

2019

## Wallaceward the American Literature Survey Course Takes Its Way

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### Publication Information

Clare, Ralph. (2019). "Wallaceward the American Literature Survey Course Takes Its Way". *Approaches to Teaching the Works of David Foster Wallace*, 75-84.

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## Wallaceward the American Literature Survey Course Takes Its Way

Ralph Clare

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Finding a comfortable fit for David Foster Wallace's work in the American literature survey is a challenge that raises a host of questions regarding Wallace and American literature itself. Wallace criticism has tended to situate his oeuvre in relation to postmodernism in general and, more specifically, to postmodern metafiction. This is an important critical task, to be sure. Like many, I have taught Wallace's stories, essays, and novels in an array of courses, including twentieth-century American literature, postmodernist literature, and the single author course, all formats in which I had a luxurious amount of time to get students acquainted with Wallace's complex on-again, off-again relationship with that often exciting, if sometimes terrifying, thing called postmodernism. But what happens when Wallace is not the focal point of a course, or when a course reaches back before the twentieth century, or when students read only one of Wallace's shorter pieces at the tail end of a course packed with numerous writers and poets, some of whose works seemingly have nothing in common with Wallace's? What gets inevitably overlooked in the limited, though nuanced, context of twentieth-century or theme-based courses that feature Wallace is his work's relation to the American literary tradition as a whole, as well as questions about the ways in which we can understand Wallace's place in the ever-evolving American canon. Teaching Wallace in the survey course provides a prime opportunity to address such pressing concerns.

One of the unique features of the literature survey is that it provides a *longue durée* that establishes shared concerns and themes and demonstrates their transformation over time. Placing Wallace in the context of the survey means that we ought to consider him as one of many writers who have significantly questioned and altered how we view literature, ourselves, and America in ways that are relevant beyond the present in which they wrote. Hence, this essay will explore two specific ways in which Wallace might fit into the American canon beyond the obvious post-postmodern periodization of his oeuvre, and it will consider which of Wallace's works are best suited to the aims of the survey.

### *The American Self*

The Chris Fogle chapter, section 22, in *The Pale King* is quite possibly the best candidate of Wallace's fiction to complement the survey course. Though the chapter is an excerpt from a novel, it works well as a stand-alone piece that contains many of Wallace's familiar themes; its novella length makes it a readable size for a survey; and, perhaps most important, it forges connections with texts likely to have been covered earlier in the course, especially in the longer survey.

Postmodernism, when it arrives in the survey, earns at best a few weeks at the end of an exhausting semester. When and if the question of post-postmodernism arises, students are probably already studying for finals and frantically finishing papers, hence the benefit of finding a work by Wallace that enters into dialogue with several of the works the class has read over the semester.

If one can manage it, setting aside two classes to discuss Fogle's narrative of his transformation from a self-described "wastoid" and "nihilist" into a serious and driven IRS agent will serve students best. The first day can be spent exploring the story's themes of freedom, choice, and individualism, as well as the ways in which Wallace turns Fogle's story into an allegory about the ongoing political and cultural challenges facing America in the twenty-first century. The second day offers an opportunity to discuss the story's generic and formal features and its links to earlier American literary genres and to consider how Wallace works within tradition while reworking it.

Some preliminary remarks about Wallace's critique of postmodernism will establish a useful framework for students to think about the story. By this point in the course, we will just have finished roughly two to three weeks on postmodernism, usually having read Pynchon's "Entropy," Barthelme's "The Balloon," and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Having at least one high postmodern text in this grouping is helpful in that postmodernism's penchant for textual play and disinterest in fleshed-out characters is something that Wallace's work reacts against. Indeed, one could bring in an excerpt from Wallace's McCaffery interview to emphasize this point.

