

“It’s what we have in common, this alone-ness”: Solitude, Communalty and the Self in the Writing of David Foster Wallace

Clare Hayes-Brady (University College Dublin)

Easily the most-canvassed of all the concerns of his career is David Foster Wallace’s consistent interest in the notion of solipsism, which he regarded as the worst of all possible worlds. Solipsism, the illusion of being the only mind in the universe, the unconscious generative impulse of everything you encounter or imagine, is depicted time and again as the loneliest of conditions. The antithesis of meaningful communication for Wallace is not miscommunication or even silence, but the short circuit of solipsistic communication, the condition of being permanently and irrevocably alone in “tiny skull-sized kingdoms.” This paper looks at identity formation in a world dominated by narcissism, solipsism and alienation, exploring how themes of connection and alienation operate in Wallace’s fiction.

Beginning with a discussion of Wallace’s recurrent imagining of solipsism and narcissistic self-regard, this paper goes on to explore the place of community and sharing in his work. In particular, I examine the narrative importance of witnessing in Wallace’s writing, beginning with the AA structure that is central to *Infinite Jest*. In outlining the ways in which characters choose to be alone, and the destructive force of that solitude, this paper offers an interrogation of Wallace’s abiding and ambivalent desire for connection between selves.