

Spring 7-13-2017

"The New Millennium's Passion for Standing Live
Witness to Things:" The Epidemiology of Isolation,
Addiction and Redemption in David Foster
Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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**“THE NEW MILLENNIUM'S PASSION FOR STANDING
LIVE WITNESS TO THINGS:”
THE EPIDEMIOLOGY OF ISOLATION,
ADDICTION AND REDEMPTION IN
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST***

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts,
With a Major in English

Governors State University
University Park, IL 60484

2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the wisdom, support, advice, encouragement and dedication of my graduate advisor and professor at Governors State University, Associate Professor of English, Dr. Christopher White.

When I decided to write a thesis on a novel that encompassed over one thousand pages, Dr. White did not discourage me. Rather, he insisted that I read the novel twice while trying to find meaning in David Foster Wallace's ambiguous prose. When I felt overwhelmed at the task I'd undertaken, Dr. White gave me perspective and lent focus to my chaotic thought processes. Despite numerous health set-backs, he has continually provided me with the teaching, assistance, compassion and patience that I needed to finish. Words alone cannot express my gratitude for his leadership and guidance. His contagious energy, continuous probing and consistent direction are why I was able to complete this thesis. It is with deepest sincerity that I thank him for giving me the opportunity and motivation to earn my Master's Degree. Dr. White, this thesis is truly dedicated to you.

I would to thank the English Department at Governors State University. My committee members, Dr. Rosemary Erickson Johnsen and Dr. Kerri K. Morris, the time you spent reading and offering suggestions for my thesis are greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank Dr. Rashidah Jaami` Muhammad, for her compassion and support of my degree pursuit. It is the dedication and continuous learning experience from these professors that saw me succeed during a tumultuous and catastrophic period in my life. I consider myself extremely blessed that these were the professors who shaped my experience at Governors State University.

Finally, to my family, my father, Michael, my mother Shirley and my siblings Gina, Elizabeth, Michael and Teresa, your continuous love and unconditional belief kept my path open and gave me the confidence and courage to keep moving along it. You are my inspiration and my best friends. Thank you for being the light along my journey.

And last but by no means least, my husband Jeff and my daughter Grace, the sacrifices you have both made so that I could finish this degree are too numerous to write out, know that I appreciate every one of them. Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and most of all your never ending love. My dearest Grace, I love you more than you can ever imagine. This thesis was written so that you could see dreams come true. Never forget that you can do anything you set your mind too.

It is through patience, persistence and perseverance that I honor the people who made this thesis possible, many thanks to each and every one of you.

Natalie C. Helberg

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ABSTRACT

Infinite Jest is a one-thousand, seventy-nine page novel and it weighs almost three pounds; it is heavy in a literal and a spiritual sense. The novel is David Foster Wallace's greatest achievement. It portrays characters who are dramatically isolated from one another and who cannot cope without some form of addiction. This addiction manifests itself in the form of an extreme dependence on drugs and/or technology to escape reality. This thesis first discusses the effects of technology on a society that is lonely and isolated. Then, two major characters with substance abuse issues are analyzed in an effort to understand the consequences of isolation and why their addictions are central to Wallace's literature. Lastly, this thesis explores the possibility of redemption despite isolation, addiction and a penchant for self-absorption in a society whose inhabitants have trouble relating to one another. Discussed in conjunction with redemption is Wallace's own vision of postmodern literature. Using major and minor characters, the following pages will uncover a group of humans that must ultimately accept their flaws and create their own happy endings.

Keywords: *Infinite Jest*, technology in literature, addiction, redemption, postmodernism

“The New Millennium's Passion for Standing Live Witness to Things:”

The Epidemiology of Isolation, Addiction and Redemption in

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Introduction

Isolation, miscommunication, and addiction permeate David Foster Wallace's 1996 magnum opus *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's verbose and extensive novel chronicles the lives of the Incandenza Family, Hal, Orin, Mario and Avril, primarily through the eyes of tennis prodigy Hal. It also focuses on a near-future dystopian United States, Canada, and Mexico conglomerate now called O.N.A.N. or Organization of North American Nations. This strange union is corrupt with commercialism and on the surface highlights a society doomed to waste and cynicism. Wallace's novel revolves around human isolation, an essential aloneness that sums up society's inability to bond with others without drugs, sex, violence or technology. It is this dependence on technology and inability to truly bond to other human beings that perpetuates the following excerpt from the novel:

Hence the new millennium's passion for standing live witness to things. A whole sub-rosa schedule of public spectatorship opportunities, 'spect-ops,' the priceless chance to be part of a live crowd, watching. Thus the Gapers' Blocks at traffic accidents, sewer-gas explosions, muggings, purse-snatchings, the occasional Empire W.D.V. . . . planned communities and people leaving their front doors agape in their rush to get out and mill around and spectate at the circle of impacted waste drawing sober and studious crowds, milling in rings around the impact, earnestly comparing mental notes on just what it is they all see (620-621).

Wallace's humans are delighted by the chance to be a part of a crowd witnessing "something" happening. This is easily relatable to any urban dweller that becomes trapped in a traffic jam only to travel inch by inch and come upon a car accident--a car accident that every driver must slow down and stare at. Inside *Infinite Jest* any bit of excitement involving a crowd is cause for sheer joy. As the narrative continues it describes a nightly ritual where cars parked on the street have to be moved to the other side: "The nightly chance to crank back the drapes and face out into the streets at 0000h., when all street-parked cars have to switch sides and everyone goes nuts and mills, either switching or watching" (621). This perpetual excitement creates an almost insane dynamic--either you're in the car moving it or you're inside watching the cars being moved. There is no communication during this nightly ritual, just the crazed intensity of humans watching each other.

The essential nature of the dystopia created in *Infinite Jest* is perfectly represented in this contradiction: one is surrounded by others, but is lonely and isolated. There is a persistent ache governing *Infinite Jest* and this ache exists because humanity is completely alone. They have lost the ability to communicate to others in a meaningful manner; they have generated their own aloneness and isolation. As Hal Incandenza states, "In a nutshell what we're talking about here is loneliness" (113). Hal is explaining to his younger tennis protégées' how Enfield Tennis Academy, aka, E.T.A. feeds on tension. His discussion focuses on the administration and faculty. They create a bond between the students, uniting them, by causing them pain, "The suffering unites us" (113) but the reality is that it is a false unification; they are still essentially alone: "But we despise... the repetition, the stress. The loneliness" (114). Throughout *Infinite Jest* there

are communities seeking out togetherness. This is visible at E.T.A, at the addiction recover facility Ennet House, in crowd gatherings like the one mentioned above, and even in the extended conversations between secret agents Marathe and Steeply, which span much of the novel¹.

Wallace's characters struggle with communication, self-absorption, depression, obsession with technology and extreme addiction. Writing in the later part of the twentieth century, Wallace faced a society that was becoming increasingly self-absorbed. However, Wallace's world is not completely devoid of hope. *Infinite Jest* is not a nihilistic novel; rather, it is a dystopian picture of a world Wallace wants to avoid, and thinks we can avoid.

Wallace wanted his novel to be sad; he claimed this on multiple occasions. I would argue that *Infinite Jest* is not only sad; it is a commentary on what happens to society when they can no longer communicate on a person-to-person basis; when addiction and isolation become the norm and forming human relationships is an afterthought. *Infinite Jest* is a message for those who abuse the trust of family and friendship and allow addictions to erode basic human decency. In designing dystopia, Wallace highlights how technological dependency allows apathy and addiction to become second nature. His novel confirms that televisual entertainment and drugs become a substitute for the interpersonal relationships necessary to sustain the human part of humanity. It in its darkness however, there is light and in order to fully comprehend the hope and redemption that is possible, in spite of *Infinite Jest's* catastrophic

¹ Marathe is an agent of a secret Quebec terrorist group, the A.F.R., while Steeply is a cross dressing officer who knows Marathe is not just a double or triple but a quadruple agent crossing the A.F.R. Their conversations provide an understanding of two lonely people who use philosophy to connect over their cultural indifference. They provide a necessary, pragmatic, view of miscommunication.

circumstances, one must first understand the malicious and murky concavity² that threatens humanity.

Infinite Jest portrays a society that chooses to abuse pleasure through entertainment as well as an array of addictive substances. Humankind thus constructs a world even less inclined to communicate or bond except under the guise of a false sense of security. Addiction is a medical and social science field, often written about in the non-fiction vein. However contemporary fiction, especially postmodern literature is saturated with addiction themes, from Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* to *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. These postmodern novels focus on expressing the turmoil, anguish, fear, anxiety and the chase of the high. They flourish in a society that becomes more self-absorbed and less communicative as the technology to stay connected advances and improves. Technology and addiction are obviously related in Wallace's writing; however, the link between the two in Wallace's writings is yet to be fully examined.

Wallace himself was critical of technology, especially television's ability to create "a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and lit today" (Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram" 162). His non-fiction essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" details the influence of television on modern fiction writers. In the essay Wallace is asking writers to accept this influence while not letting it distract from writing quality fiction. It is an important essay to reflect upon when reading *Infinite Jest* because it offers insight into Wallace's own

² The Great Concavity in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, is an extremely large parcel of land in what was part of the northeastern United States. When the U.S. forced Canada and Mexico to merge and become O.N.A.N., the former United States also forced Canada to annex land that is essentially a toxic waste dump. It is covered by a dome so the toxic fumes are not released into the air and the toxicity has to be refueled, so to speak, or catastrophe occurs. The United States still dumps pollutants into the concavity while Canada wants the U.S. to reclaim it, thus creating a continuing conflict. The Great Concavity is an example of human apathy and the poisonous atmosphere it creates.

issues with television and the paradox of using television as a substitute to actual observation and interaction with others. However, his intent was not to build a case for anti-television sentiment or to blame television for low test scores or dumbing down of society. Rather Wallace was more inclined to see Americans as already suffering from some type of sensationalized malaise. He quotes Alexis de Tocqueville, nineteenth century political scientist, historian and author of *Democracy in America*, "...By 1830 de Tocqueville had already diagnosed American culture as peculiarly devoted to easy sensation and mass-marketed entertainment, "spectacles vehement and untutored and rude" that aimed to "stir the passions more than to gratify the taste" (Qtd. in Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction* 162).

The idea that Americans were easy to manipulate and this fact was recognized by an outsider, the Frenchman de Tocqueville, is concerning and poignant. Television of course fashions a perfect type of gratification. It is easy to disassociate while viewing television; TV fashions a barrier between reality and fantasy but allows the viewer to believe he or she is thoroughly involved in the story. Wallace was very aware of this condition and likened it to an alcohol addiction calling television addicts "teleholics." He defines malignant addiction and further explains television's role as an addiction:

Watching TV can become malignantly addictive...something is malignantly addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes. A malignant addiction is also distinguished for spreading the problems of the addiction out and in in interference [sic] patterns, creating difficulties for

relationships, communities and the addict's very sense of self and soul
(Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" 163).

In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, technology is often represented through television and the cartridges or videos that the characters make a signature part of life.

James Incandenza was a filmmaker as well as being father to tennis prodigy Hal. His final film has the power to render humans catatonic, to the point where they are essentially committing suicide, dying because nothing else matters except watching this film. This film's Master copy is believed to be buried with James. Periodically however, there exist episodes of people dying from viewing this final cassette. The film is innocently labeled "The Entertainment" and "has a little smiling face on the case" (850) as though to convey how much fun it is to watch, to epitomize its innocence; the cartridge however, is neither harmless nor safe.

Infinite Jest cleverly winds this facet into the novel using blurbs about a medical attaché's descent into madness from "The Entertainment." It starts innocuously, with the medical attaché returning home from work every night and needing to eat his dinner while watching the teleputer. A description of his evening begins as such, "...the medical attaché partakes of neither kif nor distilled spirits, and must unwind without chemical aid...when he arrives home...he wants the living room's teleputer booted and warmed up and the evening's entertainment cartridges already selected and arranged..." (34). The emphasis placed on the attaché's need for the teleputer as a remedy to his hectic and stressful day is juxtaposed with his inability to use liquor or drugs as a relaxant. This contrast is substantial in a novel focused on technology, addictions and their effects on society. He is even subtler in his portrayal of the medical attaché; he slowly builds to the

attaché's demise, highlighting the growing impact of technology's effects on an apathetic culture.

Chapter 1- "Society's Destruction through Technology's Seduction:

Understanding Televisual Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*" aims to explain society's fascination with televisual devices and the impact this devotion has on intrapersonal relationships. Technology, miscommunication and the final *Infinite Jest* film are explored in this first chapter. David Foster Wallace was critical of modern day technology, including television and communication devices. He was concerned about their capability to seduce. More than two decades ago in a much-cited interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace stated "What TV is extremely good at—and realize that this is 'all it does'—is discerning what large numbers of people think they want, and supplying it." *Infinite Jest* capitalizes on this idea, utilizing technology as a powerful force capable of mass destruction. Using carefully placed character thoughts *Infinite Jest* provides windows into the technology induced doom present throughout the novel. This first occurs early in the novel during an exam between a doctor and a very depressed woman "The doctor...preferred handwritten notes to a laptop because he felt M.D.s who typed into their laps during their clinical interviews gave a cold impression" (73). The simplicity with which Wallace associates technology and a lack of human bonding is critical to understanding how this society functions. The videophony fiasco of the late twentieth is discussed in detail during Chapter 1, to outline the depth of obsession with technology and the swift decline of that obsession due primarily to the operator's growing self-consciousness. The debacle of the videophony highlights critical insights into Wallace's

fears of technology and how easily society is manipulated. Essentially, in the novel, twenty first century Americans are the creators of their own fatalities.

The ultimate threat to humanity exists in the final video produced by James Incandenza. This video, titled *Infinite Jest VI* is the final entry in his filmography. It will cause its viewers to lose the will to live, to become unable to function at even the simplest level. It will cause the observer to commit suicide in their quest to seek the ultimate gratification that the cartridge promises. Searching for the film is a Canadian terrorist group, the A.F.R.³ They want to use the film will as the final mode of human destruction. Remy Marathe is a member of the A.F.R., and is fundamentally the voice of the individual in Wallace's novel. His conversations with O.N.A.N. secret agent Hugh Steeply provide the existential philosophical questions that Wallace wants his audience to ponder. As Marshall Boswell writes in *his Understanding David Foster Wallace*, "The world of *Infinite Jest* is...a parallel world, one that ...manages paradoxically to call increased attention to the world *outside* the novel, that is, the world of the reader, the observer..." (125). Boswell cannily places the reader's world at the center of his critique acknowledging the relationship Wallace hoped the world of *Infinite Jest* would have with his readers. Although the novel is fiction, Wallace wrote it in such a manner that the reader is able to see the connections to his or her own world, especially in regards to

³ "Infamous Separatist 'Wheelchair Assassins' (*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* or A.F.R.'s) of southwestern Quebec...A.F.R.'s stated aims being nothing less total than the total return of all Reconfigured territories to the American administration...and the secession of Canada *in toto* from the Organization of North American Nations...[they are] essentially cultists" (1055-1056). Members are also confined to wheelchairs and completely organize and manage their organization from their wheelchairs, including attacks. They want the United States to take back the toxic dump lands they forced on Canada and they want their country to be completely independent from O.N.A.N. They are deadly, brutal and "To hear the squeak [of the wheelchair]... is now an understood euphemistic locution...for instant terrifying, and violent death" (1057).

one's dependence on technology. Allowing the reader to open his or her eyes to the outside world is significant in realizing the role of technology's seduction in Wallace's novel. Technology and televisual entertainment are imperative to understanding *Infinite Jest* and Wallace. He acknowledges the influence of television on his own development and recognizes its power on the generations of today.

