

A Reverence for Untrendy Human Troubles: David Foster Wallace's "Good People," Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," and American Minimalist Narration

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ABSTRACT

David Foster Wallace is best known for writing what has in recent years been theorized as Maximalist, but he also produced several Minimalistic works that, perhaps surprisingly, reflect his admiration for Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver. Wallace's view of Minimalism was rather complex, and based on his fiction, reading, essays, and statements in interviews, his perception of the tendency changed over time. While he in many ways mastered the techniques central to the mode, he did not ultimately embrace the model of the self-effacing, amoral narrator. Even in his most elliptical stories, the speaker maintains a firm, subjective presence. In "Good People," Wallace's protagonist Lane Dean, Jr., a character closely attuned to the speaker, embodies the tension between Wallace's appreciation for the movement and his sense that it lacked ethical boldness, a characteristic he advocates for in his non-fiction. "Good People" includes a number of overt parallels to Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," a tale that is an exemplar of a style that Wallace seems to both admire and reject.

David Foster Wallace's reputation as a postmodern Maximalist is dubious in that it obscures the breadth of his style. Critics and scholars have praised the prodigiousness of his work, often seeming pleased that it marks a departure from the Minimalist aesthetic. In a review of Wallace's first book, *The Broom of the System*, *New York Times* reviewer Caryn James lauded its inefficiency, asserting that it is an "excessive novel" in which "a few missteps" in terms of tone and development "hardly matter" because it is not a "minimalist tightrope-walk." In his study *The Maximalist Novel*, Stefano Ercolino writes extensively about Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, discussions of which tend to include mention of its encyclopedic scope and length (26-47). Wallace's stylistic forebears include William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon, authors who produced densely allusive novels that both challenge and entertain, but Wallace also expressed admiration for Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver. Additionally, Wallace wrote a handful of stories best described as Minimalistic; citing "Incarnations of Burned Children," Joyce Carol Oates asserted that Wallace was at times "a brilliant minimalist" (Birkerts et al). His fiction, reading, and criticism reveal more than a mild interest in the movement. "Good People," a short story that alludes to Hemingway's "Hills Like What Elephants," demonstrates Wallace's technical mastery of the mode, but it also suggests a subtle contentiousness with the use of the disengaged, reportorial voice common in American Minimalism. Concurrently embracing and rejecting the tendencies central to the movement, Wallace crafts an efficient, concise narrative

in which his narrator's close affinity with the protagonist enlivens a robust examination of the value of empathy.

Although it has been discussed as a monolithic literary fad, Minimalism is a diverse movement, and it is best defined according to style rather than content. Authors working within the tradition follow three central techniques: they write concise, economical sentences; they tend to use allusions to efficiently provide contextual depth; and they adhere to Hemingway's iceberg theory, meaning that important elements are omitted yet implied. Hemingway articulated the model for the first time in *Death in the Afternoon*, maintaining that

if a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (192)

If executed effectively, the technique Hemingway describes generates a powerful sense of suggestiveness, and it by no means limits authors to a narrow range of themes or subjects. Contrary to evaluations set forth by critics such as Mark Helprin and Bill Buford, American Minimalist fiction is not exclusively domestic or about inarticulate, benumbed alcoholics. Literary Impressionists such as Hamlin Garland provided the foundation for the American version of the mode in the late nineteenth century, inspiring authors such as Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and Hemingway to create fragmentary, prose-poetic pieces well into the twentieth century. The tradition has continued through writers such as Carver, Susan Minot, Cormac McCarthy, and Robert Olen Butler. Following the aesthetics of haiku, a form important to Lowell and the influential Ezra Pound, Minimalist speakers tend to be direct, reportorial, and self-effacing. This last tendency, the use of an unobtrusive narrator, is perhaps the greatest point of contention for Wallace. Following in the Impressionist tradition, Minimalists sought to render and describe, eschewing intellectual synthesis and overt engagement with moral and social issues.

