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**Excusable Versus Explainable Misogyny in David Foster Wallace's  
*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men***

Senior Paper

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirk Boyle', with a stylized, cursive script.

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In light of accusations of misogyny, David Foster Wallace has become a controversial force in the literary world. His short story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), explores themes of gender politics and existential crises, narrating the male experience in terms of sexual and romantic relationships. Wallace's "hideous" men express frustration in their encounters with women, leading to objectification and invalidation. His characters exist in similar romantic relationships to the ones he had in his lifetime, which were emotionally volatile at best and abusive at worst. In her book chapter, "On Not Reading DFW," literary scholar Amy Hungerford poses the lurking question: can we separate art from the artist? She questions Wallace's motives, arguing that readers and teachers alike must ask themselves "whether the stories [within *Brief Interviews*] revel in or revile the hideousness of their men" (Hungerford 149). She concludes that we cannot separate Wallace's work, particularly *Brief Interviews*, from his personal life. His own struggle with women too closely mirrors that of his characters' experiences and subsequent actions, which she believes to be taken at surface level. Clare Hayes-Brady, a leading female Wallace scholar, responds to Hungerford's declaration, emphasizing the necessity of engagement with problematic authors and our duty to examine them closely for what they *do* bring to the table. On the value in Wallace's writing, she states that "he is writing from and about a flawed position" that allows us to better understand "the culture that we live in and the culture that we're just emerging from 10 years on" (Hayes-Brady). Hungerford and Hayes-Brady both engage in feminist discourse to discuss the controversy over Wallace's validity as an author, but they approach the issue from largely different perspectives. The short story collection as a whole acts as a telescope into Wallace's mind, but how it is received is up to the reader.

*Brief Interviews* begins with “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life,” a short story, short enough to include in its entirety here:

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who’d introduced them didn’t much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one. (Wallace 0)

Right off the bat, Wallace asserts the main theme of the collection. The stories within the book center around relationships and self-image. Beginning with this brief story introduces the hyper-awareness and sense of self experienced by Wallace’s characters, particularly the titular “hideous men.” These themes are touched on throughout the book in a series of fictional interviews as well as non-interview-format short stories. He places the onus on the human experience, specifically the *male* human experience, to tie together themes of language, gender, and identity-seeking. The interviews within the book, which will be the focus of this essay, are conducted by a silent, unnamed female presence, who I will refer to as “Q.” Q is the interviewer who keeps the interviews moving but simultaneously does not feature in them. Wallace shifts focus to the hideous men and their responses to Q, but the questions asked of them are omitted and the reader is left to fill in the gaps. These interviews deal with the male perception of women in an almost exclusively sexual way. The men express explicitly misogynist opinions within their stories and sometimes even directly to Q.

After reading D. T. Max’s biography of Wallace or glancing at any of the numerous accounts of domestic misconduct against him, it is easy to see that Wallace himself is not

without fault. It is undeniable that his behavior towards women was despicable. However, I strongly believe that *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* provides a unique perspective on the causes of misogynist behavior and exposes a vulnerable part of the male human experience. It is important to have empathy for Wallace's hideous men, despite their toxic behaviors. In other words, their behaviors are not excusable, but they are *explainable*. In my analysis of the text, I will explore misogyny as a product of male narcissism and loneliness, arguing that the male solipsistic bind is inextricably linked to misogynistic behavior. Wallace brings to light the struggle of the post-postmodern man in search of sentimentality; the hideous men are bereft of emotional awareness, motivation, self-confidence, and the language needed to build meaningful relationships with the women in their lives. Wallace embodies the New Sincerity movement, invoking a dichotomy between postmodern traditions of irony and a newfound desire for sincerity; his hideous men become postmodern subjects that Wallace analyzes through a post-postmodern lens. They represent the world moving from postmodernist ideals to the importance of candor and authenticity. They are ultimately faced with a world that is changing rapidly around them and as a result of their solipsistic tendencies find themselves unable to catch up.