Chapter 2- "The Etiology of Addiction in *Infinite Jest*: Is Isolation the Cause or the Effect?" will provide an in-depth analysis of addiction as it appears in *Infinite Jest*. The discussion will focus on the relationship between addiction and communication. Chapter 2 will highlight the further destruction characters (especially James and Hal Incandenza, and Don Gately) create when using their addictions as coping mechanisms for the emptiness and isolation in their lives. Chapter 2 will also examine the differences in lifestyle between Hal and Don Gately and the manner in which each man attempts his recovery. Throughout *Infinite Jest* Wallace illustrates the growing disenchantment with metaphysical philosophy and introspective thought. Humanity in Wallace's dystopia is a callous lot and their self-centered philosophies are a direct result of their inability to communicate and understand their own inner selves. Addiction is threat to a society that refuses to take off the masks that hide their inner selves, thus creating isolation and loneliness despite being surrounded by others.

The failure of *Infinite Jest*'s civilization to cope with stress and tension is one possible reason for their addiction and isolation. Hal's addiction takes the form of marijuana, a drug that he smokes in secret and goes to great lengths to hide. His real addiction though may not be in the drug itself but rather the secrecy of it, the time he spends alone, searching for a place to smoke, a place to hide who he has become. He

contemplates "...brooding uncomfortably for a moment on why he gets off on the secrecy of getting high in secret more than on the getting high himself, possibly" (114). This need to get high alone is a paradox because Hal lives at E.T.A.; he is surrounded by young men all competing for a place in the tennis rankings. There is an underlying current of another addiction here. When Hal finishes his illicit one hitter alone, he immediately "gets ravenous...and goes out...for candy or else...heads down to the Headmaster's House for another late dinner with C.T. and the Moms..." (115). This connection of a clandestine high combined with his going to his mother's home for dinner is a striking contradiction. The essential addiction is unknown yet the immediate response is to be around others. The ritual of eating dinner with "the Mom's" and C.T. is formulaic. They always eat late and Mario usually joins them. There is always dessert, and a systematic way of saying goodbye which "to Hal sometimes gets ritualistic and hallucinatory, the post-prandial farewell routine" (193). There is a formality to this ritual though and that formality contradicts the secrecy of the marijuana smoking. They counter each other with a cyclic motion. The solitude of the marijuana smoking drives Hal to seek out a connection but the rituals of meal lacks a closeness or connection. Therefore he keeps smoking and seeking family interaction only to find an empty longing. This need to end the loneliness the addiction creates capitalizes on the idea that isolation in *Infinite Jest* is merely a mask. Hal uses the marijuana to try and compensate for the inability to communicate or form human relationships.

Infinite Jest is an often oppressive novel, it tells the story of what happens to people who are too absorbed in their own needs and desires. It foretells the isolation that transpires when interpersonal relationships exist to service the addiction. Are Wallace's

characters therefore on a path to complete nihilism or is there a salvation in their world? One interpretation of his final chapter would have the reader believe that drug addicts eventually succumb to their illness. Boswell explains this final moment:

. . . Wallace concludes the novel with a detailed account of the last time Gately ever did heroin, a sequence presented as a recollection or possibly an hallucination [sic] Gately has while still in the hospital bed refusing drugs. The novel provides hints that Gately has this hallucination/recollection because of delirium brought on by his intense pain; it is also possible that he re-experiences this episode because he has been given the painkillers after all (177-178).

The open-ended interpretation of the ending is evasive, the reader is not completely sure of Gately's final memory. Nonetheless, although much of *Infinite Jest* is dark, isolated, and filled with sorrow and tragedy, Wallace believed that art, including fiction had a positive role to assume. In a 1996 television interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace commented:

. . . Fiction for me . . . is a very weird, double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be difficult and it can be redemptive and morally instructive . . . On the other hand, it's supposed to be fun. . . what drew me into writing was mostly really fun rainy afternoons spent with a book . . . it was a kind of a relationship. . . I think part of the fun for me was being part of some kind of exchange between consciousnesses, [sic] a way for human beings to talk to each other about stuff that we normally can't talk about (C. Rose Interview 5/17/96 04:07-34).

He felt that it was imperative to create an atmosphere that welcomed interaction. For Wallace, fiction was the way to positively connect individuals to the world around them, in the Charlie Rose interview he continues “. . . There's this part-- there's this part that's-- that's-- that makes you feel full. There's this part that is-- that is redemptive and instructive, where when you read something, it's not just delight. You go, ‘My God, that's me.’ . . . I'm not alone in the world’” (C.R. Interview 5/17/96 10:07). His intentions as a fiction writer are clear, in spite of the darkness, *Infinite Jest* was meant to have hope.

Chapter 3, “Patience, Persistence and Perseverance: Finding Redemption within *Infinite Jest*,” will observe the recovery and hope that is portrayed in the novel. Chapter 3 looks towards the future Wallace was attempting to create; it will explore the healing side of Alcoholics Anonymous and the role of sentiment Wallace explored in his postmodern writing. Minor character Barry Loach will be discussed as a contrast to the darkness Don Gately represents. I will attempt to express that *Infinite Jest* was not nihilistic in its final representation but rather embraces new hope.

In his essay “Xmas Junkies: Debasement and Redemption in the Work of William S. Burroughs and David Foster Wallace,” Erik R. Mortenson claims that Wallace is “. . . engaged in an attempt to redeem the addict, to make him human again. . . . By giving us only glimpses of . . . redemption, Wallace shows us a character trying to do his best to live in a world we all inhabit” (45). Wallace and Mortenson both recognize the idea of hope, of living in a world that contains deliverance and liberation, if *Infinite Jest* does not realize this then the novel becomes a long diatribe concerning a group of extremely narcissistic, extremely selfish and seriously arrogant individuals. Although the novel displays extremely troubled souls and circumstances, a society forced to live with the

threat of terrorists, addicts, violence and technology that can render humanity useless, there is still a capacity for human kind to evolve, to become better than their first impressions might suggest. The isolation and inability to communicate, which becomes graver with advances in technology, desires an outlet beyond addiction and suicide inducing pleasure. In 2010, Charles B. Harris, chairman of the English Department at Illinois State University, where Wallace taught, wrote a eulogy to Wallace, titled "David Foster Wallace: 'That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself.'" He writes "The "way out," to use the evocative concluding words of *Infinite Jest* is to find the way out, to free ourselves from emotional solipsism by paying attention to things outside of us, by caring" (172). This simple statement identifies Wallace's underlying sentiment towards humanity. He discerns the heart of Wallace's characters and their redemptive qualities as they appear in *Infinite Jest*.

Infinite Jest by David Foster Wallace creates innumerable questions and provides a backdrop for a variety of interpretations. It certainly begs questions about communication between people in the novel and the idea of an isolated society. However, something intrinsic is failing in society. Is it the isolation factor, the aloneness from too much dependency on technology and entertainment or are humans evolving into this egotistical, obsessive-compulsive addictive society where depression and suicide are all that is left? The therapy and self-help of the late twentieth century appears to have led humans into a community of doomed automatons. So, why is Wallace trying so hard to express this melancholy and ultimate failure of humanity? Was he trying to warn society of the impact of its choices? I would argue that *Infinite Jest* is ultimately a commentary on what happens to society when they can no longer communicate on a face-to-face

basis, when trust, family and friendship erode into addictions and drugs and televisual entertainment become a substitute for human interactions. Greg Carlisle in his manuscript *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* formulates the following idea:

Our ability to connect with other people is compromised by our inclination to self-obsession and self-absorption ... Isolation and denial intensify the loneliness of our pursuits and the horrors, secrets, and surprises that always loom for us; but the truth of our remembered experiences- that our histories are shaped by our families and by other people- lies just under the surface of consciousness to haunt us if we persist in our denials (486).

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is a novel of extremes. His characters are flawed, obsessive, depressing, and have very little hope for a positive and happy future. His one thousand plus page magnum opus is a juxtaposition of verbose language, comedic scenarios and detailed experiences. His work is highly regarded and critically acclaimed yet he himself did not notice the extent of his power with words. Communication and isolation are constantly weaved throughout the novel, the constant addiction and need to connect to other humans create a society that cannot formulate meaningful, or sincere relationships with anyone outside of their hidden identities. *Infinite Jest*, however, finds recovery, hope and redemption if we can put aside our inclinations towards cynicism and observe the suffering that each human must experience in order to evolve as a complete self.

Chapter 1

Society's Destruction through Technology's Seduction: Understanding Televisual Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*

One of the cruxes of *Infinite Jest* is that its characters do not take the fatal characteristics of technology seriously, thus causing an avalanche of systemic breakdowns and a plausible ignorance of the doom awaits them. Technology, in the near-future of *Infinite Jest* creates a society where technology and isolation are preferred to interpersonal relationships and face-to-face communication. The following chapter outlines the impact of televisual entrainment on the characters of *Infinite Jest*. Technology's impact on physicality, Wallace's issues with late twentieth century technology and the rise and fall of the videophony are highlighted in Chapter 1, to provide a working theory on humanity's obsession with technology. James Incandenza's history and relationship with his son Hal are discussed in Chapter 1 and offer insight into the role televisual entertainment plays in intrapersonal relationships. James final film, not coincidentally titled *Infinite Jest* is discussed. This film becomes a symbolic and tangible example of the pain and pleasure hide-and-seek game society engages in throughout *Infinite Jest*. Finally, the medical attaché and his wife will be analyzed to better understand the extent technology plays in this relationship between pleasure and self-absorption.

Televisual entertainment is a significant and contributing factor in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. This type of entertainment concerns media that is viewed primarily via a screen or monitor system and can include computers and televisions or a combination of the two, which Wallace calls teleputers. The idea of televisual

entertainment and teleputers is not complex. Technology that provokes a visual stimulation of the senses explains televisual entertainment. A gratification that exists while viewing media as it is expressed through a machine or gadget would also explain televisual entertainment. Appearing in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment is a description of *Infinite Jest's* teleputer:

Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment: Interlace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink₂, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel free Internet Fax, tri- and quad modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, Screens so high-def you might as well be there, cost effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic *couture*, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media cards, fiber optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps; carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadioposity, lumbar stressae [sic] (60).

The attention to detail in describing the teleputer is significant. Without specifying the actual technological requirements that each item addresses, it is understood that these particular items “pixel free Internet Fax, tri- and quad modem” or “932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console” are descriptions of a system that is in the top echelon of capability. Wallace’s specifics appeal to the late twentieth century persona; they speak of a world that is accustomed to “Screens so high-def you might as well be there.” This description of the teleputer is important to note because it sets up the parameters of a society bolstered by technology that also causes serious malaise. The ending of this description leaves a trail of physical ailments, “carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine,

gluteal hyperadioposity, lumbar stressae.” These ailments are a combination of medical terminology and physical attributes. For instance, carpal neuralgia is a reference to carpal tunnel syndrome and another disorder called neuralgia. While carpal tunnel syndrome is commonplace, often associated with an overuse of the wrist, neuralgia, according to the medical website maintained by the Department of Health & Human Services, State Government of Victoria, Australia, “is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn’t an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder. In many cases, the cause of the pain is not known” (n.p.). Wallace’s juxtaposition is substantial; it uses a well-known medical ailment especially associated with technology and juxtaposes it with a rather rare nerve disorder that causes pain for reasons unknown.

Video games and computers were part of pop culture by the time Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest* and television was certainly a quotidian part of life. In addition, instances of reported injuries due to video gaming became more common, according to The British Medical Journal:

Nintendo related problems in the thumb, hand, and wrist are referred to as nintendinitis” or “nintendonitis.” All reports, mostly letters to the editor, point out that strenuous game play with a traditional controller can result in temporary discomfort. . . The first case dates back to 1990. The patient...a 35-year-old woman . . . experienced severe pain in her right thumb after playing her Nintendo uninterrupted for five hours. A similar case, which was termed nintendonitis—a form of tendinitis—was caused by repetitive microtrauma (Jalink et al 2).

Technology and these medical conditions are notable in Wallace's writing as a contributor to a lifestyle that suffers from engaging in televisual entertainment practices. The similarity to reality displays Wallace's awareness of the problems associated with modern advancements yet by juxtaposing it with a defect such as neuralgia he makes a statement that society in *Infinite Jest* is unaware of the cause of the disorder; this idea will factor prominently in my discussion concerning isolation, addiction, and miscommunication in the novel.

Wallace wrote often about the impact of technology on humanity. In his early essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction," (helpfully described as "Wallace's artistic manifesto" by Adam Kelly), Wallace outlined a general criticism of contemporary fiction writers and the influence of modern television on their writings, their overall ideals, and their treatment of technology in their writing. Published three years before *Infinite Jest*, "E Unibus Pluram. . ." lays the groundwork for *Infinite Jest*; it is a type of prequel to a novel that associates addiction with an inability to communicate-- a novel that presents technology as paradoxically both a cause of and (superficial) antidote to loneliness and isolation, a novel that forces the reader to confront technology's seductions and flaws.

In "E Unibus Pluram . . .," Wallace discusses his own television viewing practices. He recognizes the voyeurism facet of television and the constant watching of people who are pretending that they are not being watched. He makes the argument that television has to be more than just "fun." He outlines one of his primary arguments, "One claim of this essay is 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 . . . many of us are so blinded by the constant exposure that we regard TV . . . as ‘just another appliance, a toaster with pictures’” (155). Through his description of television as a disseminator, he highlights its capacity to influence society, acknowledging its ability to spread information. The powers of dissemination are so poignant that the descriptive passage of the most modern teleputer has “. . . post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination . . . [and] Dissemination-Grids,” (I.J. 60). The references to dissemination are technologically advanced and impressive. Wallace has used this terminology to prove a point about how television or teleputers can be configured to be symbolic of deeper consequences. In his essay “Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace,” Paul Giles echoes this view: “Wallace’s technomorphic fiction thus mediates the dynamics of globalization, subtly recording how the mass media impacts and interferes jarringly with the lives of American citizens” (341).