However, the tendency to avoid the use of an intrusive narratorial voice did not lead Wallace to universally ignore Minimalist writers. He read Hemingway's and Carver's work. Based on notations Wallace made in his personal copies of *In Our Time* and *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, as well as anthologies that he ostensibly used in his teaching, he was knowledgeable about the common, albeit incomplete, definitions of the style. His notes, however, at times conflict with positions he articulates in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his 1988 essay "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," he writes about "Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver" (40), decrying a perceived lack of diversity that pervaded American fiction produced by his contemporaries. Bret Easton Ellis, however, is the only writer he mentions by name as an example of these negative trends (47). In a 1993 interview, Wallace elaborated upon an idea he briefly mentions in "Fictional Futures" by maintaining that the mode is essentially an overreaction to metafiction. He asserted that "Minimalism's even worse, emptier, because it's a fraud: it eschews not only self-reference but any narrative

personality at all, tries to pretend there is no narrative consciousness in its text. This is so fucking American, man: either make something your God and cosmos and then worship it, or else kill it” (“An Expanded Interview” 45). When asked to elaborate on his point in light of Carver’s stories, Wallace argued that there are essentially high and low Minimalisms: “I was talking about minimalists, not Carver. Carver was an artist, not a minimalist. Even though he’s supposedly the inventor of modern U.S. minimalism. ‘Schools’ of fiction are for crank-turners. The founder of a movement is never part of the movement.” Wallace goes on to say, however, that Carver perhaps “resurrected” Hemingway’s “techniques,” matching form, content, and vision to create something innovative. Finally, he said that “what’s especially dangerous about Carver’s techniques is that they seem so easy to imitate. It doesn’t seem like each word and line and draft has been bled over. That’s part of his genius. It looks like you can write a minimalist piece without much bleeding. And you can. But not a good one” (46). Wallace’s comments suggest that he acknowledged the centrality of craft and recognized that efficiency does not automatically generate suggestiveness. On the other hand, he was rather dismissive of a number of unnamed “crank-turners.”

Wallace commented more specifically on his influences in a 1996 interview and included Hemingway among the figurative “stars” that he would “steer by.” He said that he particularly liked “the ital stuff in *In Our Time*” (Miller 62), referring to the numbered, prose-poetic interchapters. Based upon the notations and markings found in his personal copy of the collection, Wallace read narratives such as “Indian Camp” and “Big Two-Hearted River” with particular enthusiasm. He underlined the last two lines of “Big Two-Hearted” and wrote that “tragedy lies ahead,” suggesting that he was aware of what would occur in future works about Nick Adams (Annotations in Hemingway, 156).¹ Wallace’s interest in Hemingway extended well beyond *In Our Time*; he also owned copies of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and “Hills Like White Elephants” (Kennedy and Gioia; Current-Garcia and Hitchcock). His underlining implies that he was aware of various definitions of the mode. In the seventh edition of an anthology titled *An Introduction to Fiction*, published in 1998, Wallace underlined the following: “minimalists—Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Mary Robison—have written with flat, laid-back, unemotional tone, in an appropriately bare, unadorned style.” In the margin, he wrote, “& Hem” (Annotations in Kennedy, *Literature: An Introduction* 139). His marginalia suggest that his view of the movement had changed during the years following his statements about “crank-turners,” and that the “founders” are, in fact, part of the movement. Importantly, his note also implies that he did not separate the movement into paradigmatic categories, such as modern and postmodern, but acknowledged a broad technical kinship.

Despite received notions about his often-expansive style, Wallace’s study of Minimalism carried into his fiction. He uses techniques commonly associated with the style in his own short stories as early as his 1989 collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*. The opening paragraph of “Little Expressionless Animals” is a

¹ All archival material is quoted with the permission of both the David Foster Wallace Literary Trust and the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas—Austin.

direct, third-person narration about two children being left on the side of a road by a man and a woman. Compact and imagistic, it is a prose-poetic interchapter. The sentences are terse, and Wallace uses repetition in a manner reminiscent of Hemingway: “She gets in the car and the car leaves. There is a cow in the field near the fence. The children touch the post. The wind blows. Lots of cars go by. They stay that way all day” (3). Wallace associated this technique with Hemingway, who learned it from Gertrude Stein; when reading Carver’s “Cathedral,” Wallace underlined the repetition of the word “tape” and wrote “Hemingway” in the margin (Annotations in Kennedy, *Literature: An Introduction* 261). He also composed complete pieces that conform to the tenets of the mode. “Everything is Green,” a vignette that in *Girl with Curious Hair* immediately precedes the sprawling novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” is a typically Minimalistic work focused upon the aftermath of an argument between two people. In other words, the event that drives the action takes place “off stage.” However, Wallace may have written this story as a parody; it is set in a trailer park, and the action is absurdly mundane. Mitch has attempted to break up with Mayfly, and he weakly explains that he can no longer tolerate the age gap between them. His fear seems to be that she will not stay with him due to his age, and her insistence that he focus on how “everything outside is green” is rather evocative (230). The tale is replete with meaningful images: the “wet window” in the trailer speaks to the stark difference in temperature inside and outside on the morning after a “hard rain” (230), a representation of the figurative chasm that has grown between the couple, and the color green speaks to both Mayfly’s youth and Mitch’s jealousy. Due to its concision, complexity, and effective use of the iceberg theory, “Everything is Green” is a firmly Minimalist work.