For new college students, many of whom are still acclimating to university life and deciding on their majors, Fogle's first-person narrative relating his struggle to find himself in life is sure to resonate. Students are likely to see Fogle's dilemma primarily as an existential one, raising such fundamental questions as, What is the meaning of life? What is truly worth doing? To what degree do the expectations of my family or society matter in my decisions? To be sure, these questions underlie Fogle's experiences, but the trick is to get students to see that Wallace is up to much more than telling simply another coming-of-age tale.

The existential question of the burden of freedom, in the broadest sense, is a theme most students will have homed in on; a good question to pose students at the beginning of discussion is, in what ways is Fogle free during his college years? Students will surely note that Fogle is exemplary of someone with the freedom to do whatever he wants, which he exercises by essentially doing nothing but partying, taking drugs, dropping out of school, and making cynical fun of the world around him. He sees himself as a rebel, and students will probably have strong opinions regarding the familiar figure of the American rebel or maverick so often depicted as free from society's petty and hypocritical constraints.

Since the discussion of freedom up to this point will have been fairly abstract, it will be necessary to start directing it toward the story's greater concerns regarding American democracy. To this end, a quick poll asking students to write down what freedom means to them will generate some common answers: free-

dom of (consumer) choice or thought, freedom from intrusive government, freedom to pursue happiness, freedom to do whatever you want so long as it does not harm someone else, etc. After listening to these answers, it is important to point out to students that they are equating freedom with individual freedoms or liberties. The next question should address whether Fogle as an individual is using or abusing his freedoms. Is there a positive and negative way to use freedom?

Undoubtedly some students will point out that Fogle is wasting his life and thus his freedoms too. This is a perfect opportunity to have students parse Fogle's realization that "I drifted . . . because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better. That I was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn't actually real—I was free to choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter. . . . I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter" (223). Here, students should consider how Fogle can be "too free" and what "real" freedom entails—active engagement instead of passive acceptance. Handing out an excerpt from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* will also help to spur a more focused discussion about the interrelation of freedom, self-interest, and the greater community. Democracy, Tocqueville writes, "at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, . . . attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright egotism" (98). Tocqueville's warning recalls early American texts that ponder the promise and perils of a young nation, such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's letter claiming that Americans' "labour is founded on the basis of nature, *self-interest*; can it want a stronger allurements?" (44) as well as John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," with its religious argument and corporeal metaphor for the establishment and bonding of community through love. With these texts in mind, students can explore what freedom of choice means politically, and not just existentially, in statements like "[i]f I wanted to matter . . . I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way" (*Pale King* 224). In short, Wallace shows how Fogle's dilemma, and our own, is still related to fundamental questions about the relation between the one and the many, and between personal liberties and governmental authority. Students should benefit from Wallace's renewal of these questions that can sometimes seem stuffy or dated but are as relevant and urgent as ever.

Once students have grasped the personal-as-political stakes of Fogle's story, they should be prepared to identify larger questions regarding the sustainability of American democracy. Pointing out that Fogle accidentally attends the lecture that will change his life instead of taking a final exam on *The Federalist Papers* will allow the class to revisit the question posed in *Federalist No. 1* as to "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice" (Rossiter 27) and the argument elaborated in *Federalist No. 10* apropos of "the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, [such as] its tendency to break and control the violence of faction" (71). In the light of *The Federalist Papers*, I recommend asking students what "factions" or sides exist in the story and what the qualities are of each. Following students' suggestions, drawing this schema on the board will yield a division

between Fogle's father, a representative of the conservative 1950s, and Fogle (and his mother), representative of the "Me Generation" in bloom after the heady years of the '60s (*Pale King* 165–68). This visual chart illustrates the gaping generational chasm and resulting authority vacuum. Fogle describes a culture in which the father's moral authority no longer holds sway, having been rightfully criticized by a radical '60s politics. Yet, as the story shows, without a replacement for that authority, "pretty much every red-blooded American in [the] late-Vietnam and Watergate era felt desolate and disillusioned and unmotivated and directionless and lost" (213). At this point reminding students about Wallace's position *vis-à-vis* literary postmodernism and the postmodern era should help them see the ways in which Wallace is criticizing Fogle and his generation's failure to respond to troubled times with anything but irony and cynicism, for "all of the directionless drifting and laziness and being a 'wastoid' which so many of us in that era . . . believed was cool and funny . . . was, in reality, not funny" (223).