Dissemination is used as an enticement to the viewer; it is the essence of televisual entertainment. The fact that this coincides with the concealing of contaminated lands while aligning the U.S. and Canada, which then creates several Canadian terrorist groups is reflective of the insanity that ensues when society’s attention is consumed and diverted by technology. Wallace’s recognition of a society that ignores the underlying meaning of dissemination and its capabilities is acutely perceptive. This is remarkably poignant when considering *Infinite Jest’s* isolation and emptiness, particularly as it exists through the lens of televisual entertainment. Jon Baskin highlights Wallace’s reflections of television and its impact on humanity stating, “The broader ambition of Wallace’s early stories was to explore how it felt to live in the world of *Jeopardy*, *The David*

Letterman Show, McDonald's, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *White Noise*. And how it felt was: lonely" (n.p.) And Marshall Boswell offers the following discussion regarding the decade long presidency of "Johnny Gentle former Las Vegas crooner turned politician" (I.J. 123), and the growth of technology within *Infinite Jest*. As president, Gentle creates the "Great Concavity," which hides the toxic waste dump that was once part of New England's geography. In addition, he establishes a one-nation alliance between Canada, Mexico and the United States, called the Organization of North American Nations mostly referred to as O.N.A.N. During Gentle's presidency, InterLace's home entertainment business is growing and capturing the attention of millions of people. As Boswell explains:

A decade or so after their original conception, Johnny Gentle's giant Concavity and InterLace's at-home entertainment network have yielded a population of lonely, solipsistic voyeurs, an entire nation--continent, rather--overdosing on nonstop entertainment and information, all transmitted instantly by way of the InterLace Dissemination Grid and viewed via high resolution Teleputers. . .within the coddled comfort of their increasingly cagelike homes (124).

As technology advances, society becomes less aware of its effects thus creating a paradox where the future becomes muddled and confusing rather than clear and concise.

Correlating to the dystopian society in which technology eschews interpersonal relationships are the various milieus by which televisual entertainment is viewed and absorbed. In "E Unibus Pluram. . .," Wallace specifically comments on the effects of televisual technology on the individual, stating, "Make no mistake. We are dependent on

image technology; and the better the tech, the harder we're hooked" (189). Wallace emphasizes this concept in the novel through a description of the downfall of the videophony. The videophony is condensed terminology for video-telephoning technology, a type of telephone call where the conversationalists were visible to each other by cameras. At first, the concept of video phone calls had Wallace's society "Thrilled at the idea of phone interfacing both aurally and facially" (144). However, this thrill quickly backfired: "The real coffin-nail for videophony involved the way callers' faces looked on their TP screen, during calls. Not their callers' faces but their own" (147). Callers were not only disgusted with the way they looked but also with the fact that on video they had to play a part, they had to be attentive because the caller on the other end was watching everything they did. Videophony created an inability to ". . . enter a kind of highway-hypnotic semi-attentive fugue" (146), which one could indulge in the old, aural-only telephone technology. Prior to videophony "while conversing, you could look around the room, doodle, fine-groom, peel tiny bits of dead skin away from your cuticles, compose phone-pad haiku, stir things on the stove. . . all while seeming to be there attending closely to the voice on the phone" (146). This deception was soothing; it was a form of pretending to connect to others while being remarkably attuned to your own needs and actions. The incredible aspect was that although the caller knew they were only tuned in about halfway, they believed the person on the other end was actively engaged in listening except that they were also doing the same thing you were, only partially listening while engaged in other occupying behaviors. This "unilateral attention" (146) illusion allowed you "to believe you were receiving somebody's complete attention without having to return it. . .like being able both to lie and to trust other people at the

same time” (146). The deception creates a false bond. When the actual truth is revealed through technology, society is at loose ends, they are unable to cope with the falseness of their connection. This revelation leads to a series of technology aficionados creating high-tech masking devices that literally cover people’s faces with a better-looking mask of themselves. These new masks then segue to full body “videophone masks” (149) which were quickly replaced with digital imaging. Thus, wearing masks and body armor was no longer necessary and society was now broadcasting high definition, “high quality transmission-ready photographs” (149).

This complete telephony enterprise happened over a sixteen-month period and is a defining moment in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. It portrays the seduction of technology’s prowess and it highlights the way the mind is transformed through technology. Wallace even goes to extremes in defining illnesses caused by this deferential technological seduction e.g. “Video Physiognomic Dysphoria (or VPD) and Optimistically Misrepresentational Masking or (OMM)” (147 & 149). Consumers eventually realize that they do not need to broadcast fake images of themselves and that they would be just as satisfied using the retro version telephone which only transmitted aurally. Scientific American author, Francesca Gino, in her essay “The Must-Have Effect: When an Upgrade is Available, People Tend to Break What They’d Like to Replace,” claims “A well-established body of research, dating back at least as far as Freud’s 1894 elaboration of defense mechanisms, suggests that people’s perceptions of the world—and of themselves—are self-serving . . . We are more than happy to accept evidence that makes us look good” (n.p.) Society’s flakiness is emphasized by its callous dismissal of the videophony. Point of fact, not using the technology then becomes a “status symbol of

anti-vanity. . . [the] tacky facsimile-using people become ironic cultural symbols of tacky vain slavery to corporate PR and high-tech novelty” (151). Gino states, “Research suggests that the way we weigh ourselves mirrors the way we behave in general” (n.p.). Thus, most of society decides to forgo the masks and high-definition images and relocates sixteen months of technology upgrades to “the back of a knick-knack shelf” (151). It is a stunning revelation in the wake of advancement after advancement of technology and upgrades.

This scene is perhaps even more compelling concerning the effects of technology in the twenty-first century than it was when Wallace envisioned it. Society’s frequent upgrading of cellular phones, television, tablets, and computers is an all too common occurrence today. Gino’s research posits, “As consumers, we are often faced with the opportunity to purchase a new, enhanced product—such as an upgraded cell phone—even though the device we currently own is still fully functional. To justify the purchase to ourselves, we behave in rather strange ways” (n.p.). Wallace saw this as a potential problem twenty years ago. While Wallace never claimed to be clairvoyant, his perceptions were certainly accurate. Wallace’s final commentary in this segment of the novel reflects on society’s overall reaction to the rise and fall of videophony claiming “. . .the bulk of U.S. consumers remained verifiably reluctant to leave home and teleputer and to interface personally, though this phenomenon’s endurance can’t be attributed to the videophony-fad per se, and anyways the new panagoraphobia served to open huge new entrepreneurial teleputerized markets for home-shopping and delivery, and didn’t cause much industry concern” (151). The juxtaposition of technology and a fear of leaving home is evident however; the blasé comment that they are not related “per se”

leaves a question mark to the actual cause of the “new panagoraphobia.” The connection appears to reiterate the fact that the panagoraphobia was caused by the insecurities resulting from videophone calling. Yet it also dismisses the fear because it was positive for the economy and for business entrepreneurs. Ultimately, society becomes infatuated with technology and constantly expects devices that are more gratifying; it is of little importance if said technology starts to disintegrate interpersonal exchanges.

Society was now avoiding interpersonal relationships, thus more advanced delivery services such as shop at home businesses became a necessity; consequently, society’s panagoraphobia became a potential source of profit, and technology found yet another avenue for its seduction. Marshall Boswell concurs, “This new technology [videophony] in turn gave rise to a new form of ‘psychological stress’ borne from phone-users’ sudden reluctance ‘to leave home and interface personally’” (149). In other words, “openness leads to self-consciousness, which then leads to despair and hence to an even more insidious form of hiddenness” (142). Boswell’s conjecture observes the videophony as a type of “open” technology that makes people aware that they are being watched. Their actions are in the open but because of the technological seduction of it, the videophony leads to trying to hide the physical self behind masks and digital imaging. This causes a dramatic turn to completely shutting society out, to staying hidden in all aspects of life. Self-absorption befalls society within *Infinite Jest* as televisual entertainment advances; the public creates a cycle that desires it until it becomes a type of addiction and ultimately self-destructs.

Wallace’s feelings about technology were multi-layered, part fear, part obsession, and part fascination. In his much-cited 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace

made a comment that highlights a crucial plot detail inside *Infinite Jest*, which defines television and its viewers: “U.S. viewers’ relationship with TV is essentially puerile and dependent; as are all relationships based on seduction . . . what’s seldom acknowledged is how complex and ingenious TV’s seductions are. It’s seldom acknowledged that viewers’ relationship with TV is, albeit debased, intricate and profound” (127). He further explains that “. . . part of being a human self is suffering” (127) and emphasizes the concept of using pleasure, one of which is television to control such pain and suffering. Ultimately, though such pleasure only intensifies the pain. Televisual entertainment therefore becomes transfixed in a teleological paradigm. Wallace explains this in the following manner:

If you just look at the number of ways that we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country from fast-fast-fast relief antacids to the popularity of lighthearted musicals during the Depression- you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself . . . you see a whole teleology predicated on the idea that the best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio (McCaffery 128-129).

The seduction of televisual entertainment thus lies in its apparent ability to give the viewer a pain free experience. Yet, ultimately the technology only produces a greater sense of loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness--which is an intense emotion running congruent to isolation in *Infinite Jest*-- appears soothed by television, but television actually creates a far more formidable isolation. Television is a distraction that hides the loneliness but causes further pain in its

effort to provide pleasure. Wallace addresses this idea stating “Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the emotional costs associated with being around other humans. They are allergic to people. People affect them too strongly. . . . But lonely people home, alone, still crave sights and scenes. Hence television” (E Unibus Pluram. . .152). The existence of televisual entertainment logically should forgo these deeper insecurities and issues. Eric Carl Link, in his analysis, “Lactantius, Teleology, and American Literature,” offers another explanation, “. . .the natural world does not reflect the influence of transcendent design, and, thus, the pain in the world is solely attributable to natural flaws, both in nature and in human moral or ethical behavior” (174). In applying this model to *Infinite Jest*, televisual entertainment’s teleology can be seen as no more than a natural inclination to avoid pain through other means. However, this explanation is far too elementary to accept. Through James O. Incandenza’s final film aptly titled “Infinite Jest,” one can attain a working theory into the graver consequences of televisual entertainment and its effects on sense of self and isolation.

James O. Incandenza, founder of Enfield Tennis Academy and obsessive producer of eccentric films, the father of tennis prodigy Hal and prominent football athlete Orin, as well as the unassuming Mario, was a brilliant and misunderstood scientist. James’ film is an important concept within *Infinite Jest*. The film forms the heart of communication, addiction and relationship issues. Every narrative in Wallace’s novel eventually ends up with a connection to the film. It epitomizes the destruction humanity can bring upon itself in a quest to find pleasure while ignoring the world that surrounds them. With an ability to seriously harm humanity the film is sought after; it is also a symbol for Wallace’s postmodern message to readers.

With an intriguing, confusing and abusive childhood, James designs the film cartridge that lies at the complex heart of Wallace's novel. To better understand James' final film, one must first appreciate the background of *Infintie Jest's* notorious and elusive filmmaker. His father was an alcoholic who used alcohol as a crutch to talk with his son Jim. One long scene consists of James and his father discussing the art of tennis playing; James' father wants James to follow his example as a tennis prodigy. This essential father-son bonding moment is fraught with ambiguities and pain; it highlights James O. Incandenza at ten years old and gives opportunities to witness an inability to communicate with one's children. The scene takes place before subsidized time, in 1960 and paints a clear picture of James' father as an alcoholic with an inability to bond with his son. James is a young child, already a genius and unable to relate to the athletic aspirations his father wants to instill. James' father is discussing the human body and the way one handles his own body in relation to the physical space around it. He wants James to open a garage door but feels that James is not doing it right, telling him its, "Needless and dangerous ever to yank, pull, shove, thrust" (157). He explains that the way James treats the door is analogous to treating his body with the same disrespect and blames this act on James' mother and Marlon Brando: "Your mother is a shover and thruster, son. She treats bodies outside herself without respect or due care. She's never learned that treating things in the gentlest most relaxed way is also treating them and your own body in the most efficient way. It's Marlon Brando's fault, Jim" (157). James' mother was an extra in a Brando movie and watched Brando display stereotypical, macho type, man behavior as he was "trying to dominate objects, showing no artful respect or care, yanking things. . .and using them up and tossing them crudely aside" (157). In witnessing

this, James' mother came to inherit these attitudes about the body and therefore "The disrespect gets learned and passed on. Passed down" (157). This passage is a key moment in understanding James O. Incandenza.

At a young age, James was forced to observe his father as a drunk. His father had little tolerance for James as a clumsy, young boy trying to wrestle with a garage door. Stephen J. Burns recognizes the important role of father-son relationships in the novel: "Perhaps more importantly, however, since *Infinite Jest* is a novel that explores the different ways 'fathers impact sons,' Wallace places Hal's problems with self-definition in a longer perspective that details the legacy of his father" (48). James's father also believed in the passing down of learned traits and the reflection of one's treatment of his body to its physical space. These ideals would have influenced James O. at a young age, juxtaposed with his scientific genius and film obsession. It thus makes sense that James' final film contains hidden, mysterious and subconscious elements that go beyond human awareness. James could not form an attachment to his father and therefore could not form one with his son. The inability of Hal and James to bond combined with James' lack of relationship with his father leads to an isolation of self. Each generation finds the previous generation an enigma that further confuses their own identity; there is a lack of conversations between generations. Film thus becomes the primary mode with which James believes he can find a sense of self while bonding with his son.

James O.'s confusion with identity is evident in his relationship with Hal. When Hal was just ten years old, the same age James was when his father tried to teach him about respect to one's body, James O. arranges a secret meeting with Hal. He disguises himself and tells him "Hal, you are here because I am a professional conversationalist,

and your father has made an appointment with me, for you to converse” (28). The imagery in this exchange is caricatured in nature; James is hiding his identity from Hal in an attempt to bond with his son. Hal is confused at the appointment. His father disappears behind a fake nose and moustache while attempting to engage his son in a discussion. James O. however, seems more concerned with the sounds his son makes as a result of “low salivary output” (27) and asking Hal odd questions such as “[Do] you know the meaning of implore, Hal” (28). As the conversation continues, Hal grows suspicious of the meeting’s intent and questions the conversationalist’s methods, lack of displayed credentials and interrogation-like inquiry. James begins a confusing and peculiar discussion and Hal interrupts exclaiming:

I’m ten for Pete’s sake. . . I’m the potentially gifted ten-year old tennis and lexical prodigy whose. . . dad’s a towering figure in optical and avant-garde film circles. . . but drinks Wild Turkey at like 5:00 A.M. and pitches over sideways during dawn drills. . . and some days presents with delusions about people’s mouths moving but nothing coming out. . . (30).