Published more than a decade after “Everything is Green,” “Incarnations of Burned Children” echoes the language, rhythms, and themes found in Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, particularly “Indian Camp.” An intense, difficult story, it begins with Daddy hearing screams issuing from inside his house, and he runs in to find that his young son has overturned a pot of boiling water onto his head and body. Evocative of Hemingway’s pacing and diction, the narrator says that the father moves “quickly and well and his man’s mind empty of everything but purpose, not yet aware of how smoothly he moved or that he’d ceased to hear the high screams because to hear them would freeze him and make impossible what had to be done to help his own child” (114-15). Daddy’s ability to ignore his son’s screams is similar to the professional detachment Dr. Adams adopts when he is called to perform an emergency cesarean section in “Indian Camp” (16). Daddy’s command, and the “anger” he feels “at the Mommy” for allowing this to happen to their son (115), echoes Hemingway’s notion of “grace under pressure” or the idea that acting well under duress is courageous. He is now doing things the right way, helping his child, and he derives a sense of righteousness from his actions.

In the end, however, Daddy’s competence, like that of Dr. Adams, collapses. In both stories, pride gives way to tragedy. Soon after Dr. Adams feels “exalted and talkative” after completing an operation he deems “one for the medical journal,” he allows his young son to see that the new father has cut his own throat “from ear to ear” (18), exposing young Nick to an image that is potentially psychologi-

cally damaging. In his own copy of “Indian Camp,” Wallace noted that at the end Nick is “already thinking of his death as a child” (Annotations, 19), emphasizing that even though he misunderstands his own mortality, there is something to be lamented in the fact that he is thinking about his demise at all. “Incarnations” is thematically similar. The damage that Mommy and Daddy have done to their own child, it is implied, has longstanding physical and psychological consequences. When they remove the toddler’s diaper, they see “where the real water’d fallen and pooled and been burning their baby boy all this time while he screamed for them to help him and they’d hadn’t, hadn’t thought and when they got it off” they “saw the state of what was there” (116). The narrator says that when the son accepts that his parents cannot make his excruciating pain stop, he “had learned to leave himself and watch the whole rest unfold from a point overhead, and whatever was lost never thenceforth mattered.” Furthermore, as he moves into adulthood his “self’s soul” is only like “so much vapor aloft” (116), suggesting that he has succumbed to an irreparable state of detachment from emotion and meaning. Mentally and physically scarred by an unhealed wound to his genitals, he is not unlike another of Hemingway’s protagonists: Jake Barnes.

In addition to these thematic and stylistic affinities, Wallace’s teller adopts a cold, detached tone reminiscent of the speaker in Hemingway’s “On the Quai at Smyrna” as well as several of the interchapters in *In Our Time*.² Relayed in plain, straightforward language, the narrator explains the sequence of events in past tense, showing little attunement with any of the characters. However, he demonstrates at the end that he is essentially advocating, or perhaps explaining, the adult state of the child. Wallace omits much about the child’s life after the accident, although, according to D.T. Max, Wallace “suggests” in a passage in one of his notebooks “that [Shane] Drinion,” one of the IRS agents who appears in *The Pale King*, “might be the child in the micro-story ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’” (323n15). If true, this recontextualizes the last lines of the tale given Drinion’s ability to levitate; his power results from his need for the alleviation of pain in his extremities. While the contents are damning to Mommy and Daddy, the speaker at one point states that “if you’ve never wept and want to, have a child” (116), a brutal statement in this context that implies that becoming a parent is an emotionally taxing job oftentimes enervated by chance and misfortune. Mommy and Daddy should have been more attentive to their child, and Dr. Adams had the option to leave Nick outside the shanty rather than allowing him to participate in the operation, but in neither narrative is a parent depicted as willfully cruel.

