through his writing that Wallace wanted readers to think about heroism differently, or at the very least, consider alternative incarnations of heroism. Society can and will revere and praise the one in a million individual who might be on the news for defying human expectations and saving a bus full of children in a hurricane, and we can be entertained and possibly inspired by the fictitious super hero on the big screen whose Hollywood heroism is far removed from our everyday experiences. But perhaps we should try to apply effort to focus our attention on the small-h heroes: the ones who volunteer their time to clean up neighborhoods they don’t live in, the heroes who take precious time out of their day to help feed less fortunate people, or the silent heroes who perform jobs and professions that are as necessary as they are unglamorous because someone has to do the job. And even if we can’t appreciate the small-h heroes, I think Wallace would certainly have wanted us to consider their vital contribution and unassuming value to our chaotic existence.



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