Hal’s father becomes defensive and elusive claiming that Hal’s mother has “maternal assignations with a certain unnamed bisexual bassoonist” as well as “cavortings with not one not two but over thirty Near Eastern medical attaché s” [sic] (30). The bizarre conversation becomes idiosyncratic with Hal realizing it’s his father talking. James then starts in on a tangent comparing Hal’s “graphite-reinforced” tennis racket as “organochemically identical . . . to the gyroscopic balance sensor and *mise-en-scène* appropriation card and priapistic-entertainment cartridge implanted in your very own towering father’s anaplastic cerebrum after his cruel series of detoxifications and

convolution-smoothings and gastrectomy and prostatectomy and pancreatectomy and phalluctomy” (31).

The strength of James’ outburst is similar to his own father’s with him when he was the same age. Neither father can converse with their son, both have an animosity towards their wives and both fathers are under the influence of alcohol. These similarities suggest an inherited inability to have interpersonal relationships. James’ father though was attempting to teach his son tennis as well as having respect for one’s body. Although James’ father was abrasive and insensitive to the emotional needs of his child, he was attempting to teach him how to be a man. In James and Hal’s case, James appears more intent on his convoluted ramblings than on any attempt to connect to his son. This elusive meeting ends with James asking Hal a question and not being able to hear the response. Formulated as a simple series of ellipses “. . .,” with James repeating “‘Son?’ ‘. . .’ ‘Son?’ ‘. . .’” (31) Hal’s response as “. . .” is a non-response. This non-response is an attempt for father to define son and as Burns explains “. . . *Infinite Jest* suggests that much of [Hal’s] history has comprised of other’s trying to define his character” (47). Hal’s non-response and lack of identity is an oft-repeated theme in *Infinite Jest*; there is a common thread of miscommunication and solipsism in the Incandenza family that is expressed in not only James but also his father and his grandfather. As each family procreates, the relationship becomes fragmented, less communicative, familial bonds break down with Hal not having his own identity while “Hal’s father laments that his son is as silent as his own father was” (Carlisle 37).

In understanding James’ inability to communicate with his father and his consequential inability to communicate with his own son, a pattern is revealed in which

James uses film to communicate and emotionally connect with his sons. Stephen Burns agrees stating:

According to the evidence of the filmography Wallace includes, James Incandenza apparently also felt that he was surrounded by a multitude of explanations of the self. Although Joelle [star of many of his films] describes his filmic quest as a search for ‘freedom from one’s own head’ (742), an escape from the self that perhaps shares something with his son’s sense that he is no one, he seems paradoxically to have sought that freedom by attempting an encyclopedic survey of efforts to understand the self in his films. (48-49).

James is misguided in his attempt to communicate with his son by disguise and the conversation ultimately ends in a lamentable silence; with neither father nor son recognizing the other, they both experience a type of identity crisis, a loss. Marshall Boswell observes a significance in this sense of lost self through Hal calling his father “Himself,” rather than Father or Dad, “Not only are the interiors of others hidden from us but our own interiors are hidden as well. Hal knows neither himself nor Himself” (151). Wallace, in essence is connecting the inner Hal with the outer James but the result is a relationship where neither figure forms an attachment to the other. Katherine Hayles further clarifies this separation, “. . . the illusion of autonomy poisons family relations, creating failures of communication so extreme they become tragic. These failures are evident in James’s relations with his sons, who call their father “Himself,” as if to acknowledge the man is so inward-bent that any nominative referring to him must include an intensifier of selfhood” (688). James O. Incandenza therefore envisions and

designs a film that as Boswell states “. . . sits firmly at the core of the story” (126). The film becomes known by several names and “Wallace deliberately shrouds it in tantalizing mystery” (Boswell 126). The final film of James O. Incandenza is titled “Infinite Jest V”; it is also known as “the Entertainment” and “Samizdat.”⁴

This efficacious film is catastrophic in various respects. This cartridge is different from the widely disseminated cartridges produced by InterLace; it has capabilities that heighten David Foster Wallace’s own fears of televisual entertainment. The cartridge is overwhelming and exhilarating; James O. Incandenza is described by the star of the film as an “infinite jester, director of a final opus so magnum he’d claimed to have had it locked away” (228). Hayles characterizes the film as “so powerful and seductive that once someone has seen it, everything in life ceases to matter” (687). The film is hidden, it is not available to the public; supposedly, it is not available to anyone. It is the final entry in James O. Incandenza’s filmography and “Comprehensive filmographies have the film either unfinished or UNRELEASED, it’s Master cartridge either destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*” (993). The implication of this entry being that the Master cartridge no longer exists and as an unreleased film, it was not distributed nor viewed. Joelle Van Dyne whom Orin called “P.G.O.A.T. aka Prettiest Girl of All Time” as star of James’ final masterpiece claims to have “never seen the completed assembly of what she’d appeared in or seen anyone who’s seen it and doubts that any sum of scenes . . . could have been as entertaining as he’d [James O. Incandenza] said the thing he’d always wanted to make

⁴ “Samizdat. Russian compound noun. Soviet twentieth-century idiom. Sam- stem: “self”; izdat- undeclined verb: to publish...the sub-rosa dissemination of politically charged materials that were banned...the generic meaning now is any sort of politically underground or beyond-the-pale press...“(1011). The layman’s view of samizdat is a document, image, movie, art or even music that is banned because of its political connotations but is secretly being distributed or sought after. James O. Incandenza’s film is considered Samizdat in Canada and by the U.S. government, although most citizens do not even realize it exists or its threat.

had broken his heart by ending up” (228). Greg Carlisle gives this dialogue a concise explanation, “Jim told Joelle that his final film ended up breaking his heart by being as entertaining as he’d always wanted to make it” (150). In the critical discussion surrounding the novel, “*Infinite Jest*” the film is highly contested as to its ultimate symbolic message. Is the film “...a last desperate attempt to communicate with Hal and save him”—as James O. claims (Hayles 692)? Is it the freedom from one’s self that Joelle describes? Is it just a brilliant scientist’s quest for immortality and solipsistic command of a community? Did Wallace intend the film as a final metaphor for the absolute dangers of televisual entertainment? An investigation of the medical attaché character within *Infinite Jest* provides an analysis of self-induced isolation and pleasure within the confines of technological apathy—and so provides a provisional answer to the question of the symbolic significance of the film.

The medical attaché, although a minor character with no dialogue, reveals the deepest impact in terms of the danger of the samizdat. The medical attaché is significant to the novel. He provides the solipsistic and apathetic attitude Wallace saw happening as a result of technology. His relationship with his wife is flawed and highlights a growing distance in relationships because of technology. The medical attaché was born in Canada and maintains residency there although has Arab ethnicity as well. He went to school in the United States and has direct ties to James O. Incandenza’s wife, Avril. He is currently under “Saudi diplomatic immunity” (33) and living in the Boston area. He is an ear-nose-throat physician for the Saudi Prince Q---, who is residing in the United States area of O.N.A.N. as the “Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment” (33). His role consists of trying to arrange a business deal with InterLace TelEntertainment. The concept of an Arabian

prince acting as an entertainment minister appears to be a direct link to technology's role in worldwide entertainment; however, it also brings a sardonic twist when the medical attaché reveals that the Saudi legion "finds the promotional subsidy of the North American calendar hilariously vulgar. To say nothing of the arresting image of the idolatrous West's most famous and self-congratulating idol, the colossal Libertine Stature, wearing some type of enormous adult design diaper" (33). The "subsidy" he speaks of relates to the buying of calendar years, it is called "Subsidized Time."⁵ It is a humorous juxtaposition on Wallace's part to have a country mocking the citizens of O.N.A.N.'s complete acceptance of "Subsidized Time," while that same country also has a "Minister of Home Entertainment" (33). James K.A. Smith substantiates this association, "*Infinite Jest* is an ethnography of our postmodern moment; it captures the extent to which time and space are configured by the commercial, while also recognizing . . . that distractions and entertainment threaten to overwhelm anything else that seems to matter" (27). One nation's seeming indifference to forced commercialism is equally detrimental to the health of its society as another country's attempt to profit from the same type of corporate influence. The same principle applies when becoming caught in a loop of apathy and pleasure. Boundaries are not important, it is just as possible for an American to be self-absorbed as it is a Canadian, although each country would attempt to deny such a claim. However, the incident with the medical attaché attests to the ease of manipulation among humanity at large.

⁵ In Wallace's dystopia, the years are no longer based on a consecutive, Gregorian calendar formula. Instead, the years in *Infinite Jest* have been bought out by large corporations who gain the naming rights for the entire year, it is called subsidized time. E.g. - Y.D.A.U. refers to the Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment, YW is the Year of the Whopper. There are nine of these subsidized years within *Infinite Jest* with a chronology existing on page 223. These years highlight commercialism, which is not detailed in this thesis; however, they also pertain to the apathy humanity experiences in the banality of everyday life.

The incident occurs on April 1st, Y.D.A.U. at the medical attaché's home. It is a Wednesday evening and it is "Permitted to be his wife's Arab Women's Advanced League tennis night with the other legation wives and companions . . . on which nights she is not around wordlessly to attend him" (34). This statement is particularly significant because of the language Wallace uses, namely "wordlessly." The medical attaché's wife is expected, to use an old cliché, to be at his beck and call. Her basic function is to serve the medical attaché; he has no interest in communicating with her or even sharing a meal with her. Wallace details the medical attaché's objectives concerning his wife:

When he arrives home after evening prayers, he wants to look upon a spicy and 100% shari'a-halal dinner piping hot and arranged and steaming pleasantly on its attachable tray, he wants his bib ironed and laid out by the tray at the ready, and he wants the living room's teleputer booted and warmed up and the evening's entertainment cartridges already selected and arranged and lined up in dock ready for remote insertion into the viewer's drive. He reclines before the viewer in his special electronic recliner and his black-veiled ethnically Arab wife wordlessly attends him (33).

Although the treatment of the attaché's wife could be construed as a campaign against misogyny and an avocation towards feminism, in this situation Wallace is using the husband-wife scenario as an example for the isolation televisual entertainment easily creates. During the interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace posits, "One thing TV does is help us deny that we're lonely. With televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship . . . The interesting thing is why we're

so desperate for the anesthetic against loneliness” (136). David Foster Wallace saw television as a diversion from having interface with others. Punctuating the silence between the medical attaché and his wife with televisual entertainment illustrates humanity’s growing isolation. The gap in a united relationship continues to be revealed through the medical attaché and his wife as “...[she fits] the completely molded dinner tray over his head so that his shoulders support the tray. . . so that he may enjoy his hot dinner without having to remove his eyes from whatever entertainment is up and playing” (33).

On this particular evening, the attaché returns home early. A normal Wednesday evening has him working late while his wife attends her tennis league. This unusual set of circumstances necessitates the attaché’s attention to his own needs, most notably his entertainment. There are no pre-arranged cartridges set-up for his viewing pleasure, instead he must figure out his evening viewing with his own hands. This poses a problem because the medical attaché relies so heavily on his wife to arrange every part of his evening, his meal, his chair, dimming the lights and placement of his tray. However, none of this is completed and “worst of course no entertainment cartridges have been obtained from the . . . InterLace outlet” (35). The reliance on his wife is almost infantile in nature. More importantly though is the magnitude of his disappointment that there are no cartridges. His need to watch the teleputer and receive pleasure from the viewing is so extreme that to not have it is worse than not having food to eat. This dependence on technology is extreme. Wallace’s use of non-speaking characters stresses the isolation that televisual entertainment is generating.

Parallel to the isolation the medical attaché experiences is the pleasure he derives from watching the cartridges. As stated in the introduction, the medical attaché needs televisual entertainment because he has no other vices from which to “unwind without chemical aid” (33). It is precisely this pleasure that shapes the cartridge’s ability to destroy. Hayles explains the film’s influence as “. . .an ideology that celebrates an autonomous independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness, a subject who has the right to grab what pleasure he can without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others” (692-693). The observer is fixated on deriving pleasure and believes he is entitled to that pleasure by whatever means he desires. The medical attaché has no interest in formulating a relationship with his wife other than the one he decrees. This primarily includes her servitude to him as evidenced by his thoughts concerning her night away from home which he claims is her “. . . irritating Americanized tennis-league evening away from her place at home” (36). His attitude towards his wife is also apparent from narration concerning their intimate life. After she completes her tennis games she stays at the club with the other wives; it is her only social gathering of the week and as such, she enjoys it. Part of their discussion consists of “making extremely delicate and oblique fun of their husbands’ sexual idiosyncrasies, laughing softly with their hands over their mouths” (54). This aside is a hint at the lack of communication and intrapersonal relationship they have with their husbands. The medical attaché’s compulsion with watching the teleputer leads him to put the deadly tape into the device

without hesitation, although it is an atypical cartridge.⁶ The time that he starts watching is listed as 19:27h.

The elapsed time between the medical attaché's starting the film and when his wife departs the tennis club is approximately five hours; her departure from the tennis club is recorded as 0015h. In these ensuing hours "The medical attaché, at their apartment is still viewing the unlabeled cartridge, which he has rewound to the beginning several times and then configured for a recursive loop. He sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching, at 0020h., having now wet both his pants and the special recliner" (54). Although he is still alive at this point, the self-destruction has already begun. The cartridge is being played repeatedly while the attaché foregoes eating and using the facilities. This is the danger of the film. The pleasure of watching this film is so great, that the viewer is lost to the world around him or her. It is an inevitable outcome and yet a poignant discovery of human kind's devotion to an undiscerning pleasure. Marshall Boswell claims, "The Entertainment's lethal appeal is its ability to give viewers what they think they have wanted all their lives" (131). I would argue however, that Wallace was chronicling a far graver circumstance with Incandenza's film than desire.

The medical attaché's wife returns home at 0145h and notices the condition of her husband: he is soiled, his eyes are fixated on the television and most importantly, "The expression on his rictus of a face nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic even, you

⁶ The medical attaché finds the cartridge in a pile of unopened mail. "There is a plain brown and irritatingly untitled cartridge-case in a featureless...padded cartridge mailer. The padded mailer . . . return address box has . . . a small drawn crude face, smiling, in ballpoint ink, instead of a return address or incorporated logo. . . . the item inside. . . is merely a standard black entertainment cartridge, but is wholly unlabeled and not in any sort of colorful or informative or inviting cartridge-case and has only another of these vapid U.S.A.-type circular smiling heads embossed upon it (35-36)

could say--she eventually and naturally turning her head and following his line of sight to the cartridge-viewer” (78). The implication in this passage is predictive and considerable. Burns expresses the core connotation of this scene, “*Infinite Jest* demonstrates how the individual action takes place with more complex systems, beyond their comprehension” (57). The medical attaché’s search for pleasure creates a reliance on the technology that brings him what he feels he deserves. His wife with whom he has no relationship or human connection serves him however, in her one absence, the medical attaché--so determined to ensure his gratification, blindly inserts the one pleasure that will not only extinguish his map (as the saying goes in the novel) but also his wife’s and those of the first responders sent to find out why he does not appear for work. The final count of individuals viewing the Entertainment at the medical attaché’s apartment is eight. Eight individuals “Watching the recursive loop the medical attaché had rigged on the TP’s viewer the night before, sitting and standing there very still and attentive, looking not one bit distressed or in any way displeased even though the room smelled very bad indeed” (87). The disturbing image of these individuals enthralled to the point of no return because of one film is haunting, captivating and frightening. In this finality, Wallace leaves the reader to ponder his own existence and the uncanny manner in which pleasure becomes so inherently necessary it foregoes all other basic life necessities.