To tackle the complex relationship between literary tradition and the solipsistic viewpoints of Wallace's hideous men, it is important to first lay out a few definitions that will be widely referenced throughout this project. Postmodernity is best defined by Fredric Jameson, who says "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature'" (Jameson ix). He explains the need for postmodernism in terms of the end of modernism, where we have already realized the significance of the world around us and we must now react to it. A famous explanation of the

need for postmodernism within literature lies within John Barth's 1967 essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," where he states that everything has already been done, or 'exhausted.' All there is left to do is exist within the world we have created and fall into our own human nature (Barth). Alan Wilde remarks that postmodern literature was a means of coping with the reality of life and the rejection of "the image of a perfectly ordered world...even as it carries on and redefines the problem of the artist's relation to the reality that surrounds him." Irony became a major feature of this literary movement, creating a place for the postmodern author "involved in, though not necessarily with, that world: a part of, even though he may be apart from other objects in, his own perceptual field" (Wilde 47). Considering this definition, the response to postmodernism is tricky, particularly in figuring out how we move on from an ironic, somewhat self-absorbed point of view to a "New Sincerity," especially from an authorial standpoint. What becomes the role of the author once they no longer serve an ironic purpose?

David Foster Wallace discusses a transition from postmodernism to New Sincerity in his critique of commodification and consumerism, "E Unibus Pluram," which is to the latter movement what Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" is to postmodernism. He calls upon a return to sentimentality and takes an anti-ironic stance, which Adam Kelly deems a pillar of The New Sincerity movement. Kelly defines this new literary period as "a sturdy affirmation of non-ironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words" (Kelly 198). It focuses on engagement with the reader and their "experience of the text," similar to postmodernism in the sense that it acts as a means of orientation within a changing world (Kelly 206). Kelly references "E Unibus Pluram" in his book chapter on the movement, which he considers to be synonymous with post-postmodernism. He takes Wallace's stance, among others, as the defining principle of the progression away from postmodernism, but warns that "being a

post-postmodernist or New Sincerity writer means never being certain whether you are so, and whether your struggle to transcend narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity is even undertaken in good faith” (Kelly 204). In terms of reading Wallace, this is a question that provokes controversy. In writing about such topics as *Brief Interviews* handles, is Wallace even able to prove his own sincerity? Kelly addresses this question by stating that “the guarantee of the writer’s own sincerity cannot finally lie in representation...What happens off the page, outside representation, depends upon the invocation and response of another; this other to whom I respond, and whose response I await, is, for many New Sincerity writers, the actual reader of their text” (Kelly 205). In other words, there is no definitive answer. There is no way to prove the author’s sincerity other than through the interpretation of his audience.

Wallace situates himself in an interesting position between this postmodern irony and the sentimentality that comes along with post-postmodern discourse. A. O. Scott, in a review of Wallace’s oeuvre, assumes his authorial intention is “to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth” (Scott). While *Brief Interviews* contains many of the aforementioned postmodern themes, these themes lie within the characters who become a representation of the ironic mode which Wallace evaluates through the lens of The New Sincerity movement. If “sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation,” as Adam Kelly says, Wallace succeeds in doing exactly that (Kelly 201). In this way, the acknowledgment of the collection as Wallace’s project in finding sincerity is just as important as the fictional piece in understanding the male human condition. The short story collection itself is removed from the characters, placing them on display for the reader to

critique and reflect on. The title of the collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, evinces this metafictional awareness. Wallace acknowledges the hideousness of his men but lets them incriminate themselves. By putting these misogynist characters on show, he allows the reader to cast judgment and analyze why these men act the way they do, instead of blatantly attempting to excuse their behavior. Taking into consideration the role solipsism plays within the lives of Wallace's hideous men helps the reader develop an understanding of their frustration surrounding romantic and sexual relationships.

Much of the frustration expressed in *Brief Interviews* directly results from existential crises suffered by the postmodern interviewees. The protagonists are unable to form meaningful relationships; they experience a uniquely male narcissism and sexual solipsism that leads them to objectify women, even as they acknowledge their fault in doing so. The connection between the two falls into the category of "enlightened sexism," a term coined by Susan Douglas in the early 2000s. She describes this phenomenon as "tak[ing] the gains of the women's movement as a given, and then us[ing] them as permission to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sex objects, bimbos, and hootchie mamas still defined by their appearance and their biological destiny" (Douglas 10). The hideous men recognize the importance of feminism but seem to believe that it exists for their benefit. They rely on their twisted rhetoric surrounding the cause to help them make sense of relationships, but their poor understanding ultimately lands them in misogynist territory. Douglas argues that this is the intention of the concept: "enlightened sexism is meant to make patriarchy pleasurable for women," not to dismantle the patriarchal systems that oppress them (Douglas 12). Wallace's men benefit from this subversion of feminist thought and perpetuation of the patriarchy because it allows them to exist confidently within their sexual exploitation of women.