Given Wallace’s previous exercises in writing Minimalistic fiction allusive to Hemingway’s, “Good People” forms part of a pattern of development rather than signifying an entirely new direction. Wallace’s narrative, first published in February of 2007 in *The New Yorker* and then as chapter six of *The Pale King*, and Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” share obvious connections; in fact, Richard Abcarian, Samuel Cohen, and Marvin Klotz anthologized the stories side-by-side in *Literature: The Human Experience*, asking readers to consider if Wallace’s piece shares any stylistic similarities and whether it is a “commentary”

² III, IV, and V are particularly strong examples.

on Hemingway's tale (923-32). The plots focus upon couples debating whether to have an abortion, and in both works the word for the procedure remains what Gerry Brenner terms a "lexical riddle," which "pivot[s] upon a lexical crux" that must be deciphered (161). For Jig and her companion, known only as the American, this refusal perhaps stems from a desire not to name what they are considering, but it could also be a function of the fact that they are in a public place. Wallace's young couple is alone except for a group of people across the lake and an older, somewhat mysterious man who looms in the background, perhaps a Deistic godhead, present yet uninvolved. On the other hand, his presence seems to remind the evangelical Christian protagonists, Lane A. Dean, Jr. and Sheri Fisher, of their belief in a metaphysical realm, a place in which their choices will have longstanding consequences.

Despite the affinities between the tales, "Good People" is not a response to "Hills Like White Elephants" but a multilayered critique of American Minimalist narratorial style. Hemingway's story is almost entirely dialogue; Wallace's contains no speech at all, even though it is centered on an intense, important conversation already well underway. The narrator is preternaturally empathic, yet also conveys a distinct point of view while describing Lane's attempt to better understand Sheri's perspective. The speaker in Wallace's piece adopts nothing like the unobtrusive, objective position of Hemingway's more traditionally Minimalistic work. Ultimately, the teller in "Good People" supplies some of the material Hemingway omitted, the moral ruminations Wallace suggests should have been more directly engaged by the narrative voice in "Hills Like White Elephants."

Aside from the considerable difference in narratorial approach, "Good People" is in important respects much like a Minimalist narrative. Contrary to the idea that Maximalists are somehow less concerned with the value of a single word, early manuscripts suggest that Wallace edited the piece with care and diligence, careful to sustain a measured tone. He tried a variety of titles. In a spiral notebook labeled "Roster of Parts," Wallace referred to the piece as "Lane & Sheri—Christian Abortion" ("Handwritten"). On a draft found on a disk last modified in January of 2007, he referred to the story as "Christian Love Scene" ("2005-2006"). The ultimate removal of any reference to "Christian" in the title suggests that Wallace sought to focus on matters of "goodness," or on a "*moment of grace*" (69), not unlike those depicted in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," tales that Wallace owned and marked extensively.

The publication history of the title, however, is somewhat convoluted. The print version of "Good People" carries no subtitle, but the copy made available through *The New Yorker's* website carries the iceberg-diminishing phrase "Two young Christians and an unwanted pregnancy," an addition that mitigates stylistic subtleties. When a representative of the magazine was asked if this was a change requested by Wallace, Erin Overbey, Chief Archivist for *The New Yorker*, responded in an email that the magazine's fiction editor "confirmed that Wallace did not specifically request that a subtitle be added to his story." Furthermore, Overbey wrote that such additions to electronic re-prints are "something we are

currently in the process of correcting” (“Question”).³ Wallace, it appears, intended for the title of his tale to be suggestive and concise, carrying no direct reference to religion or pregnancy.

Wallace’s editing tendencies demonstrate that the names of his characters were also carefully crafted. For example, he showed a Hemingway-like devotion to finding the right appellation for his protagonist. On one early version, he wrote “Lane Brown Jr.,” “Lane Tunney Jr.,” and scrapped the overly suggestive “Lane Sweetwood Jr.” (“Typescript” 1). “Lane Tunney” was perhaps too close to the name of former heavyweight-champion boxer Gene Tunney; Lane is not characterized as particularly tough or combative. The dismissal of “Sweetwood” suggests that Wallace successfully resisted the urge to adopt the cheeky tone of some of his earliest work; it carries a similar sexual connotation to the surname of Rick Vigorous, one of the protagonists in *The Broom of the System* and the co-owner of the publishing company Frequent and Vigorous, and it would have been a rather tone-deaf choice given the general sincerity of “Good People.” Furthermore, in his 1998 essay “Big Red Son” Wallace writes about the phallic usage of the term “wood” within the pornography industry. His choices seem motivated by a need for tonal control. This is a tale that is implicitly about hypocrisy, but the narrator does not adopt the subtly judgmental language found in “Incarnations of Burned Children.”