Students will recall that the goal of *The Federalist Papers* is not to end but to manage faction by arguing that states should adopt the Constitution and submit to a strong central power for the good of the nascent nation. What, students might consider, represents such a power in the story? Directing students to the passage in which Fogle describes his encounter with the Jesuit professor will make for a provocative discussion, since Fogle's statement that "a real authority was not the same as a friend or someone who cared about you, but could nevertheless be good for you, and that the authority relation was not a 'democratic' or equal one yet could have value for both sides" (227) may at first strike students as counterintuitive. What value might be accorded an authority that is not democratic? Does this mean that one should unquestionably submit to whoever holds power, and does this not lead to tyranny or fascism? After some discussion, pointing out that the *Federalist No. 10* proposes a republican form of government and not a "pure democracy" (76) should help students to see that Fogle's situation as a "free" individual at war with his father's generation is analogous to the antifederalists who resisted relinquishing any power to a strong central government for fear of tyranny. What Fogle eventually realizes is that the Jesuit's authority, like any power, is not exactly one-sided, that "[i]t was a certain kind of power that he exerted and that I was granting him, voluntarily" (227). Thus Wallace suggests that Fogle must make a deliberate choice to commit to something larger than himself (say, civic duty), which will cost him a certain amount of "freedom," in order to overcome his personal nihilism. By extension, the same goes for American politics, in which political infighting and party politics can trump the government's ability to make sound decisions for the betterment of the nation as a whole.

After establishing Wallace's portrayal of the dangers of an American individualism given over to selfishness and nihilism, it is just as important that students explore the positive side of individualism or, more precisely, what Fogle's ability to change his life for the better says about the capacity of the individual self. To

this end, I would call attention to the notable Emersonian feel to Fogle's description of his Pauline decision to "[p]ut away childish things" (172) because "there were depths to me that were not bullshit or childish but profound, and were not abstract but actually much realer than my clothes or self-image, and that blazed in an almost sacred way" (187). The sovereign or sacred self that emerges at the moment of decision, or is actually always there to begin with, shares something with Emerson's divinity of the soul. A survey incorporating an Emerson essay, such as "The Poet," "The American Scholar," or an excerpt from *Nature*, as well as selections from Thoreau's *Walden*, can help to establish Wallace's link to the transcendentalists. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is especially apt as its lauding of the divine self—"[n]othing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (1165)—and diatribe against conformity pairs creatively with the young "rebel" Fogle's ironic realization that "I was just as much a conformist as he [his father] was, plus a hypocrite" (165). Asking students what Emerson and Thoreau might have thought about Fogle's decision to join the "Service" (as Fogle calls it) with its seemingly institutional conformity prompts them to consider what individualism meant in the nineteenth century and what Wallace thinks it means today. Emerson, after all, claimed that "a greater self-reliance,—a new respect for the divinity in man,—must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men" (1175), and it is curious to consider Wallace as a post-modern Emerson in this respect. Moreover, Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," with its criticism of the ways in which governmental institutions may dominate individuals and its call for a citizen not to "resign his conscience to the legislator" (1858), offers a compelling foil to Fogle's unquestioned belief in the civic good of working for the IRS. Yet who in the modern world is ever free of an institutional affiliation (from one's work to the very university that teaches about individualism) or is completely "off the grid," in today's parlance? In this light, students should look closely at the Jesuit's rallying sermon, which recalls Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. The Jesuit claims that "accountants . . . are today's cowboys" who are "[r]iding the American range. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data" (233). Moreover, "[y]esterday's hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers" and "generated facts," whereas "the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts . . . . To put it another way, the pie has been made—the contest is now in the slicing" (232). If this is so, does Fogle provide a model for how to remain an individual within an institution?