Brief Interview (B.I.) #28 is one of the most obvious examples of the link between misogyny and solipsism within the collection, especially in Wallace's use of enlightened sexism. It is not structured as an interview, but as a conversation overheard between two men discussing the wants of a modern-day woman. Given initials instead of names, K and E are the two main characters. They determine that it is difficult to figure out what women want as a result of the societal pressure they face. K understands this, yet continues to speak on his struggles in seducing women, not the plight of women themselves: "The point being that this is what makes it so difficult, when for example you're sexually interested in one, to figure out what she really wants from a male" (Wallace 193). He uses his knowledge of feminist thought and twists it to justify his aggravation in misunderstanding women. Seemingly, the characters' only purpose for analyzing the female struggle is to assist them in their own sexual conquests. K and E both understand the pressure on a woman, and that "she's expected to be both sexually liberated and autonomous and assertive, and yet at the same time she's still conscious of the old respectable-girl-versus-slut dichotomy," but they nonetheless continue to discuss these concerns from a largely dismissive point of view (Wallace 194). Douglas discusses this very contradiction when she mentions the assumption that, "now that women allegedly have the same sexual freedom as men, they actually prefer to be sex objects because it's liberating" (Douglas 12). Despite the seemingly progressive pattern of thought within their discussion, the men fall straight into the trap Susan Douglas describes. They epitomize irony in that they discuss the dangers of misogyny while speaking with misogynist undertones. They feed directly into negative female stereotypes, once stating that the double bind is the reason "why so many of them are nuts" (Wallace 193). E once again contorts the feminist philosophy and uses it to his advantage in explaining an incredibly misogynist blanket statement. Both K and E are aware of the societal expectations



placed on women and they begin to hold an educated discussion on the wrongness of policing female sexuality but are consistently unable to meet the mark, reverting back to their patriarchally-programmed thought processes.

Similarly to K and E, the interviewee of B.I. #20 represents a perfect example of how male narcissism and solipsism act as a roadblock to understanding female agency. There are two stories to be analyzed within this example, one being that of the present narrator in a frame-like situation and the other being a story within it, retold from the narrator's memory. In the frame story, the main character recounts falling in love with one of his "simple pickups" after hearing her share a very personal story regarding rape survival. The second story involves the main character retelling the story of the rape as he heard it from the woman, who he names "The Granola Cruncher." Both of these stories provide insight into the male experience in very different ways. The narrator meets the woman in question at a music festival, claiming that her type was "evident right at first sight" (Wallace 246). From the very beginning, it becomes clear that he actively works to define women he encounters in terms of their potential within a romantic or sexual relationship. He treats the entire rendezvous methodically, claiming that her perceived type "dictated the terms of the approach and the tactics of the pickup itself and made the whole thing almost criminally easy" (Wallace 246). He treats her just as he does all of his conquests, saying anything and everything he can to convince her that he is good, just so they can hook up and he can give her a fake phone number in the morning, never to worry about her again. He is focused on his own self-interest, even going so far as to plan his manipulation of women to avoid his own guilt: "giving a false number whose falseness isn't so immediately evident that it will unnecessarily hurt someone's feelings and cause you discomfort" (Wallace 260). He is entirely detached from his own emotions, acknowledging that he feels "exploitative"

but unwilling to change anything about his approach (Wallace 248). The disconnect is a result of his self-absorbed worldview, limiting him from forming real relationships with women, particularly the nameless subject of the story. While Wallace gives his hideous men self-awareness, this is not their escape from solipsism; their self-awareness arguably drags them deeper into a narcissistic state.