In addition to his editing tendencies, Wallace employs stylistic techniques commonly found in Minimalistic stories. The opening lines of “Good People” feature prose-poetic rhythms and repetition: “They were up on a picnic table at that park by the lake, by the edge of the lake, with part of a downed tree in the shallows half hidden by the bank” (67). The repeated use of the word “lake” establishes that it is an object viewed in two different ways by two different people, Lane and Sheri, and they are of different minds on a subject that is life-altering. The imagery throughout the opening paragraph is portentous. Emphasizing the youth and virility of the protagonists, the speaker says that it is “springtime, and the park’s grass was very green and the air suffused with honeysuckle and lilacs both, which was almost too much” (67). The addition of the phrase “almost too much” implies that the couple’s surroundings are fertile, thus adumbrating the central conflict. The downed tree, part of it above water and part submerged, is effectively a stand-in for an iceberg, perhaps an immediate acknowledgement from the narrator that this story is going to adhere to Hemingway’s theory.

The narrator omits much about Sheri, but it is implied that she, like Lane, tries to live with discipline and integrity, and she possesses a potential for strength and fortitude, qualities that Hemingway’s speaker intimates may also be central to Jig’s character. Lane’s guilt stems from his sense that he has corrupted someone who is in many ways his superior. She is smarter than Lane, more responsible, and she has lost a beloved cousin, experiencing death in a way that her companion has not. He is intimidated by her because “she was serious in her faith and values in a way that Lane had liked,” but now these same qualities cause him to feel “afraid”

³ Overbey wrote this in June 2016, and as of February 2017, the digital version of “Good People” still carries a subtitle.

(67). Like many of Wallace's characters, the protagonists are attempting to find a balance between their beliefs, the urges that reside below the surface, and the consequences of past decisions. Within the context of their faith, Sheri and Lane have done something wrong by fornicating; the tension between them is amplified because now they contemplate an action that their church deems murder. In the listless atmosphere of the implied conversation, the teller reveals that for Lane "the whole last black week had been this way and it was wrong. He knew it was wrong, knew something was required of him that was not this terrible frozen care and caution, but he pretended to himself he did not know what it was that was required" (67). He is attempting to come to terms with an internal sense of duty, a feeling of responsibility derived from his ethical commitments.

Wallace's teller generates an elaborate iceberg by continuing to develop the various tensions that inform Sheri's and Lane's convictions. Minimalist authors sometimes incorporate fragmentary quotations as a means to lead the audience to a broader idea or narrative; Hemingway uses this technique to great effect in *The Sun Also Rises* when he includes four words from Ida Cox's song "Cherry Picking Blues." Wallace's narrator inserts a rather dense reference, a partial mention of 1 Timothy 6:4 that is the first of multiple important allusions to Pauline epistles. The verse Lane remembers is part of a series that speaks to the hypocrisy of those who profess to be teachers yet do not live according to the laws that they profess. While consistency between word and action is a central theme in the missive, much of it is about submission to authority, and sections speak directly to the role of women within the church. For example, Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (Fitzgerald and Meeks 126-27). Lane's thoughts move counter to these insistences, however, in that he is willing to listen and does not assume authority. Additionally, he does not view Sheri as the initial corrupter, and their mutual consideration of abortion does not coincide with the notion that she will earn some form of salvation by giving birth. Wallace creates an intricate complex of ideas here, balancing Lane's beliefs about Sheri's autonomy and her role within a distinctly patriarchal hierarchy. The specific verse Lane remembers is less important than the broader context in which it appears, and Wallace thus introduces questions about whether Lane should have any input in the first place. The male protagonist knows the entire letter, and the text suggests that Lane is trying to reconcile his beliefs with the complicated problem he and Sheri confront.

The discord Lane Dean, Jr. feels is in part driven by a sense of transition and ephemerality, a state that is also central to the couple in "Hills Like White Elephants." He has lost clarity about how he should conduct himself. The narrator says that Lane "felt like he knew now why it was a true sin and not just a leftover rule from past society. He felt like he had been brought low by it and humbled and now did believe that the rules were there for a reason. That the rules were concerned with him personally, as an individual" (68). His internal admissions reveal

that he had become a relativist, and that the strictures of his religion had grown archaic and unresponsive to his needs. Sheri's pregnancy, however, has again led him to see morality in more concrete, binary terms. The cycle Lane experiences is interesting in light of material that Wallace wrote but does not overtly integrate. He omits an important detail about Lane; in an early typewritten draft, he wrote: "[Lane's dad military; Lane in Peoria as military brat]" ("Typescript" 6). "Military brat" is a term applied to the children of parents who are actively serving in the armed forces. Journalist Michael Hall, the son of an army doctor, wrote in a brief memoir that he had difficulty identifying a place of origin because of frequent moves, and he recalls that "the Army is all about order, conformity, and discipline, and much of daily life was too" (174-75). Deployments and moves represent "a significant hardship for military families" (Lowe et al. 17), so perhaps Lane's lack of certitude emanates from an unease about the prospect of further changes such as fatherhood and marriage. His openness to recommitting himself to the values that gave his life direction in the past leads to a mysterious moment of insight.