Marshall Boswell claims that “Incandenza’s film *Infinite Jest* is a dangerous piece of art that perpetuates the culture’s desire for self-forgetting, a desire to be returned to the catatonic state of the womb” (160). There does appear to be truth to Boswell’s statements because the majority of the film’s viewers either die or exist in a vegetative state “. . . all in wards. Docile and continent but blank, as if on some deep reptile-brain level pithed. . .

. The persons' lives' meanings had collapsed to such a narrow focus that no other activity or connection could hold their attention. Possessed of roughly the mental/spiritual energies of a moth. . ." (548). However, Boswell's assumption that viewers simply want a return to the womb is less of an influence than the underlying solipsism and gratification junkies televisual entertainment conceives. In discussing fiction, Wallace claimed ". . . the reader has to fight through the mediated voice presenting the material. . . The complete suppression of a narrative consciousness, with its own agenda, is why TV is such a powerful selling tool. . . . TVs mediated message is never that the medium's the message" (McCaffery Interview 137). If we are to understand televisual entertainment's allure in *Infinite Jest* than James O. Incandenza's film must be presented as a ruse to push past the pleasure seeking absorption of humanity. James himself was a narcissist, a brilliant scientist who as a wraith to Don Gately's pain-induced vision claims to have made the movie only to communicate with his son to get him to ask for more. James, however never officially released his film, yet it becomes an obsession of O.N.A.N.'s and the A.F.R.'s. It is a deadly reminder of televisual entertainment's addicting malaise. It figures prominently in the thematic details of *Infinite Jest* as well as a powerful statement from Wallace on the human condition. Televisual entertainment as it exists in Wallace's comprehensive dystopia is not a mode of expression but rather a seductive channel leading to an apathy, isolation and lack of personal attachments that can in turn cause the self-destruction of humanity.

Chapter 2

The Etiology of Addiction in

Infinite Jest: Is Isolation the Cause or the Effect?

Infinite Jest is a story of addiction, but it is not a story of overcoming addiction or merely a sad fable of addicted characters and their convoluted, sinister lives. Addiction in *Infinite Jest* is a hidden, harrowing search for identity; it is the quest to end loneliness that ends in ultimate isolation and the truth that the addict “would disappear into a hole in a grinder inside him that supported something else inside him” (20). The varieties of addiction throughout *Infinite Jest* are immense; Hal is addicted to marijuana; his older brother Orin is addicted to sex. Their mother Avril or “The Moms” as they call her is also addicted to sex while being neurotic with compulsive tendencies. James Incandenza, as we learned in the previous chapter was an alcoholic with obsessive ties to his filmmaking, while Ennet House resident Don Gately is a hard-core drug user who unfortunately uses burglary to secure his vice. Joelle, a.k.a. Madame Psychosis, is addicted to freebase cocaine, and Kate Gompert is addicted to “Bob Hope, Dope, Sinse, Stick, Grass, Smoke” (75) but in reality is more likely addicted to her own sense of depression and despondency. Wallace’s society is of course blindly addicted to televisual entertainment and constantly seeking methods of pleasure, which is yet another type of

addiction. However, if Wallace's opus is not just another parable on the dangers of addiction, what precisely is the rationalization for highlighting not just one or two forms of addiction but a multitude of habit forming, self-gratifying enslavements?

Addiction is a form of enslavement; the addict cannot live without his or her vice. In *Infinite Jest* characters use addictive substances as a bridge to escape the disparity humanity feels at being isolated and without fulfilling interpersonal relationships. Addiction in Wallace's novel takes the form of obsessive love. Chapter 2, through Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply, will define a philosophical element to this obsessive love and why the addiction/love ultimately leads to isolation. Moving along, binary opposites who share an affiliation for substance abuse, an analysis of Hal Incandenza and Don Gately provide a contrast in drug use and recovery. They both suffer from a loss of identity and a desire to reclaim a sense of self. Chapter 2 will contrast both their battles with drugs. It will also look at the relationship between sobriety and the sense of loss when quitting drugs. To conclude the idea of hitting bottom and subsequent reclaiming of identity is explored.

One of the early exchanges between Hugh Steeply and Marathe Remy—about love and the lengths a human will go to in order to secure it—provides crucial insight into Wallace's treatment of addiction in *Infinite Jest*. Steeply and Remy are two of Wallace's most philosophical characters. Their epic dialogue, which is spread out over hundreds of pages, addresses an impressive range of topics including existentialism, animosities between nations, freedom, the pursuit of happiness and pleasure, and the relative merits and deficits of individualism and socialism. Steeply is an American while Remy is Canadian. Steeply works for the Office of Unspecified Services, which pays for the

medical care Remy's wife needs to stay alive. Remy is a member of the Wheelchair Assassins, a Canadian terrorist group that wants to destroy the United States by way of James O. Incandenza's "Entertainment" cartridge. The Wheelchair Assassins believe Remy is pretending to betray them just so he can get information about the cartridge for them. Remy, however, is actually a disloyal member of the Wheelchair Assassins. Both groups know that Remy is betraying the other or rather "pretending only to pretend" (995). The approach Remy takes to pretending renders Steeply nervous, yet they share information with each other. It is a convoluted and confusing spectacle of a relationship; however, it is important because of the conversations they generate.

Their early exchange about love is particularly illuminating. They stand on opposite sides of understanding love with Steeply appearing to have a more romantic notion of it while Remy's view is pragmatic and logical. Steeply attempts to argue that Greek wars were fought over the love of goddesses while Remy explains they are "for commerce that what launches vessels of war is the state and the community and its interests" (106). Steeply disagrees and attempts to prove that even in their current political atmosphere, his boss, Rodney Tine, the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services, "would die twice" for the woman he loves and that "he wouldn't even have to think about it. Not just that he'd let the whole of O.N.A.N. come down if it came to that. But'd die" (106).

Their conversation becomes especially heated when Steeply provokes Remy by exclaiming "The fanatically patriotic Wheelchair Assassins of southern Quebec scorn this type of interpersonal sentiment between people" (106). Remy responds by launching into an etymological reflection on the word "fanatic": "it comes from the Latin for 'temple.' It

is meaning, literally, ‘worshipper at the temple’ (106). As their debate continues Remy further clarifies, “. . .this love you speak of. . . It means only the attachment. Tine is attached fanatically. Our attachments are our temple, what we worship no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith’” (106). Remy’s remarks here may serve as a helpful metaphor for how addiction is conceived in *Infinite Jest*. Addiction in the novel is the temple at which characters like James, Hal, Don and Joelle, to name a few, worship. Don Gately acknowledges this temple through his recovery sponsor who “. . . says some people never get over the loss of what they’d thought was their one true best friend and love” (272). The addicts pattern their love on a desire or a high and as such addiction becomes the very entity that they “would die twice” for.

Addiction in *Infinite Jest* is far more than just a chemical dependency. The novel interweaves addiction, isolation and Wallace’s commentary on society’s apathy. Alexander Rocca, in his essay “‘I don’t feel like a Genius’: David Foster Wallace, Trickle-Down Aesthetics, and the MacArthur Foundation,” explains:

The novel’s action is structured around this cast of extraordinary individuals, all of whom are empowered yet socially isolated by virtue of their *techne*; as a result, they continually yearn to get outside of themselves. [Hal’s] pursuit of absorption inevitably leads to forms of paralysis or self-destruction: drugs, television, and sports alike all convey an absorptive capacity, but they offer false versions of transcendence that lead to further imprisonment rather than liberation (88).

The drugs are a door to thoughts and actions that are possibly more debilitating than the actual substances. In the process of seeking out the high and the deliberations of the

mind, isolation occurs and the individual becomes hidden, reclusive, and unable to function within a group.

The opening sequence of *Infinite Jest* with Hal at a University interview emphasizes this isolation. Stephen Burns explains, “The novel’s opening, then, sets up a tension between an excess of information and unexplainable selfhood” (46). While the admissions screeners are interrogating Hal, he appears to go into a type of frenzy; he is unable to communicate, making strange animal sounds and figurative gestures with his body. The admission team believes him to be having a seizure; they wrestle him to the ground and move him to the men’s room where his inner dialogue, which is perfectly coherent to the reader, continues. Hal insists “‘There is nothing wrong’ . . . I’m not what you see and hear’ . . . ‘I’m not’” (12). Burns describes this scene, looking at the men’s room environment as metaphor for Hal’s taciturnity, “Hal’s location only serves to highlight the elusiveness of his identity. It is clear that the cold room, sterilely cut off from the external world, is meant to suggest a spatial metaphor for the hermetic husk of a self that “contains” this character who is unable to express his internal thoughts externally” (46). This is Hal, completely isolated, unable to talk to anyone or defend himself physically and verbally, as Burns states “It becomes clear that this struggle is more accurately his own. . .and his failure to move beyond grunting and wagging to a more externally recognizable selfhood” (46). The admissions team is appalled while the Enfield Tennis Academy faculty who accompanied Hal on this interview tries to convince the University that nothing is out of the ordinary. Uncle Charles commenting “‘He’s fine,’ . . . ‘Look at him, calm as can be, lying there’ . . . ‘Excited is all he gets, sometimes, an excitable kid, impressed with-’” (13-14). The sequence continues with the

University horrified that Charles Travis brought Hal to the interview when he cannot communicate and Travis defending Hal by stating “Hal here *functions*, you ass. Given a supportive situation. He’s fine when he’s by himself. Yes he has some trouble with excitability in conversation” (15). The University responds by telling Travis ““You sir, are quite possibly ill”” (15). The only mention of drugs is from University representative who states to Travis ““Dope him up, seek to act as his mouthpiece, muzzling, and now he lies there catatonic, staring”” (15). However, there is no actual confirmation that Hal did drugs before the interview. But as the novel progresses, the reader becomes aware of Hal’s addiction, and his intensity not only in sports but also in intellectual matters. His memory is extensive as is his study of vocabulary. However, by the last date the novel chronicles, which is the University admissions interview, Hal cannot communicate. He is in the final analysis completely alone and completely isolated. Is the addiction to blame? Are the faculty members at E.T.A. who have “carefully manipulated” (Burns 46) Hal too consumed with seeing him only as a tennis machine to notice his mind decaying through the excessive use of drugs and obsessive tennis playing?

Infinite Jest begins its lonely walk through eyes of eighteen-year-old, tennis prodigy Hal Incandenza. Son of the infamous creator of the “Samizdat,” Hal Incandenza sits in the administrative offices of the University of Arizona “surrounded by heads and bodies” (3), he is ill at ease and barely speaks, leaving that task to the men who mentor him at Enfield Tennis Academy where he lives and plays competitive tennis. The opening sequence is hazy, there are several unnamed characters that interrogate Hal rather than interview him as part of an admissions process. Hal’s thoughts are disorganized yet concise, he has “. . . been coached to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what

would feel . . . like a pleasant expression or smile” (3). He is flanked on both sides by members of Enfield’s staff, one of which is his Uncle Charles Travis. The admissions interview is similar to a set-up of a criminal brought in for questioning who is not yet aware that he is a suspect. The reader does not yet realize Hal is an addict and that this is partly an account of addiction, a seedy, sleazy, disturbing, and uncomfortable observance of dependence in all its brutality.

The substance of Hal’s addiction is not yet known but his thoughts are paranoid in nature, his inner monologue conveying fear: “This is not working out. It strikes me that EXIT signs would look to a native speaker of Latin like red-lit signs that say HE LEAVES. I would yield to the urge to bolt for the door ahead of them if I could know that bolting for the door is what the men in this room would see. . . . I’d tell you all you want and more, if the sounds I made could be what you hear” (8-9). These early hints, i.e. the exit signs changing names, Hal’s inability to get up and walk away, and his communication issues are clues to the hallucinating aspects of addiction. The chapter ends with Hal being strapped to a stretcher from a “special ambulance. . . [with] some kind of psychiatric M.D. on board,” (16) and his inner monologue recognizing that his uncle is “. . . outraged that [he’s] being needlessly ambulated off to some Emergency Room against [his] will and interests,” (16). He notes that those around him are discussing “[t]he issue of whether the damaged even have interested wills” (16), while going through a line-by-line description of what will happen once at the hospital, most notably the “etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method” (17). Hal’s psychological behavior is reminiscent of an unbalanced or mentally ill patient; the presence of a psychiatric doctor confirms this. Whether the etiology is drug induced or some other event is unknown. The

running dialogue in his head while disordered is still recognizable but his uncle, the admissions people and the medical personal are perplexed by his behavior. In Hal's tormented, drug addled, conception, it will not be the upper class, educated, psychiatrist that grasps the heart of his inner demons but rather a "blue-collar and unlicensed with quick-bit nails tired Cuban orderly who will looking down in the middle of some kind of bustled task, catch what he sees as my eye and ask "So yo then man what's *your* story?" (17).

In Wallace's world, no character is immune to the strongholds of addiction; each addict has his own story. Amongst Wallace's addicts there are differences in class, age, even ethnicity and yet they are all addicted to a substance that to imagine a life without it gives them the howling fantods.⁷ *Infinite Jest* clearly explains this cruel fortress:

A little mentioned paradox of Substance addiction is: that once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you . . . that sometime after your Substance . . .has just been taken away from you. . .you will find yourself beginning to pray. . .to lose your mind, to be able to wrap your mind in an old newspaper. . .and leave it an alley to shift for itself, without you (201).

Each addict suffers his or her own misery separately but shares in the common clamp of addiction. Hal is an upper-class, comfortable high school student at an elite boarding school. He exists in an echelon of privileged society. Another addict, financially solvent,

⁷ Refers to an intense feeling of fear of or repulsion for something. This is an extension of the original meaning of *fantods* as "a state of uneasiness or unreasonableness" (Oxford Dictionaries Blog, n.p.)

describes himself as “a reasonably successful personal-injury attorney” (177), while still another one claims in broken English “. . . I am Alfonso, I am drug addict, powerless, I am knowing powerlessness since the period of Castro” (178). These exchanges are part of a segment titled “Selected Transcripts of the Resident-Interface-Drop-In-Hours of Ms. Patricia Montesian, M.A. C.S.A.C., Executive Director, Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (SIC), Enfield, MA. . .” (176). Ennet House is a long-term drug and alcohol recovery facility located down the hill from Enfield Tennis Academy. “Ennet House is equipped to provide 22 male and female clients a nine-month period of closely supervised residency and treatment” (137); it is a symbol of addiction and denial, isolation among equals. Ennet House immerses the addict; it uses self-help addiction therapies such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous as well as counseling and community service to help addicts find sobriety. Although it is a group home, with people in every corner, the isolation and loneliness that Wallace denotes throughout much of his novel are profoundly present in Ennet House. Don Gately is the most notable resident of Ennet house. A former drug addict, convict and unintentional murderer, Gately offers *Infinite Jest* its most cynical and changed character. He metamorphoses from a narcotics addict supporting his habit through crime into a recovered, productive member of society. Don Gately, the addict, is like most addicts a professional burglar, “a gifted burglar, [and] when he burgled. . .he was, at his professional zenith, smart, sneaky, quiet, quick, possessed of good taste. . .” (55). It was in fact during a burglary that he has his epiphanous moment, which “made him finally stop and question his kismet” (56).