The hideous man has his solipsism shattered when he hears his conquest bring up the story of her assault, casually mentioned after an evening together. His retelling of her story is intertwined with a commentary on his own process for picking up women, a connection through which he begins to realize his own fault. He fully understands the implications of his actions but is unable to resist the selfishness that compels him to continue. Upon hearing the story of her rape, he even equates it to his own method of taking advantage of women, stating that it is not “all that substantially different from a man sizing up an attractive girl and approaching her and artfully deploying just the right rhetoric” (Wallace 259). He draws parallels between his treatment of women and a serial rapist’s treatment of women, yet he *still* does not understand the gravity of his actions. His blind acceptance of his own behavior allows him to continue living comfortably, pushing any guilt he may feel aside and continuing to self-indulge. He uses his sexual conquests as a coping mechanism for his inability to connect with others, despite the realization that he is doing so selfishly. Rae Langton discusses the theory behind this counterintuitive coping in her article entitled, “Sexual Solipsism,” wherein she explores Kant and his ideas surrounding the power of human connection in dealing with the weight of a solipsistic mindset. She explains that there are two different sexual solipsisms: “one of treating things as human beings, in sexual contexts, and one of treating human beings as things, in sexual contexts” (Langton 154). Summarizing the latter she writes, “Kant is at least sometimes an optimist who

believes that sexual love and friendship are alike in their power to provide an escape from solipsism, through mutual knowledge, affection, respect, and the trust which makes knowledge possible” (Langton 156). While this theory can be used to explain the behavior of his men in their numerous sexual conquests, Wallace also subverts it, using sexual relationships to perpetuate the solipsism his characters deal with. They seek sexual involvement as a way of connecting with women in their lives but lack the “mutual knowledge, affection, respect, and trust” that would make their efforts fruitful. Kant is also quoted within Langton as saying “sexual love makes of the loved person an object of appetite” (Langton 153). Even if the men of the story have a sliver of romantic attraction or common decency towards the women they approach, their sexual attraction causes an immediate turn to objectification. The very thing they are hoping will get them out of this bind keeps them locked in it when they start to view their sexual interests as objects. These men exist within a feedback loop, working towards a state of emotional growth and sentimentality that they can never achieve.

Once the protagonist reaches the point in the story where he realizes he has fallen in love with the Granola Cruncher, hearing about her compassion towards the perpetrator as a means of escape, he experiences a shift and begins to relay his emotions for the first time to the interviewer, admitting that “this was [his] first hint of sadness or melancholy, as [he] listened with increasing attention to the anecdote” (Wallace 269). This vulnerability does not come without an adverse reaction, as he immediately begins to spout a slew of curse words at Q, reacting to a perceived judgment of his emotional outburst. Q becomes the female standard to which the hideous men can be compared; she offers a calm, controlled presence up against their emotional disarray.

Throughout the collection, this reliance on the feminine presence becomes another way in which Wallace reflects the dichotomy between his postmodern characters and the sincerity of the collection as a whole. The men have a particular incapability of vulnerability and lack of language to discuss anything of emotional depth, which leads to their manipulative and misogynistic behaviors. In many of the interviews, there are numerous instances of emotional outbursts in response to any admittance of human emotion outside of the character's own head. This can be analyzed through the gendered language Wallace utilizes to create a feminine Other, a topic discussed in depth by Clare Hayes-Brady in her book chapter, "' . . . ': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace." She discusses Wallace's use of "masculine linguistic power" in terms of the relationship between male and female language in the text:

Masculine linguistic power is characterized in Wallace largely by direct speech, linguistic play, and univocality, with oppositional characteristics such as excessive quotation or tonal slippage indicating a lack of coherent identity. By way of contrast, Wallace signifies the corresponding security and coherence of identity in female characters via vocal plurality, dialogue verbal manipulation, and, most interestingly, the infiltration of the vocal patterns of the men who seek to subjugate them. (Hayes-Brady 131)

As Wallace's men become increasingly more aware of their inability to express their emotions, their language reflects the disconnect with the world around them that they are experiencing. Although lacking a physical voice, the female perspective shows up as an absent character throughout the text. The feminine sphere of influence over the men in the interviews positions women at the heart of the collection, despite their intentional exclusion. This is especially evident within the absent character Q, who is the one pushing these men into discussing their

emotions and testing the limits of their misogyny through her questions. Although we are not given the interview questions at any point for context, it is a common theme for Wallace's men to become increasingly agitated with Q throughout the conversation. This is noticeable through repetition of sentences and direct addresses to her. Hayes-Brady brings up the fact that Wallace often depends on "the feminine [to function] as a stabilizing Other for the masculine Self," which explains the majorly influential role of those absent throughout the text (Hayes-Brady 134). In B.I. #20, the Granola Cruncher functions within the role of the feminine stabilizing force and has a significant impact on the narrator in that she dictates his actions, particularly within his desire to become more in touch with his emotions following their sexual encounter. While she poses the opportunity of freedom from his cycle of misogyny and mistreatment, it is easier for him to remain in it and place this encounter within his repertoire of sexual experiences. This is largely reflective of the "two emotions repeatedly [mentioned by Wallace] with regard to gender conflict: guilt in women, and fear in men" (Hayes-Brady 133). Focusing on the latter within *Brief Interviews*, Wallace places his hideous men within a strict comfort zone of emotional detachment.