In the final fifth of the narrative, Lane has what "he would later call in his own mind a vision" (69), and this sequence is stylistically important. Wallace makes two allusions that demonstrate the depth of his mastery of Minimalist techniques. Eschewing the stubborn certainty of the American, Lane experiences a sequence of insights that the narrator refers to as a "vision or *moment of grace*" (69). Wallace's use and italicization of this phrase suggests that he is referencing Flannery O'Connor's definition. During a talk delivered at Hollins College in 1963, she described the "moment of grace" as the thing "that makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story." She then explained that

I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the analogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture that somehow made contact with mystery. (111)

Lane's vision, the way that he later remembers and perceives it, meets all of O'Connor's criteria in that the young man sees into the mind of another person and is then able to translate that perception into a knowledge of what she will do in the future. In creating a parallel between Lane and the grandmother in O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Wallace suggests that Lane has to abandon his illusions, or his "willful misconception of reality" (Dowell 236), and see his situation anew. He envisions that Sheri will lie to him and tell him that it is acceptable for him to continue his life and studies while she carries and raises their child, actions that coincide with the "values" that leave her no other options, but she will do this with the hope that he will not believe her because he is "good" (69). In other words, he imagines that she will give voice to a lie to prove its wrongness. Equally important is O'Connor's statement "that violence is strangely

capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (112). "Good People" does not feature the type of violence found in some of O'Connor's narratives, but for Lane it is the prospect of doing violence to Sheri, his child, and his own ethics that returns him to an accurate view of his reality. Through this allusion to O'Connor, Wallace adds complexity to the moment and creates a bridge to his next allusion.

The narrator adds a Bible verse, Galatians 4:16, during Lane's moment of realization, but quotes it only partially: "*Have I then become your enemy?*" (69). In its correct form, Paul asks the faltering church in the region of Galatia, "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" The protagonist's misquotation creates an odd logical inversion. This final sequence of thoughts, the beliefs that Lane imposes upon his envisioned version of Sheri, features the same verbal misdirection employed by Jig and her companion. In both dialogues, the couples risk alienation, or becoming enemies, because they are unwilling to tell the truth, so they say what they do not mean. In this, they are unlike Paul. Lane, however, endeavors to accept the grace he imagines that Sheri will extend to him, leading him to recognize that his resistance is predicated on his *potentially* false belief that he does not love her. Wallace's reference to the book of Galatians, however, is not limited to questions of truth and falsity.

This reference to Galatians also introduces themes that go beyond Lane's poor memory of 4:16, generating complicated implications for "Good People." Paul wrote the letter to the churches in Galatia because he was angry, and the strength of his rebuke is rather severe. His letter states that interlopers have corrupted the congregations that he founded, undermining his authority and calling into question his knowledge of the law. The initial debate is over whether Gentile men must be circumcised, thus submitting to the Mosaic precepts that Paul ultimately argues that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection fulfilled. In a moment of remarkable frustration, Paul writes in 5:12, "as for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Fitzgerald and Meeks 19).⁴ Galatians is a relatively short letter, and Wallace had an encyclopedic knowledge of a variety of texts and subjects, so it is interesting that he would include a verse from an epistle that directly deals with circumcision and emasculation in a story about a young man working through problems rooted in sexual choices.

The content of Galatians thus illuminates what largely resides below the surface of "Good People": Lane Dean, Jr. feels an intense sense of guilt, perhaps to the point that he feels a particular angst towards his own genitals, and this has reminded him of Paul's angrily delivered advice to the "agitators." In the opening paragraphs of "Big Red Son," Wallace offers statistics about the number of men who castrate themselves due to "sexual urges that had become a source of intolerable conflict and anxiety" (3). In his epistle to the Romans, Paul sets forth a psychological state that aligns well with Lane's: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Fitzgerald and Meeks 73). He then describes that when he does things that are self-sacrificial, that run

⁴ My understanding of Galatians has been shaped in part by Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still's *Thinking Through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology* (87-106).

against his internal inclinations, he feels that he is acting according to his convictions. Lane's tensions are multifaceted, and he is no doubt in a state of emotional and spiritual discord, but he ultimately elects to set aside his own ambitions and live according to what he claims to believe.