The second day spent analyzing Fogle's narrative should focus mainly on the literary techniques and genre conventions that Wallace employs. Fogle's story is clearly a "conversion narrative" and resonates with the tradition of the Puritan sermon. It also shares generic qualities with captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's, and slave narratives, such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, as well as autobiographical texts, such as the first chapter of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, both of which link personal revelation to national discovery. Students can trace the

similarities and differences between these narratives and Fogle's, which is distinct from the earlier texts in that it displays a self-consciousness of generic conventions, though it does not, following Wallace's critique of postmodernism, use any metafictional techniques to parody or ironize these conventions. After a short introduction to the conversion narrative, students might complete a short written response to the questions, In what ways does the story illustrate the features of a conversion narrative, and why might Wallace employ the genre?

Having already discussed the "sacred self" with its Emersonian overtones, students should recognize the spiritual aspect of Fogle's narrative and understand Wallace's aim of converting the reader, so to speak, to the pursuit of an aware, responsible, and morally earnest citizenship. Fogle's tale can be put in fruitful dialogue with Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative," an example of a Great Awakening text that reacts to Enlightenment sentimentalism by emphasizing the emotional experience of spiritual awakening. Students might compare and contrast Wallace's religiously tinged yet secular conversion story with Edwards's. That Fogle, for instance, gives a metacritique and a psychological explanation of a onetime Christian classmate's conversion, but does not discount its actual effects, is compelling. In the light of Wallace's aversion to postmodern cool and irony and his desire to stress emotion and feeling in his work, students may be asked to consider the postmodern challenge to Enlightenment ideas of the self and the rational world, the degree to which Wallace's text rejects or accepts Enlightenment values, and the possibility that post-postmodernism might mark a new kind of sentimentalism in America literature. Introducing Paul Giles's argument that Wallace is a "sentimental posthumanist" (291) can help to clarify such questions for the class. Students should debate whether Wallace reworks the conversion narrative in a way that is self-aware enough to refute charges that he is merely naïve or nostalgic for a former, mythic, Emersonian self.

Unlike these generically structured and carefully ordered texts, moreover, Fogle's story exhibits a style similar to the stream of consciousness in Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" or in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning." T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could come into play here too, as Eliot's narrator appears to ramble, offering seemingly disordered reflections that on further study prove to be bound to one another by images, allusions, and symbols. Asking students to distinguish how stream of consciousness works differently in each of these texts helps demonstrate the evolution of this modernist stylistic device. Wallace's story is not merely a catalogue of imbricated senses, emotions, memories, and desires, however. It evinces a kind of meta-aware stream of consciousness in which Fogle attempts, with some success and in keeping with the theme of willful choice, to guide his thoughts, memories, and reflections. It is as if Fogle has become a participant-observer of his own stream of consciousness, marking a kind of meta-awareness typical of an age in which neuroscience has transformed our understanding of the mind, so that consciousness appears paradoxically both more transparent and opaque than

even an erstwhile modernist depth psychology, with its Freudian, Jungian, and mythic underpinnings, represented it to be.

### *Before and beyond Irony*

The survey setting can also reveal how one of Wallace's most important themes, the destructiveness of postmodern irony, shares a genealogy with the American preoccupation with innocence and experience. "My Appearance" or "Little Expressionless Animals" may be sequenced with Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Henry James's "Daisy Miller: A Study," T. S. Eliot's "Pru-frock," Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Sexy" to create a cluster of texts expressing the theme of lost innocence. In all these stories, characters struggle to overcome skepticism or to accommodate painful knowledge about the world, which sometimes leads them to dire cynicism and other times to guarded optimism.