Another example of the gendered language component and sentimental disconnect within the text is B.I. #30. In this *especially* brief interview, the narrator is discussing why he married his wife. He explains the sexual attraction he had to her initially and the potential he saw within her, thinking "[he] wasn't likely going to do better than this because of the way she had a good body even after she'd had a kid" (Wallace 22). He continues to objectify his wife and shame the standard female body in the meantime, ending the interview with a contradictorily confident and self-conscious question to Q, "Does that sound shallow? Tell me what you think. Or does the real truth about this kind of thing always sound shallow, you know, everybody's real reasons? What

do you think? How does it sound?" (Wallace 23). He seems to justify his testament through his question of relatability. While his behavior and hugely misogynistic remarks throughout the interview lend themselves to the general theme of the book, most interesting is this last direct address to Q. He acknowledges the contentiousness of his statements but places the responsibility on Q to help him analyze his own language. This becomes commonplace throughout the text; the men rely so heavily on the female linguistic presence to dictate the morality of their actions, simply because they are unable to make sense of their own role within their relationships. When the women in their lives, such as Q, are unwilling to do the emotional unloading for the protagonists, the men no longer have an escape from their self-doubt. They struggle with no means by which they can escape their solipsism and revert to misogynist tendencies. Oftentimes they lean into an explosive response as a defense mechanism, similar to the outburst made by the protagonist of B.I. #20.

All of the emotional detachment and reliance on women throughout the text comes back to deep insecurity within the male protagonists; they ultimately fear the perpetuity of their solipsism. The final interview I will discuss from *Brief Interviews* is B.I. #2, which encompasses Wallace's use of enlightened sexism, the feminine Other, and sexual solipsism. He uses all of these themes within the interview to reflect misogyny as a result of identity crises. The sentimentality sought after by his hideous men is at odds with their postmodern ironic tendencies. This interview recounts a conversation between a man and his long-term girlfriend, which acts as a far drawn-out breakup. He explains how his track record with women is an indicator of who he is as a person, stating, "almost every intimate relationship I get into with women seems to end up with them getting hurt, somehow. To be honest, sometimes I worry I might be one of those guys who uses people, women" (Wallace 77). While this seems like a step

forward in some kind of journey towards self-awareness, the main character hits a wall after the admission stage. He details the repetitive way in which he rushes into serious relationships but leaves as soon as things get to a stage of real commitment. He analyzes his actions, stating that it provides him “a certain amount of hope, because maybe it means [he is] becoming more able to understand [him]self and be honest,” but does not lay out any explanation of future goals to eradicate the pattern (Wallace 81). He thinks that he is sparing his partner from pain by exposing his past with commitment issues, “warning” her, but what he actually does is attempt to absolve himself of any guilt before she can hold him accountable for his actions (Wallace 83). He presents this huge lead-up to an event that has not occurred yet and manipulates her emotions, constantly placing the focus on his fears and skirting around the actual topic of conversation. He begs for her forgiveness and understanding, despite never explicitly apologizing for how he has acted or posing any solution to the problem. He even goes so far as to blame her for the way that he feels, stating his fear that she is not “going to understand. That I won’t explain it well enough or you’ll somehow through no fault of your own misinterpret what I’m saying and turn it around somehow and be hurt. I’m feeling unbelievable terror here, I have to tell you” (Wallace 81). He goes back and forth, repeating that it is not her fault but continuing to make her feel guilty for the situation that he has put himself in. Similar to the foregoing interviews, when the woman of this story is unwilling to accept the emotional burden of the protagonist, he spirals into a monologue about how he may never be capable of loving anyone and the immense guilt he feels for continuing to end relationships in this fashion.