The details surrounding Gately's actual admittance to Ennet House are interesting but not significant in terms of his "kismet." Gately's story begins when he is a teenager and starts using Quaaludes. His father is non-existent, his mother receives beatings from an ex-Navy military police boyfriend and he does not have any academic talents. His one area of expertise is football and until he drops out of school as a junior, football is his obsession. Gately's addiction begins long before his recovery; his addiction, whether to football or to drugs, is still a search for identity. It is a search to find a place among his disoriented family life. His personal etiology includes a lack of intrapersonal relationships and a fragmented soul. These must be resolved before he can fully find peace, and while he builds significant strides in this area, the paradox of *Infinite Jest* may be that he cannot quite connect to others. This, however, remains to be seen. Although ingesting drugs and alcohol, he still manages an impressive middle and high school football career. This is due, in part to the fact that "He had disciplined personal rules back then. He absorbed substances only at night, after practice. Not so much as a fractional foamer [sic] between 0900h and 1800h during the seasons of practice and play. . . . During football season he ruled himself with an iron hand until the sun set. . ." (905). This dedication is relevant to Gately's drug use, his procurement of narcotics, his recovery and the overall management of his life once he decides to get sober. Sobriety requires a certain discipline, admittance of one's disease and acceptance of the choices the addict makes in life. Gately's commitment to football and drugs is significant, it tells of a young boy with no means of expressing himself, a boy who is unable to form bonds and relationships to a family, who therefore must search elsewhere for resolution to the emptiness inside.

Hal, Gately and other Ennet House residents are constantly searching for an interconnectedness that they can only find through drugs. Marshall Boswell illuminates this concept:

[Addicts] identify their whole selves with their heads, creating narratives of self-control and sophisticated, aesthetic constructions of their identities that seek to assuage the dread of being, of self-responsibility. In a bit of vicious irony, this same attempt at psychic self-control actually breeds addiction, for in the words of one of the novel's most heroic characters, Don Gately. . . 'the Disease [of addiction] makes its command headquarters in the head' (272). Drugs and entertainment- in and of themselves innocent objects of desire. . .offer a release from that insistently craving interior, a release from the cage of self-consciousness that often results, paradoxically in the construction of an even more confining cage. . . (136).

Many of Wallace's addicts are constantly arguing against their addictions; they find reasons to believe they are not addicts, that they do not need Ennet House or its recovery efforts. Don Gately, now a staff member describes his charges and their internal struggles. New house resident Geoffrey Day claims that ". . . he just strolled into Ennet House on a lark one day . . . and found the place too hilariously egregulous [sic] to want to ever leave" (272). Another resident Burt F. Smith is ". . . forty-five and. . .making his fiftieth-odd stab at sobriety in A.A." (274). There is Nell Gunther ". . . "Whitening her nails with a manicure pencil amid the remains of something she's eaten" (274) and ""Emil Minty, a hard-core smack-addict punk here for reasons nobody can quite yet pin

down. . . with his combat boots up on one of the standing ashtrays. . .” (275). Bruce Green, yet another resident, is “. . . the quiet kid . . . a garbage-head-all-Substance-type kid, maybe twenty-one . . . and had lived in a trailer in that apocalyptic Enfield trailer park. . .” (275). Randy Lenz has compulsions beyond drug use, he has a “need to be north. . .a tendency to constantly take his own pulse, a fear of all forms of timepieces, and a need to always know the time with great precision” (279). Gately’s highlights remind the reader that these are the lost souls roaming Wallace’s dystopian, United States or O.N.A.N., men and women who cannot quite make it past the habits of addictions.

At Ennet House “Time is passing. . . [it] reeks of passing time. It is the humidity of early sobriety, hanging and palpable. . .” (279). Time is all-consuming in *Infinite Jest*, “Gately remembers his first six months here straight; he’d felt the sharp edge of every second that went by” (279). For residents at Ennet House, time is monitored by how many days sober they are, how far away they are from embracing the teachings of their program and most poignant how each person is just a split-second away from traveling back into the eternal hole of an addict’s fix. It is this split-second that changes an addict’s life and causes them to go spiraling backwards. For Don Gately, this happens because of a gunshot wound during an unexpected clash with some Canadian junkies who have a grievance with Ennet House resident Randy Lenz. During the scuffle, the “Nucks” as Gately calls the Canadian attackers, wield a gun called “the Item” as well as a knife. These pieces of weaponry find their way to Gately and his calf is stabbed while his shoulder receives the bullet. It is at this precise moment in time, that Gately’s metamorphosis is complete. His lost identity is found as he fights to protect the residents

of Ennet House from the viciousness of the “Nucks.” The following excerpt from *Infinite Jest* accentuates Gately’s transformation:

Gately shrugs at the Nucks like he’s got no choice but to be here . . .
Having no choice now not to fight and things simplify radically, divisions collapse. Gately’s just one part of something bigger he can’t control . . . He says he’s responsible for these people on these private grounds tonight and is part of this whether he wants to be or not, and can they talk this out because he doesn’t want to have to fight them. . . (611-612).

Gately’s acceptance as a mentor, a recovered addict and possible savior alludes to the concept of metempsychosis. The most basic definition of metempsychosis is Greek meaning “change of soul” (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia n.p.) Attributed to eastern religions and Greek mythology, metempsychosis is similar to the idea of reincarnation where the body is reborn, however in metempsychosis the soul itself transforms after death of the human body. While Gately does not die in this excerpt, his soul is firmly transfigured. While this transformation may or may not be tangible, without it Gately cannot be completely recovered. Paul M. Curtis in his essay “Yo Man so What’s Your Story: The Double Bind and Addiction in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*” writes:

The experience of the individual is one of a bind and is split in two ways: one is freed by the truth, but one is unfree until awakened. Freedom depends upon surrender, and the spiritual freedom that truth provides is contingent upon total surrender of the diseased self. On the one hand, anything less than total surrender guarantees the return of the “Spider” (*Jest* 357), Wallace’s hypostasis of addiction (38).

Gately admits the truth of his disease, yet he is not fully engulfed in recovery. Although he is sober, he works hard at his program mandated outside job, and he takes his role as Ennet House staff member seriously, monitoring residents, making sure rules are followed, he still keeps part of himself locked away. Even sober and aware, Gately still has a mocking air to his comments concerning residents; at times scoffing internally at the other residents, “Charlotte Treat . . . the poor bitch is clueless. All of them are clueless still” (271) and “. . . he always tries to remind himself daily that this all an Ennet House residency is supposed to do: buy these poor yutzes some time, some thin pie-slice of abstinent time, till they can start to get a whiff of what’s true and deep . . . under the shallow surface of what they’re trying to do” (271). He does not form connections to the other residents, except perhaps Joelle, he believes the house director has an “odd gullibility in the presence of human sludge” (279), and he is simply unable to feel true warmth towards others. This is apparent until the very moment he instantly attaches to Ennet House as a being when the “Nucks” try to attack and destroy. In an instance his soul is transformed, a bullet rips through his shoulder, he will face a conundrum so deep, and overpowering it leaves the reader drowning in hermeneutic possibilities. The interpretation of Gately’s choice considers the likelihood of redemption within *Infinite Jest* while questioning the concept of complete recovery.

Infinite Jest presents addiction as a force that is beyond mere will; the interpretations of an addict’s life are immeasurable as are their motives, desires and abilities to recapture their sobriety. Don Gately’s conversion is evident. The consequences and disasters of his drug use are prominent and explained. Redemption on some level exists for Don Gately. Hal Incandenza however, is an ambiguous protagonist.

Earlier I discussed Hal's marijuana addiction as well as his penchant for getting high in secret and the extreme gratification he receives from that secrecy. Hal, like Don Gately, also has an epiphany. Although his is far more innocent than Gately's it still happens as a consequence of being an addict. An unexpected drug test forces Hal to confront his own howling fantods.⁷ above Given the reprieve of a thirty-day waiting period, Hal realizes it is time to think about his drug use and why exactly it is so excessive. Hal and his confidant, Michael Pemulis, one of the few people who are aware of Hal's addiction, discuss the milestone Hal is trying to tackle:

“What if it was that I was doing it more and more and it was getting less fun but I was still doing it . . . and the only way to moderate would be to like wave a hankie at it all together.”

“I applaud. Some low risk transcendentalism with me . . . could be just the impotence for this kind of like major re---”

“But it'd be everything. . .”

“You are so naïve, Inc.. . . You think you're just going to Here I go, deciding, and. . .quit everything?”

“What I said was what if.”

“Hal, you are my friend. . . So brace yourself. . . You want to quit because you're starting to see you need it, and---“

“That's exactly it Peems, think how horrible that'd be, if somebody *needed* it. Not just *liked* it a great great great deal. Needing it becomes a

whole separate order of. . . It seems horrific. It seems like the difference between really loving something and being---“

“Say the word, Inc. . . .

What if it's true? The word. What if you are? So the answer's just walk away? If you're addicted you need it, Hallie, you need it what do you imagine happens if you just . . . try to go on without it, without anything? . . . You lose your mind, Inc. You die inside” (1064-1065).

Don Gately's choice and Hal's choice are the same, either quit drugs or in a sense give up on life. The rest of Michael Pemulis and Hal's conversation centers on the facets of stopping drugs, on the withdrawals, and whether or not Hal can actively stop smoking marijuana without another drug in its place. Hal is able to observe clearly the danger of replacing one drug with another. Pemulis believes Hal is a machine, lest we not forget his compulsion to play superior tennis, and as such cannot quit his drug use cold turkey without serious consequences, “Guys that'd just quit everything because they were in too deep and quit it all and just died” (1065). He firmly believes Hal will lose an important piece of his soul if he stops using all drugs with no reflection or replacement of said loss. Unlike Gately, Pemulis believes A.A. or N.A. will not work as a substitute for Hal because “. . .that shit's not going to work for you because you're too sharp to ever buy the God-squad shit” (1066). Hal listens to Pemulis but still believes that staying away from marijuana is the only course of action for him at this moment in his life but he does acknowledge Pemulis' idea “Some vital part of my like personhood would die without something to ingest this is your view” (1066). Exasperated now Pemulis finally expresses the crux of the addict and says to Hal, “Spend some time figuring out this *needing*. Like

what part of you's come to *need* it, do you think" (1066). This is the essential soul effacing aspect of the addict; a part that perhaps the addict does not understand until they recognize that this missing piece cannot be replaced.

Don Gately is aware of the deficit recovery instills. At times, Gately still misses his oral narcotics use, especially in the early mornings. The sponsor of Gately's A.A. group acknowledges that giving up drugs is a loss that is perhaps more painful than death. Hal, like Gately, had a moment where he is completely compelled to forever abstain from all drug use but unlike Gately, Hal was not in a place where his life was headed nowhere. Hal is still part of an elite, private tennis academy, he is still the son of the academy's founder, his father although dead was still a brilliant scientist and created the most pleasure inducing object in the entire history of Wallace's world. These extreme juxtapositions in Gately and Hal's placement as drug addicts are significant. Boswell illuminates this impression by comparing Wallace's "Dis-ease" of substance abuse to despair of self as he explains:

This dis-ease is best understood as despair, a concept central to Soren Kierkegaard's psychological phenomenology, particularly as outlined in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where he identifies one form of despair as that of 'not wanting to be oneself; or . . .not wanting to in despair to be a self; or . . . wanting a new self.' Nearly all of Wallace's characters suffer from this despair of not wanting to be themselves, or more pointedly, a self at all" (137-138).

Gately and Hal specifically reiterate the fact that a drug addict is beyond intellect, beyond ethnicity, and beyond wealth. The addicts in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* emanate from

circumstances outside of their conscious control. Boswell further explicates Hal's chronic marijuana use: "Hal . . . bears the stamp of Kierkegaardian aesthetic despair. Hal. . . is 'also addicted to thinking.' . . . Wallace's prose is particularly adept at conveying the layered and compulsive nature of this sort of intellectual 'jonesing.' . . . Hal not only thinks obsessively about himself but also about the *way* he thinks about himself" (139).

Gately in this sense mirrors Hal, once he is sober, in that he obsessively thinks about Ennet House, the residents there, focusing on the puerile details that go on each day. Alexander Rocca explains:

Gately is a working-class foil to the intellectuals with whom the text is otherwise interested, as well as a character who has sworn off absorption and abstraction alike. He is a man who has come 'to learn to live by clichés,' he tells the other residents. 'To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés' (270) . . . Instead of the numbing repetition of drugs or alcohol or film, Gately finds sobriety in the repetition of empty language whose value is performative and without intrinsic meaning. . . . In lieu of critical individualism, Gately turns to cliché and 'universal assent' on the pragmatic grounds that these simply work (91).

The mundane reality of everyday life and repetitive reflections "obfuscate[s] what it is actually determined to reveal" (Boswell 140). Elizabeth Freudenthal in her analysis "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*" portrays Don Gately's healing, "[His] recovery is largely depicted as a compulsive, ritual, and physical investment in an entity outside of himself that may or may not exist" (192). Again, the desire for a different self appears but in Don Gately's case, the only sense he

can make of his drug recovery is to fully embrace the teachings of A.A., no matter that he may still be hiding a piece of inner core, that his inner self does not actually believe.

For Hal that hidden piece may pertain to his father, or his prodigious talent. A glimpse of these thoughts exists in a digital entertainment cartridge that Hal produces. In it, he is discussing the details of becoming a tennis prodigy, how to navigate being a student at E.T.A. and most importantly how to navigate a father who is “urging you on with nothing but smiles on to greater and greater demonstrations of effort” (172). The most extrapolatory of Hal’s dealings with his father exist in the directions Hal narrates during this cartridge:

Have Himself hunch down. . .and tell you that his own father had told him that talent is sort of a dark gift. . .it is. . .it is there. . .and either lived up to or lost. . . Have a father whose own father lost what was there. Have a father who lived up to his own promise and then found thing after thing to meet and surpass the expectations . . .and didn’t seem just a whole lot happier. . .Here is how to avoid thinking about any of this by practicing and playing until everything runs on autopilot. . . Please make no extramural friends. Discourage advances from outside the circuit. Turn down dates. . . . never tell anyone where you are. . . (172-175)

Gately was a football prodigy; Hal was a tennis prodigy. Gately is dedicated to his sport through personal dedication until drugs overwhelm him. Hal is forced to become a talent. Their isolation portrayed through their drug use and the secretive lengths they attempt in order to secure and consume those substances. They are both determined to hide their

addiction, to pursue their talent, and most of all to remain isolated within a self they do not want to admit belongs to them.