Wallace rarely employs narrators who prove to be inadequate, conspiratorial, or reticent, and this correlates with Wallace's contention that rather than explore ambiguous, gray areas of the human experience, writers should create art that is "serious, real, conscientious, aware" and "ambitious" ("Fictional Futures" 68). His speaker deftly conveys Lane's intensity, his willingness to consider his own decisions and attitudes through the lens of his faith, scripture, and Sheri's own psychological and emotional complexities, and this contrasts with Hemingway's unobtrusive portrayal of the glib American. On the morning of the day of their appointment, Lane tells Sheri "that he did not know what to do. That he knew if he was the salesman of it and forced it upon her that was awful and wrong" (68). In an earlier draft, Wallace had written "evil and wrong" but then changed the word to a less Manichean term ("Typescript" 3). The speaker continues on to say that Lane "was trying to understand—they'd prayed on it and talked it through from every different angle" (68). Wallace then constructs a series of lines that capture the tone, repetition, and pacing found throughout Hemingway's fiction:

Lane said how sorry she knew he was, and that if he was wrong in believing they'd truly decided together when they decided to make the appointment she should please tell him, because he thought he knew how she must have felt as it got closer and closer and how she must be scared, but that what he couldn't tell was if it was more than that. He was totally still except for moving his mouth, it felt like. She did not reply. (68)

Wallace's narrator fills in the epistemic gaps for Lane, providing synthesis where the protagonist is unable to do so for himself. The theme of this story is one that Wallace communicates in his "Kenyon Commencement Speech," his essay "Consider the Lobster," his 2003 interview with Dave Eggers, and elsewhere in his oeuvre: Human beings should fight self-absorption and strive to be thoughtful and empathetic. With the exception of Sandra Cisneros and perhaps Cormac McCarthy, few Minimalists attempt to communicate a message so overtly.

Ultimately, "Hills Like White Elephants" and "Good People" illustrate that the task of discovering the submerged elements of a work is rather complex. Both Hemingway's and Wallace's tales explore a tangled relationship between love and morality, yet both writers leave their respective maternal outcomes submerged and unresolved. Read within the context of external sources, however, Wallace decidedly addresses the question. In two additional works about Sheri and Lane Dean, Jr. "A New Examiner" and "Wiggle Room," both of which serve as chapters of *The Pale King*, the outcome of their decision is revealed: they marry and have the baby. However, this result is by no means predictable based solely upon what Wallace implies within the original narrative. Lane's inclination is to commit to Sheri and keep the child, but his questions about the situation are focused upon whether he understands intimacy. The American is decidedly less concerned about love, or at least that is what his words suggest. However, Jig's internal contemplations are another matter. Her consideration of laces of the bead curtain,

which Matthew Nickel argues are representative of the rosary (82), suggests that she is in part considering her spiritual well-being. Hemingway does not clearly indicate whether Jig carries the child to full term, but he revealed his own leanings. In 1927, he wrote in a letter to a Mrs. Williams that “I am afraid the girl in the White Elephant story was going to have a baby—But I do not want you to lose any money over it. So perhaps she wasn’t. Though I rather think she was and hope, as literary godfather, that it turned out a fine healthy child” (“Letter to Mrs. Williams” 325-26). Hemingway stated that an author must *know* what is left out, so it is important that he chose the word “hope” when writing his missive. Both stories, read according to New Critical standards, maintain a sense of mystery. In “Good People,” the theme remains focused on the essentiality of empathy.