Unlike the other interviews in this collection, B.I. #2 seems sincere when read at a surface level. The hideous man featured within this story expresses more emotion than all of the previous protagonists combined. However insincere his speech may actually be, at the very base

level this man knows that what he is doing is wrong. He takes the initiative to express his concern for their crumbling relationship, which is more than any of the other hideous men can claim. The issue becomes his lack of empathy and narcissistic outlook on relationships that allows the pattern to continue. He frames this discussion as benefitting his partner, despite the true intention being to save himself from the guilt he feels within his own conscience. This is particularly evident in the way that Wallace chooses to end the interview, ruining the illusion of sincerity he has built up:

There's just one more thing I feel like I have to tell you about first, though. So the slate's clean for once, and everything's out in the open. I'm terrified to tell you, but I'm going to. Then it'll be your turn. But listen: this thing is not good. I'm afraid it might hurt you. It's not going to sound good at all, I'm afraid. Can you do me a favor and sort of brace yourself and promise to try to not react for a couple seconds when I tell you? Can we talk about it before you react? Can you promise? (Wallace 84)

While Wallace chooses to keep the conflict ambiguous, it is clear that the entirety of the previous conversation in B.I. #2 was building up to this reveal. Any genuine concern the protagonist may have feigned regarding the state of his relationship disappears once the true motivation for the conversation becomes evident. He procrastinates confessing his wrongdoing by presenting as a nervous, caring partner protecting his girlfriend from himself. The irony of this presents in the fact that he simultaneously begs sympathy, while also convincing her that he is a bad person. His narcissism comes into play in this moment when he chooses to protect his own feelings by refusing to take full ownership of his actions.

In this refusal to accept responsibility, the language he uses to speak with his partner comes across as condescending and victim-blaming. He repeatedly uses cutesy nicknames to



degrade her, as well as assuming her feelings will be catastrophic in response to everything he says. He preemptively begins to coddle her and beg her to stifle her emotional reaction so as to avoid his own discomfort. These actions are a direct result of his fear and insecurity surrounding his inability to connect with women properly. This is also reflected in the sexual solipsism implied when he discusses the pace of their relationship. He mentions that he “probably pressured [her] and rushed [her] to plunge into sleeping together,” because he was experiencing “almost irresistible thunderbolts of attraction” (Wallace 83). He admits to moving too fast, disregarding her emotions and preferences because he simply could not control himself. Explained in the previous discussion of Langton and her interpretation of Kant, as soon as the protagonist found himself sexually attracted to her, he saw her as an object. The protagonist of *B.I. #2* attempts sincerity within his relationship but falls short in his execution due to his male solipsistic tendencies and misogynistic tone.

Wallace drives home the solitude of solipsism and the struggle of the post-postmodern man within the very last story of the collection, “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV).” Similar to the way that “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life” introduces themes of self-awareness and orientation, this final story reflects on those same themes in a cautionary way. Given the context of the whole collection behind it, the story acts as a final warning against a life lived in solipsism. It depicts a mundane scene that takes place in the home of a young boy, as he stares into the mirror watching his mother give him a haircut. Trapped in the chair as his mother intently completes the job, the boy watches his “brother” in the mirror, “reproducing [his] own visage, copying [him]” (Wallace 272). He personifies his reflection in the mirror as having its own agency, intentionally copying his facial expressions in mockery. He describes the face as “farther and farther from [his] own control,”

telling a story of “what all lolly-smearred hand-held brats must see in the funhouse mirror — the gross and pitiless *sameness*” (Wallace 273). The mockery of himself within his reflection becomes conflated with his *real* self as he realizes that the images are inseparable. He begins to panic and eventually gives up the fight against defining himself, “giving up the ghost completely for a blank...mindless stare — unseen and -seeing — into a mirror I could not know or feel myself without. No not ever again” (Wallace 273). The greatest fear men experience within the collection is that of becoming what they already are. In their solipsism, or movement towards it, Wallace’s hideous men become the subject of the aforementioned postmodern irony. They understand the necessity for genuine human interaction in breaking out of their solipsistic mindset, specifically in a romantic sense, but in the act of seeking reparative relationships, their narcissism is realized even further. They act in their own self-interest at all times and as soon as they begin to feel vulnerable, they sabotage themselves from gaining any emotional insight. The men rely on the women in their lives to carry the burden of their own existential dread, represented in their sexual encounters, as well as in the disconnect they experience between language and emotion. In presenting men who struggle to transcend postmodern irony and form meaningful relationships with the women in their lives, Wallace provides a unique insight into the connection between misogyny and male solipsism.

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