The revealing nature of drug addicts and their desperation is a theme Wallace emphasizes throughout *Infinite Jest*. Hal Incandenza and Don Gately experience drug addiction and sobriety in completely different veins, yet the vice, the gratification and search for pleasure is fierce in both. If we return to characters Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply an understanding of the pleasure aspect of drug abuse can be clarified. They are still at their secret meeting, and their debate now concerns freedom and the choices one makes based on freedoms. Marathe argues that the U.S.A. is weak because they fear the “Entertainment” cartridge. Steeply feels that it is a dangerous objective to let American’s choose whether they want to watch the fatal tape.

“You’re saying that the administration wouldn’t even be concerned about the Entertainment if we didn’t know we were fatally weak”

Marathe shrugged, “Us we will force nothing on the U.S.A. persons in their warm home. We will make only available, Entertainment. There will then be some choosing, to partake or choose not to. . . . This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose- this appetite of your people unable to choose appetites, this is the death. What you call the death, the collapsing: this will be the formality only” (318-319).

The distinction in their view of Americans is notable; Steeply feels a need to protect, while Marathe finds that idea to be absurd. Marathe’s interpretation is that it is a choice, thereby summing up that addiction is a choice as well. For an addict the need for pleasure overtakes everything else in life. Pleasure becomes a necessity while food, family, work

et cetera are forced into a hazy abyss. Marathe sees this as a choice that is made and as such the human can decide whether or not to watch the addictive film that will cause viewers to relinquish life. His tone is condescending, as though the addict's weakness is a mortal flaw. Steeply's concern eschews Marathe's view that American's are weak, for him the addiction is of secondary importance. As Steeply exclaims, "There are no choices without personal freedom, Buckeroo. It's not us who are dead inside. These things you find so weak and contemptible in us--- these are just the hazards of being free" (319). Addiction in this sense is not a weakness but rather an individual's expression of freedom. Steeply clarifies, ". . . our whole system is founded on your individual's freedom to pursue his own individual desires. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct" (422/424). Pleasure gained through addiction therefore is not a choice but a symbol of freedom and the pursuit of that freedom. Although ultimately destructive and possibly fatal, addiction is still an individual pursuit. Marathe finds this weak while Steeply promotes its virtuousness. In terms of the Entertainment cartridge, Steeply feels that exposing Americans to it, is leaving them vulnerable to a choice that can only hurt them unnecessarily. Exposing society to the cartridge unfortunately will lead to repeated viewing and form a habit and "Habit, especially in *Infinite Jest*, verges into addiction" (Gerdes 338). The Entertainment cartridge is another addiction that will bend the will of its viewers. Prior knowledge lets the reader know that this film, the final film of James Incandenza is brutal in its pleasure. The viewer is rendered catatonic, caring nothing for his needs, the film becomes the need, and an endless loop that stunts everything the viewer knows, past, present, and future.

Gately's future remains uncertain. The bullet to the shoulder leaves him in excruciating pain unable to take Demerol because of his history as addict. He continuously refuses it, through nightmares, a visit from the dead ghost of James Incandenza, and a complete recreation of his last drug binge, which included witnessing the death of his cohort in addiction and crime. Gately is left washed ashore on a beach, the reader unaware if he has finally taken the Demerol for the pain or if the pain is actually killing him. When the wraith appears to Gately it causes him to remember that he had "tried his best these last few sober months to fend off uninvited memories of his own grim conversations and interchanges with the M.P. (839). The wraith continues his visit with a pain-induced hallucinating Gately telling him "Any conversation or interchange is better than none at all, to trust him on this, that the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side" (839). However, *Infinite Jest* makes it perfectly clear that the familial relationships and interchanges are not substantial enough to warrant a bond. Gately's mother dies from a cirrhosis-induced brain aneurysm and his M.P. stepfather disappears. Hal's father commits suicide and his mother becomes a recluse. Gately's and Hal's drug addictions and subsequent recoveries become a bittersweet exchange for their continued sense of loss, especially concerning drugs and their identity. While the wraith is a manifestation of Gately's mind, it speaks of truth concerning isolation and the ties to family that Gately and Hal both seem to have lost along their way. Hal ends up strapped to a stretcher, hoisted into an ambulance and whisked off to institutions unknown for reasons unknown. Questions linger - Was Hal sober for the past year? Did he watch his father's final film? Did he take an illicit drug that caused his final descent into insanity? Most likely it would

seem that he has finally isolated himself to such an extent that he can longer communicate or exist on any human to human level.

In *Infinite Jest* characters use addictive substances as a bridge to escape the disparity humanity feels at being isolated and without true connections. Hal and Don Gately especially remain hidden, essentially escaping their reality by using drugs but also eschewing an inner awareness of self. While both characters find a path to recovery, neither character truly recovers, they are left in an ambiguous cloud still searching for a new discovery. As Marshall Boswell expresses “The ending is therefore both a death and a birth, an exhaustion and a replenishment” (179). The fact that they both appear to be headed in another direction as the novel ends, leads to an interpretation that rediscovery is possible, rebirth exists, although it is not expressed directly by the novel’s end. *Infinite Jest* leaves the reader with the impression that truth and selfhood are not interchangeable. Realizing the truth that one is an addict does not necessarily mean a resolution the sense of loss or hidden identity felt by Hal and Don. In order to overcome Eschaton desperation a complete recycling must transpire. The self must face absolute rock bottom, confront the truth again and form a cleansing of the inner soul if true recovery is to happen. The possibility that hope exists and humanity can witness and participate in a redemptive cycle was part of Wallace’s determination in moving contemporary literature beyond a desolate and isolated society. Chapter 3 will look towards the redemption *Infinite Jest* infinitely desires to express and Wallace’s attempt to “To disclose open up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making [him] look banal or melodramatic or sappy, and ask the reader to really feel something” (McCaffery 149). Wallace wanted

contemporary fiction to effect change in a reader without resorting to cynicism. Chapter 3 explores this concept and Wallace's relationship with the idea of art being redemptive.

Chapter 3

Patience, Persistence and Perseverance: Finding Redemption within *Infinite Jest*

Prolific in the English language, fond of using idiosyncratic syntax, and superior in creating eccentric characters, David Foster Wallace seized the postmodern literary world and reincarnated hope, sentiment and fallible human beings. Wallace made his intentions clear in early non-fiction essays, one of which is the oft-referenced “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction,” that was published in a 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. In this piece, Wallace advocates for fiction writers to take television seriously and move beyond their knee-jerk cynicism towards television. Wallace argues that television productions of the late twentieth century were creating a type of smug, detached individualism that encouraged alienation and solipsism.

According to Wallace, advertising of the late twentieth century became “self-referential,” meaning it was able to use wit and sarcasm against itself, which allowed viewers to take a condescending attitude towards the ads. Television shows followed suit with authority figures becoming caricatures of the post-World War II families they once revered. According to Wallace “To the extent that TV can flatter Joe⁸ about ‘seeing through’ the pretentiousness and the hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority its taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords that feeling” (180). Wallace concludes his essay with a call to fiction writers to bring back outdated values, to question

⁸ Joe Briefcase or just Joe is Wallace’s euphemism for the average, American television viewer, I.E. - the millions of people that watch television every day.

the irony and sardonic attitudes that permeate television and literature. He asks them to “be. . .willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironist, the ‘How banal.’ Accusations of sentimentally, melodrama. Credulity” (193). Wallace dares writers to “rebel,” inviting them “risk things. . . Risk disapproval” (193). His probing was momentous in this forty-four page essay where his objectives clearly express a desire to contribute to the literary world a new, revised form of literary humanism. It was as though in asking fiction writers to traverse a new path, he was actually designing that path for himself. Wallace’s uses his novel *Infinite Jest* to present this new type of humanism and postmodern challenge. Although his characters exist in a world that is alienated, his creation finds a method in which to bring forth redemption and hope. *Infinite Jest* infinitely desires to express the possibility that hope exists and humanity can witness and participate in a redemptive cycle that while changing the outcome of one’s life story, still achieves balance and peace. The following pages present the reader-response relationship that was so important to Wallace’s storytelling and discuss criticism that Wallace’s novel was simply a tale of nihilism. Don Gately’s despair is expressed along with his experience in A.A. and overcoming drug addiction. His recovery through A.A. posits a treatment that is fraught with clichés but still accomplishes an end goal. The details of minor character Barry Loach will also be considered. As a coach at E.T.A., Loach experienced a crisis of a personal faith that seemed impenetrable. The juxtaposition of Gately’s drug use and Loach’s spiritual encounter will highlight the elements of loss, grief and the possibility of a future. Mario Incandenza’s small but important role in this postmodern awakening is presented as well.

David Foster Wallace's intention towards the reader-novel relationship was unique. He discusses this relationship during his interview with Larry McCaffery:

We still think in terms of a story 'changing' the reader's emotions, celebrations, maybe even her life. We're not keen on the idea of the story sharing its valence with the reader. But the reader's own life 'outside' the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only 'her reaction to the story' or 'her take on the story.' But these *things* are the story (141).

This concept is evident through his characters. He created his characters to have flaws; in some cases, they have serious, dark, depressing, and even vicious imperfections. This type of character reflects exactly what it is to be human and alive in the modern society. His damaged characters allow the reader to connect to the story in a way that is personal and makes the story part of the human experience. The story of Don Gately the addict is shaped by the addict who lives the twelve-step program but may not actually find full faith in God. There is Hal Incandenza who gets high in secret and finds this more thrilling than the marijuana-induced high itself. Kate Gompert is a marijuana addict but also suffers debilitating depression. Mario is Hal's older brother but was born disfigured and with disabilities yet his kindness to humankind is sincere and honest. These are the humans Wallace creates in order to build a reader response that is attuned to compassion and humanism. In his essay, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," Paul Giles writes, "Yet to be a human in Wallace's world is not simply to relapse into a sclerotic humanism; instead it is to search for fragments of authentic personality amidst the razzmatazz of scientific jargon and hip-hop slang" (336). Similarly, James K. A. Smith points out that, although "not artistically conservative, Wallace became convinced

that the task of literature in late modernity is to counter the ironic nihilism with which he is mistakenly identified” (Smith 26). This is true in the case of *Infinite Jest*. While it portrays society in a dystopian slant--there is addiction, abuse and a lack of human relationships and his society is falling victim to a televisual entertainment siege and grave apathy—nonetheless, his story is not nihilistic, his humans still have a chance.

Despair is honored ultimately by the reader-novel relationship; Wallace and hence *Infinite Jest* presents a landscape that acknowledges real-life despair while also being open to the possibilities of hope and redemption. Wallace’s biographer D. T. Max points out that “*Infinite Jest* then didn’t just diagnose a malaise. It proposed a treatment, answering a need that Wallace saw perhaps better than any other writer of his time” (Qtd. in Smith, 27). Commenting on Max, James K. A. Smith suggests that Wallace “saw the need that a remedy accompany the diagnosis lest postmodern culture suffer all the more for its new self-consciousness” (Smith, 27). Don Gately and his recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) present sobriety as a path towards redemption; however, it is not the ultimate light. Don Gately struggles with his withdrawal from oral narcotics and the program A.A. demands from its participants. He does not believe in God. Wallace address this early on by writing “A.A [‘s] God . . . does not apparently require that you believe in Him/Her/It before He/She/It will help you” (201). This statement is central to understanding Gately’s recovery because he finds such difficulty in handing his life over to the mechanics of A.A. He wants to recover but he also wants to remain autonomous in his decisions. Wallace recognizes this facet of the A.A problem and acknowledges it but also admits that God is just a symbol, addicts can still find hope even without God. Boswell explores this idea as a “concept of a vague, unspecified Higher

Power” and explains that Wallace “is not proposing in this novel a conventional spiritual answer to our malaise but rather a postmodern diagnosis of the same” (145). For Boswell and *Infinite Jest* readers, the presence of a non-threatening being allows recovery to be an individual choice without judgement, while still calling on the power of a faith or spirit as guidance but not as the ultimate answer. Wallace’s post-modern call to avoid blasé apathy is answered by Gately’s willingness to adopt the idea of a God and not allowing his suspicious temperament to impede his goal to remain sober.

Wallace seamlessly incorporates other recovery aspects into his novel as well, recognizing that the more honest the novel is, the more likely it is to elicit strong reader response. One example is the simplistic way he describes the addict’s desire to still get high:

You can all of a sudden out of nowhere want to get high with your Substance so bad that you think you will surely die if you don’t but you can just sit there with your hands writhing in your lap and face wet with craving, can want to get high but instead just sit there, wanting to but not . . .and if you can gut it out and not hit the Substance during the craving the craving will eventually *pass*, it will go away- at least for awhile (202).

The angst of the addict is clearly expressed in this passage. The call to the substance is explicit while the waiting for the hunger to pass is gut wrenching. The ending of the segment is significant: rather than leave addict without a possibility, they are encouraged to have patience, to let the craving wither away and it is confirmed that it will go away.

The likelihood exists that the desire will come back and the addict will patiently wait it out again. The potential for long-term recovery does exist though. This is

witnessed through Don Gately and his experience with A.A. It is however, apparent that the addict needs to unite in a meaningful way with the program. Through Gately, the true pain of being an addict is revealed, as is the strength and will needed to regain a sense of self. It is Gately's inner thoughts that are exposed: "They just have to pray daily for acceptance and the brass danglers to move forward through the grief and loss, to wait for time to harden the scab" (271). Although the acceptance of God is a tenuous belief, prayer is recommended to get through the turbulence. This is an accepted practice and encouraged as is expressing one's emotions during tempestuous periods. Gately's inner monologue continues, "The sponsor . . . doesn't give Gately one iota of shit for feeling some negative feelings about it . . . it's a myth no one misses it. Their particular Substance. Shit, you wouldn't need help if you didn't miss it" (271). The addict is not perfect, and hence neither is his salvation. He or she is going to suffer tremendously and face the truth of getting clean. The sponsor is similar to a beacon of light in Gately's path; he encourages and ". . . commends Gately for his candor in breaking down and crying like a baby and telling him about it early one A.M. over the pay phone, the sense of loss" (271). Nothing is comfortable for Gately, the need, the loss, and the pain are intense but *Infinite Jest* juxtaposes the panic and anxiety an addict experiences with another supplication, "You just have to Ask For Help and like Turn it Over, the loss and pain, to Keep Coming, show up, pray, Ask For Help" (271). This final plea reinforces the true nature of Wallace's postmodern condition. The support and reassurance that there is another manner in which to approach life endures. Most poignantly, the quest to find it will not be without struggle.