Such texts simultaneously interrogate the notion of "the American as Adam" that R. W. B. Lewis traced in nineteenth-century American literature and that can comprise one thematic route of inquiry throughout the survey. The optimistic Adam, in following the spirit of the new nation, is a figure usually free of history, personal ties, and obligations. He is the Emersonian individual, whose "moral position was prior to experience, and . . . was fundamentally innocent" (5). Adam is thus part of the larger myth of America as a place of newness, innocence, optimism, and self-invention. Familiarizing students with the Adamic figure will allow them to consider and challenge Lewis's claims in a wide array of works. They may observe that Wallace's critique of postmodern culture is not far from Lewis's complaint, regarding early-twentieth-century literature, that "irony has withered into mere mordant skepticism" and "[t]he new hopelessness is . . . as simple-minded as innocence" (196)—a comparison that helps situate Wallace's battle against irony in the long American tradition of weighing innocence against experience.

A good place to begin exploring the theme of innocence and experience in the shorter survey is "Young Goodman Brown," in which the naïve protagonist adopts a holier-than-thou attitude toward his community, believing he has witnessed the moral hypocrisy of his entire village. Since students often align their views of the Puritan community with Brown's, it is a good idea to ask them why he ends up living an alienated and bitter life as "[a] stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not desperate man" (1297) whose "dying hour was gloom" (1298). Students will invariably note how Hawthorne upsets our assumption that innocence is always positive and experience negative. Young Goodman Brown walls himself behind the cynical presumption that human nature is essentially corrupt in order to avoid a transformative experience, only confirming his naïveté. Brown's innocence keeps him from ever testing the claims of his superior



morality; thus his supposed knowledge becomes a platform from which he looks down on others. During the class discussion, I suggest employing Wallace's phrase that "cynicism and naïveté are [not] mutually exclusive" ("Westward" 304) to sum up Brown's predicament. By the time the class reaches Wallace at the semester's end, the theme of innocence and experience will have been neatly encapsulated by this phrase (which can also apply to the texts discussed below), and students are likely to identify this theme immediately in Wallace's work.

The theme of experience masking innocence also appears in works by James, Eliot, and O'Connor that portray intelligent characters who view the world from detached, ironic stances, much to their detriment. Since for Wallace, irony (even its postmodern variation) has its time and place ("E Unibus Pluram" [*Supposedly*] 66–68), it is important to underscore for students that irony and cynicism are acceptable modes of defense for characters in these texts. This will help later on when distinguishing Wallace's negative take on such attitudes in his criticism of postmodern society and culture. Nonetheless, what Wallace sees as a cultural problem in the postmodern era can also be read as a common and personal one in many twentieth-century texts. Consider the sophisticated Winterbourne's failed attempts to figure out the naïve Daisy in "Daisy Miller." Although Daisy is equated with innocence and Winterbourne with experience, James breaks down this binary as Winterbourne's so-called knowledge leads him to misread Daisy and to mask, as he later admits to his aunt, his true feelings toward her and thus, ironically, his own naïveté in matters of the heart. One moral of this story that gels with Wallace's work is that, although others are technically unknowable, true relationships require that one must risk being vulnerable to the other.

In the war-shattered world of "Prufrock," knowledge leads not even to a belated, if ineffectual, enlightenment but to inaction and an increased sense of alienation. Prufrock's ironic view of modern life (tinged with nostalgia for a supposedly more innocent time) and his fear that the limits of language prevent him from expressing his subjective emotions trap him in unending solipsistic despair. This debilitating state is similar to that of numerous Wallace characters, from *Infinite Jest*'s Hal to the depressed person in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

Finally, nowhere does Wallace's assertion about the relation between cynicism and naïveté seem more apt than in "Good Country People," in which the pretentious Hulga bitterly plays the perpetual teenager, torturing her blindly quixotic mother. Yet Hulga, a master of irony and black humor, is humbled after a trickster bible salesman steals her wooden leg and reveals her philosophical nihilism to be merely a cynical armor covering deep psychological wounds. In each of these stories, so-called experience and knowledge lead to a character's ironic attitude and cynical resignation toward the world as they see it, an ultimately destructive behavior. Students will often respond positively to the cynicism of these characters or texts (particularly Hulga's character) because they expose society's hypocrisies. In final preparation for Wallace's critique of irony, then, I recommend pointing out to students that the characters' cynicism, although perfectly understandable, only compounds their problems. This sets the stage as the course

moves on to an age in which, per Wallace, irony cannot be reduced merely to an individual's or a character's defensive shield against an untenable reality because postmodern irony itself ultimately helps constitute and sustain this reality and must be faced directly without resort to further ironic modes of disengagement.

