MIT Spring HSSP

Course: David Foster Wallace (11th-12th grade students)

Instructor: Jessica Sagers

PhD Student in Auditory Neuroscience, Harvard-MIT Program in Speech and Hearing Bioscience and Technology

 jsagers@g.harvard.edu

David Foster Wallace has been lauded as one of the most influential writers in contemporary fiction. Author of such culturally significant novels as *Infinite Jest* and *The Broom of the System,* Wallace received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1997, but faced a lifelong struggle with depression that claimed his life at the age of 46. His meticulous and often heartbreaking works allow readers to experience the age of commercialism and mass entertainment through the eyes of a humorous, hyper-observant genius. This course will provide a brief, illustrative overview of the life and philosophy of the writer himself, which will be structured around class discussion of selected fiction, journalism, and essays. This course is offered as an ambitious selection for high school students and will require 50-150 pages of reading per week. All reading assignments will be provided.

Syllabus

N.B. Please read “The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing” (*Amherst Review,* 1984) before attending our first class.

2/20 **Introduction and Overview**

Getting to know you. Overview of the life and major works of David Foster Wallace. Discussion of “Trillaphon” and sincerity of feeling in fiction.

Assignment: *The Pale King* 31-37 (“Leonard Stecyk”)

*Consider the Lobster* 141-155 (“How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart”)

 *Infinite Jest* 321-342 + endnotes 120-130 (“Eschaton”)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2/27 **Intelligence**

What does it mean to be intelligent (physically, socially, intellectually)? Are there consequences to being smart? Discussion of these questions in the context of our *Pale King* / “Tracy Austin” */* *Infinite Jest* excerpts.

Assignment: *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* 20-22 (“B.I. #11”), 91-100 (“B.I. #2”)

Write one of your own Q sessions interviewing a former or imagined partner.

*\* Parents’ Note: The* Brief Interviews *excerpts are carefully selected to be altogether tame and appropriate for high school readers.*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3/5 **Relationships**

What is wrong with the relationships in the *Brief Interviews* excerpts fail? What can you as a reader see that these narrators cannot? What techniques does Wallace use to make these observations clear?

Assignment: “Lost In The Funhouse,” Barth

 *Girl With Curious Hair*, 232-373 (“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”)

^ This is enough reading for two weeks, and it is the most challenging in the course. **Please start early!**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3/12 No class – MIT SPARK

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3/19 **Irony and metalanguage**

What responsibilities, if any, does fiction have to the reader? Should stories always be straightforward, didactic, and bound by Freytag’s triangle? Discussion of these questions using “Funhouse” and “Westward.”

Assignment: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 256-353(“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3/26 **Hysterical realism and the “tsunami of available fact”**

Wallace saw himself first and foremost as a fiction writer, but dabbled in “maximalist” journalism, sometimes using pages-long footnotes to describe aspects of reality other writers might ignore. Is this rabid attention to detail representative of what we experience in the world, or is it overwhelming? In an age where we are bombarded by information, how do we decide what is worthy of our attention?

Assignment: *Oblivion*, 141-181 (“Good Old Neon”)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4/2 **Heartbreaking works of staggering genius: fiction and everyday humanity**

Discussion of fiction’s role in illuminating the inherent unknowability of others, as depicted in “Neon.” Reading and discussion of “This Is Water” (Kenyon College commencement speech, 2004) as a class.