“No one said life would be easy” is an old cliché, as is “God never gives you more than you can handle,” and “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” The clichés, although seemingly trite messages, are the core of A.A. Don Gately who has been sober for over a year now cannot hide his disdain at the newcomers who cannot and will not embrace the messages. He realizes though that he is in no position to judge former drug users and those trying to re-claim their sobriety. “Keep Coming, Hang in There, One Day at a Time, Easy Does It, Live and Let Live,” these are the clichés of Gately’s recovery. In recollecting his early days of recovery he admits his unease and insecurities:

And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing--so unlikely and uncompromising, so much the inverse of what they’d come too much love--might really be able to keep the lover’s toothy maw at bay. . .”
(349).

As Don Gately immerses himself in the program, almost robotically but with the knowledge that he is asking for help, he finds comfort and friendship. He learns the methods by which to instill the clichés into his soul, and even though he finds himself still questioning its effectiveness he keeps going to meetings, listening, speaking of his own addictions, helping to make coffee and clean up after the meetings and eventually spending time outside the meetings with others who were once, like him, newly recovering. As the program feeds his soul, he finds the truth about drugs and the emptiness inside:

Substances start out being so magically great . . . you just know . . . that they'll never let you down. . . But they do. And then this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans. . .is so lame you just know there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons. . .and then Gately seems to find out AA turns out to be the very loyal friend he thought he'd had and then lost. . . And so you Hang In and stay sober and straight . . . (249)

His recovery evolves and it is his utmost belief that the clichés are necessary to truly incorporate the teachings and gain the true benefits of A.A, “. . .even if they are just cliché's, cliché's are (a) soothing, and (b) remind you of common sense, and (c) license the universal assent that drowns out silence; and (4) silence is deadly” (278). Marshall Boswell explains clichés as “positive and simple truths” (138). He also admits that “postmodern self-consciousness teaches us to be wary of clichés and to detect and decode ideologically interested metanarratives that pass themselves off as essentially present” (138). Boswell asserts that “Wallace's method again and again is to embrace that cynicism--for it is the very air we breathe--and turn it on itself in order to recover those naïve yet sold truths that are worth preserving” (139). Wallace looked beyond the sardonic nature that seemed to permeate postmodern literature and readers. He seized those clichés and paired the dark lair of drug addiction and subsequent agony of recovery with potential and prospects thus catapulting humanity not into desolation but rather giving them redemption and a sense that perseverance triumphs over even the ugliest of human malevolence.

Humanity's repulsion to the foul aspects of an urbane existence occurs when minor character Coach Barry Loach is confronted with his spiritual brother's loss of faith. Buried deep within Wallace's novel is the story of E.T.A. tennis coach Barry Loach. Despite not having an "official degree in Training or whatever" (966) Barry is somehow an "elite Head Trainer" (966) at the prestigious tennis academy in Boston where much of Wallace's story takes place. While Barry's existence is similar to a blip on radar, it still holds considerable merit. His brother's loss of faith is significant because this faith crisis is attributed to ". . .the ingratitude of the low-life homeless addicted and mentally ill flocks he served, and the utter lack of compassion and basic help from the citizenry at large. . . had killed whatever spark of inspired faith he'd had in the higher possibilities and perfectibility of man" (968). Barry's brother is profoundly disturbed by the way people treat the homeless and perhaps more poignant, the lack of appreciation an addict feels when receiving help. Since much of Wallace's book presents the angst of an addict, looking to the reader response to find empathy, Barry's brother's expectations of an addict disrupts that angst. The brother seems to have high expectations of humanity and cannot cope when they are not realized. Wallace uses Barry and his brother to demonstrate the basic flaw in an unwavering faith in helping others through God, while also addressing a change in a once optimistic human being. Barry is the youngest in a large Boston family that adheres "staunchly" to the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. It is noted that Mrs. Loach's "most fervent wish was that one of her countless children would enter the R.C. clergy" (966). Due to extraordinary circumstances the entire Loach clan, save for two brothers, one of them being Barry, were unable to fulfill their mother's greatest wish. Barry however, had no desire to become a priest. From a

young age, he saw his passion in the “liniment and adhesive ministry of professional athletic training” (967). Fortunately, for Barry, there was one brother left to satisfy Mrs. Loach’s extreme ambitions. Barry’s brother entered the Jesuit order while Barry entered college to realize his own aspiration towards becoming an athletic trainer. Barry’s life seems to be heading on an uphill trajectory until his brother experiences “a sudden and dire spiritual decline in which his basic faith in the innate indwelling goodness of men like spontaneously combusted and disappeared- and for no apparent or dramatic reason” (967). Barry’s story is fascinating within the context of *Infinite Jest*’s drug addictions, suicides, toxic waste dumps, political subterfuge and wheelchair terrorists because of its inherent virtuousness. Barry himself is a devoted son, concerned about his mother’s determination to have a son with a vocation. He does not want to become a priest but is ready to forego his own dreams in order for his mother’s deepest wish to be realized. This loyalty to his mother is reminiscent of life before late twentieth century scorn crept stealthily into the attributes of routine existence. Barry, however, has a plan. He will reunite his brother with faith and in doing so “preserve his mother’s dream and his own indirectly athletic ambitions” (968).

Barry’s brother, however, is not to be swayed, saying “he’d come to expect little better than self-interested #1-looking out from human beings anyway Since a basic absence of empathy and compassion and taking-the-risk-to-reach-out seemed to him now an ineluctable part of the human character” (968). Barry is not to be swayed either though “he was actually rather a spiritually upbeat guy who just didn’t buy the brother’s sudden despair at the apparent absence of compassion and warmth in God’s self-mimetic and divine creation” (968-968). Barry and his brother engage in philosophical and spirited

discussions, until finally Barry's brother issues him a challenge, a challenge that will force Barry to re-evaluate what he thought was a sincere and devoted faith.

The loss of faith runs parallel to the addiction narrative. Both losses reflect a genuine grief for a conviction that seemed unshakable. The addict is so certain that he is not dependent and that his substance is the key to ultimate happiness, he will kill himself trying to obtain it. The devout believer of God maintains an absolute truth that faith in their God will singularly bring them peace, love and happiness. The loss of those convictions leaves the person grasping at straws to reestablish an identity, to find a place amongst the ruins. The drug addict must learn to live without his fix while the once devout Christian must focus his energies not on a spiritual being but rather on himself. Both addict and religious recluse confront a reality that seems grim and bleak. Giles makes the claim that "Wallace's narratives. . . establish intriguing dialectics between a discourse of dehumanization, which defamiliarizes the human body and represents it cartographically and a nostalgia for more traditional forms of identity" (335). This claim reinforces Wallace's attempt to forge a society that is besieged with confusing ideals of self and the underlying desire to find hope where only doom seems possible. Barry Loach epitomizes this dialectic as he is devoted to his mother's needs, however irrational they may be, his own pure aspirations, and his God-like brother who can no longer see himself as a representative of God. The challenge for Barry is resolving these arguments while not sacrificing his or anyone else's sense of self. The redeeming quality in Barry is his essential belief in humanity.

Barry's brother ultimately serves the resolution that not only determines Barry's fate but also his brothers. The challenge is for Barry to present himself as a dredge of

society, a homeless person, dirty, unkempt, perhaps even as a drug addict and stand outside the metro train station begging for someone to touch him. If he is able to find a human that will touch him, no matter that he appears homeless, dirty, and drug addled, then his brother will resume his faith and place in the church. Barry's fundamental optimism believes this task will be simple: ask for another human's touch and he shall receive it. The ensuing months however, are not kind to Barry or his brother. In what appears to be a nihilistic perspective, Barry spends almost an entire year begging "Touch me, just touch me, *please*" (969) to unknown passersby, people who may or may not have been appalled at his appearance but who when confronted with someone asking them to touch him were quickly repulsed and it was thus "ensured that just about the last thing any passerby in his right mind would want to do was touch him" (969). No one touches Barry. They throw money at him, dropped it into his outreached hand but "never touching him" (969). Barry loses his athletic based work-study job at college, he eventually has to withdraw from classes, and his brother "got bored eventually and stopped watching him" (970). His brother is mentioned as going to back the seminary to wait for them to kick him out while Barry is left to stand and wait for someone to touch him. The longer he begs the more he becomes a fixture at the station and the actual sludge that live there begin to emulate his cry for someone to touch them and Barry's "chances of getting some citizen to interpret his request literally and lay hands on him in a compassionate and human way" (970) is now practically nil. In fact his "own soul began to sprout little fungal patches of necrotic rot, and his upbeat view of the so-called normal and respectable human race began to undergo dark revision" (970). Where is the redemption in Barry Loach's sad tale of despair? It would appear that his quest to find

kindness in humanity is reduced to tragedy. Neither Barry nor his brother find hope in humanity while their mother's dreams turn murky too.

To understand Barry's persistence in finding that one human who will touch him one must look towards the actual narrative structure of Wallace's sequence of events. According to Giles in his article, "One response to this environment in Wallace's writing takes the form of mordant satire. . . This lends Wallace's narrative, albeit in an oblique and understated way, a structure of overarching dramatic irony, where the reader gradually becomes aware of the characters being caught up in a labyrinthine systems of which they necessarily remain largely unaware" (338-339). Is it fair to assume that Barry did not know he was growing increasingly disheartened at Boston society? Giles's contention is plausible—namely, that Wallace's satire creates the irony that insists Barry is unaware of what is happening to his once optimistic and open heart. Barry acclimates to the homeless life easily and it is only the handshake of Mario Incandenza that revives his dejected soul. Mario's own hand is far more deformed than Barry's pretend homeless hand ever was, even being described as "claw like." Mario's hand was so odd looking that several of the homeless men who began to follow Barry's cries of "Touch me please" recoiled in fright when Mario, who felt there was no reason "why the request of men with outstretched hands for a simple handshake or High Five shouldn't automatically be honored and granted," (970-971) went to shake them. Mario therefore brings the handshake of light and hope that both Barry and his brother spent nine months trying to find. In an "Afterward" as part of the section on *Infinite Jest* in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, Nam Le comments "Mario is sought out, trusted and loved (by all. . .) because he is good; he is open, empathetic, whole in his beliefs" (339). This goodness is essential to

Barry's story, it is the redemption that Barry seeks and needs to believe in people again. Barry's saga ends with Mario's handshake leading to a job with the athletic department at E.T.A. and his eventual promotion despite not finishing his own education.

Although at first appearance Barry seems to have lost any semblance of a decent life, he has in fact left the reader with a perplexing aside. His character is minor yet the detail in his account is immense. Wallace's inclusion of Barry is a nod to his own postmodern desires of presenting humans in a faulty yet redeeming radiance. Marshall Boswell states:

Mario then is the one truly human figure in the novel, the one character in the novel who is . . . unembarrassed about representing all that is 'unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic.' A horrible grotesque exaggeration of some sentimental Dickensian cripple. . . Mario is one more instance of Wallace parodying what he is embarrassed about, but still committed to, loving and affirming" (158).

Barry's flaw in believing in true goodness of humanity leads him to Mario who represents the innocence and illumination of the decent part of the soul, "Trainer Barry Loach all but kisses the kid's ring, since it's Mario who through coincidence saved him from the rank of panhandling under belly of Boston Common's netherworld and more or less got him his job" (315). Wallace's postmodernism constitutes a return to the sincere pathos of humanity; redemption of humanity's lost soul. His characters are fallible, dark, and prone to malevolent acts of viciousness but still there are people that remain patient and persistent, and who persevere to find the virtue that exists. Wallace's redeeming characters are lovable and courageous, his faith in humanity visible in the words he

writes. *Infinite Jest* ends with Don Gately either hallucinating in a pain-induced coma or being injected with “Sunshine- Metro Boston’s third hardest thing” (1079), and the reader must use his own hermeneutic knowledge to find the ending most plausible to his or her own story.

Conclusion

Unlike Wallace's one-thousand plus magnum opus, this thesis does have a conclusion. Isolation and loneliness permeate much of Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. It is a story of addiction and redemption; a postmodern vision that allows humanity to have wicked flaws while still evoking empathy from readers. It is more than a sad story or a persuasive text against drug use. It creates a relationship with its multitude of characters that gives the reader pause to consider his or her life choices. *Infinite Jest* builds upon the idea that humanity needs interaction with other human beings to truly find peace. In its quest to connect and bond, *Infinite Jest* highlights a growing dependency on technology and the manner in which this dependency creates apathy and isolation. Communication and isolation are constantly weaved throughout the novel, the constant addiction and need to connect to other humans create a society that cannot formulate meaningful, or sincere relationships with anyone outside of their hidden identities. *Infinite Jest*, however, finds recovery, hope and redemption if we can put aside our inclinations towards cynicism and observe the suffering that each human must experience in order to evolve as a complete self. David Foster Wallace's vision culminates in an ending that is elusive yet allows the reader to form his or her own interpretation of the future. Don Gately's ending on a beach with the tide going out fashions a number of conclusions yet the one that seems most possible is the one of hope, of Gately living through his immense pain and not conceding to the oral narcotics that once ruined his life.

The journey traversed to grasp this final interpretation is paved with pain and anguish. Characters such as Hal Incandenza and Don Gately must fight demons to find the inner strength necessary to sustain them. They cannot travel their paths alone, yet loneliness and isolation are the very means to which addiction becomes their cure. They

are both self-absorbed but they learn to consider others and the consequences of their drug addictions. Their isolation creates a barrier to the relationships they need in order to overcome life's suffering. Their addiction appears to be a path to inner peace yet it does nothing except create a deeper sense of loneliness. Don and Hal highlight this journey. In becoming sober they learn about loss and in the end both characters are left with a clean slate; Don's is on a beach, while Hal is unable to speak anymore. Although these appear to be catastrophic, they are actually symbolic of the rebirth necessary to start life over, to forge a path that finds a satisfying human relationship.

The impact of technology on *Infinite Jest's* characters may not have as positive an ending, considering the demise of the medical attaché and his wife. However, the dark circumstances surrounding James Incandenza's final film are a warning. The apathy that evolves through a dependency on technology and televisual entertainment is Wallace's attempt to rectify society's ultimate doom. The seduction of televisual entertainment lies in its apparent ability to give the viewer a pain free experience. Yet, ultimately the technology only produces a greater sense of loneliness and isolation. Through the philosophical discussions of Marathe and Steeply, technology is granted a pardon. It does not have to be the evil mechanism it's portrayed as. However, society has to accept its flaws and understand its seduction or it will indeed see destruction.

Infinite Jest achieves a balance of harsh reality and plausible hope. It gives the reader a glimpse into a future that is lonely, cold and unable to sustain human relationships. However, it also lets the reader envision a new beginning. Wallace wanted to provide postmodernism with humans that were flawed but not completely burnt out. He wanted humanity to see the catastrophe that could occur if they allowed addiction to

consume their inner souls. Through his legendary novel, Wallace shows that isolation does not have to be the ultimate end and humanity's redemption lies within its own heart.

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