

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with an analysis of how David Foster Wallace's treatment of technology defines his understanding of the self in late 20th-century and early 21st-century America. With a primary focus on how this understanding evolved between the publication of his major novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) and his posthumously published unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), this thesis also takes into consideration Wallace's ideas as expressed through his many short stories, non-fiction works, and critical essays, most prominently "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993). This thesis first briefly places Wallace in the context of contemporary literary scholarship, evaluating the state and extent of the nascent field of Wallace Studies. It then proceeds to examine and map out the philosophical underpinnings to Wallace's conception of the self, emphasising the importance of existential thought and the notion that the self is to be created rather than pre-existing in the individual. Technology as it is presented in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* is then examined in relation to this philosophical understanding of the self, proving itself consistently to be an impediment to the existential self-becoming valorised in the novels. Wallace's early interest in entertainment technology as defining the contemporary relationship to selfhood grows, in the later works, to a concern that machines assuming the roles of humans may erase the possibility of attaining that selfhood entirely. His novels evince a strong belief in the supremacy of an unmediated self and offer his readers "philosophical tools" to disentangle themselves from the technologically saturated reality of contemporary America. This thesis brings into consideration relevant criticism from the recent abundance of Wallace scholarship, occasionally challenging previous conclusions in light of its findings - for example, in posthumanist readings of Wallace's work. It also offers a new reading of the implications of Wallace's political engagement, questioning to what extent the self-enriching civic life of *The Pale King* is compatible with autonomous choice in a democratic society.