Even though Hemingway is among the high Minimalists, Wallace’s narrative suggests that Hemingway’s objective, epistemically limited narrator is implicitly flawed. Wallace argued that writers should not shy away from tackling pertinent ethical issues and expressing possible solutions. D. T. Max referred to the Wallace of 2005 as “an intense moralist ... whose long experience in recovery had made him into an apostle of careful living and hard work” (284). Perhaps he is then best included among the twenty-first century Naturalists, exemplified by Don DeLillo, a writer Wallace knew and admired. The implication of Wallace’s story is that Minimalist techniques *enable* social, moral, and political avoidance, placing the onus solely upon the reader to assemble meaning. In comparison to Lane, whose story is relayed through a teller willing to synthesize and explore the young man’s scrupulous thought process, Hemingway’s American is rather directly portrayed as ethically and intellectually lazy, focused only upon vague notions of *happiness* to the point that he does not remain steadfast in his insistence that Jig go through with the abortion. Placed within the moral environment Wallace describes in the “Kenyon Commencement Speech” (362-63), the American is presented as a man who would rather worship feelings than wrestle with questions of purpose and morality.⁵ Furthermore, to be “good” means to try to imaginatively enter into the thoughts of another (361-62), to achieve empathy, and it is in this way Lane succeeds whereas Hemingway’s American proves limited.

Within the contrast between Lane and the American, Wallace offers his own response to a question he posed about literature in his 1990 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” The premise of his article is that postmodern, contemporary fiction was largely being shaped by the influence of television, and this technological trend was leading to hyper-allusive, self-consciously ironic literature that exudes cynicism and detachment. Because the medium had functionally shattered the fourth wall, leaving viewers to process television shows about television shows such as *Entertainment Tonight*, fiction more often became meta-fictional due to the fact that writers are a part of an American society that on

⁵ Wallace speaks ironically when he says, “please don’t think that I’m giving you moral advice, or that I’m saying you’re ‘supposed to’ think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it, because it’s hard, it takes will and mental effort, and if you’re like me, some days you won’t be able to do it, or else you just flat-out won’t want to” (361). He is giving moral advice in the speech, but he attempts to mitigate his role as authority; the narrators in his fiction rarely have similar qualms.

average, according to Wallace, consumes six hours of programming each day. He ultimately asks what tactic an author could possibly adopt to combat ethically toothless writing that is realistic in that it lamentably captures a culture entrenched in banality and consumerism. The perpetrators include “Raymond Carver wannabes,” and he associates them with “the numb blank bored demeanor” he detects in unsuccessful Minimalist narratives (64). The implication is that this has led to a moral passivity generated by the nexus of a flat style and inconsequential content. He concludes that “the next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might emerge as some bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (81). He goes on to argue that such “anti-rebel” writers will “risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness” (81). In other words, this new avant-garde will be willing to risk what some of Hemingway’s narratives avoid.

Hemingway’s American is rendered as a man who embodies the shallow detachment Wallace suggests is caused by overexposure to television, despite the fact that the man is clearly not the product of television culture. He demonstrates the ethos of the 1920s, a generation that, according to the prominent American fiction of the era, felt a deep sense of isolation and loss in part due to the technological horrors of World War I. In other words, the root cause of this shared angst is the same. While the catalyst is different, the spiritual zeitgeist of the literature of the 1920s and the 1980s seems, based on Wallace’s description of the latter, quite similar. Even though Wallace at times praised Hemingway, “Good People” implies that there is still an element of the catatonic in “Hills Like White Elephants,” or at least within the “narrative personality.” The American’s unwillingness to accept the more personally disruptive route of supporting Jig stems from a persistent passivity that Lane does not mirror.

Wallace is not endorsing evangelicalism or suggesting that religion is a necessary component of morality; he is, in his role as an author of fiction, creating a model of empathy he argues for here and in his other work. Read alongside “Hills Like White Elephants,” “Good People” both emphasizes and addresses a corrosive solipsism about which Hemingway’s narrator remains relatively neutral. The stark narrative voice portrays the American as a man who lacks the will to expend any time or effort attempting to understand Jig. He has no vision. Conversely, even if Wallace’s characters do not ultimately fully understand one another, it is not for lack of trying. Lane is building something with Sheri, a common pathway and understanding that Jig and the American cannot achieve. “Hills Like White Elephants” derives energy from what is left unsaid, leaving the reader to assemble meaning, whereas “Good People” supplies a clearer portrait of the internal machinations of love and religious devotion. Given that Wallace was of two minds about Minimalism, his story flows from a sense of resistance as well as admiration, working against the ambivalence of a restrained, clarifying narrator. He seems to have ultimately concluded that the core tenets of the style—allusiveness, economy, and implication—could be used to convey richer content. Absent is the playfulness, the lack of seriousness, present in his early Maximalist prose.

“Good People” is not an ironic portrayal of hypocrisy but of two people attempting to determine what is right. The moral objective that drives the piece seems to be what is ultimately lacking in Hemingway’s narrative, or at least that is what Wallace implies in writing a tale that is blatantly allusive yet unique.

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