Wallace's "My Appearance" and "Little Expressionless Animals" are well suited to tie into the theme of innocence and experience, though the former story is perhaps the better fit. An excerpt of the last paragraph of "E Unibus Pluram" will contextualize Wallace's story vis-à-vis postmodernism, but I advise directing students' attention to the fact that Wallace sees his stance against irony as a moral decision. This frees Wallace's work from being seen as merely a reaction to postmodernism. "My Appearance," which relates a B celebrity's puzzling over how to *appear* sincere while actually *being* sincere on NBC's *Late Night with David Letterman*, illustrates the dangers of treating irony as a mode of being, and Edilyn's struggle to remain sincere in a media-saturated age of irony is something to which a generation of social media users can relate. Edilyn's husband, Rudy, claims that the way to survive *Letterman* lies not in being sincere or insincere but in "being *not-sincere*" (185). But there is a problem with putting on such an act. As Edilyn says to him later, "if no one is really the way we see them, . . . that would include me. And you" (200). Not unlike Winterbourne, Prufrock, and Hulga, Rudy adopts a cynical attitude rather than grapple with the complexities of being—an honest undertaking that would require remaining open and trusting toward others—in a world of appearances. The final irony, however, is that he takes an obvious illusion—a meta-TV show meant to entertain—to be the reality of daily life, a rather naïve mistake that will cost him his marriage at the very least. Edilyn resists this pessimism, however, and realizes that playing along with *Letterman* constitutes just that, play. The end of the story is not exactly a happy one, but Edilyn manages to keep a strong sense of her own identity and authenticity in a world in which reality and image have imploded. The choice to reject irony and its attendant cynicism as a way of life, Wallace suggests, is difficult but possible.

The sober ending of "My Appearance" also resonates with "Sexy," which updates and inverts the international theme of "Daisy Miller" in its story about a white woman, Miranda, who carries on a failing affair with an Indian émigré, Dev. Miranda's failure to realize the difference between perceiving herself as a sexy mistress and being a truly cared-for lover mirrors her inability to learn about Indian culture in a multicultural America and globalized world. While claiming to offer access to all cultures to those who can afford it, the commodification of those very cultures both incites and hinders any real cross-cultural transmission. As in "My Appearance," authenticity is not what it seems, and an American citizen on American soil can feel as dislocated as an immigrant. Globalization, like the media in Wallace's stories, has clearly transformed the space and place of understanding self and culture, and there is no escape from this. Miranda's decision that her affair with Dev must end signals a tempering of her earlier romanticizing of him—a false form of knowledge stemming from innocence as

ignorance—and her acceptance of the reality that she is a mistress and not a true lover. The story's final image of the Mapparium, which resembles the Taj Mahal—the “everlasting monument to love,” as Laxmi calls it, in contrast to the fleeting, loveless affair Miranda is engaged in (3254)—is not wholly ironic, as the image creates a peaceful scene against a “clear-blue sky spread over the city” (3264), suggesting that Miranda, like Edilyn in “My Appearance,” has not become cynical after her self-realization.

Taken together, these texts allow students to see the ways in which the myth of American self-invention is caught up in a binary of innocence and experience. For many characters, losing innocence means losing optimism, the capacity to be open to others, and faith in the world. Experience thus results in pessimism, solipsism, and an ironic attitude toward life in general. Wallace's work, as “My Appearance” and Fogle's story demonstrate, calls attention to the ongoing moral challenge for the erstwhile American Adam, the Emersonian self, or the individual citizen to avoid accepting a cynical and corrosive view of an admittedly troubled world. This means recognizing the inescapable fact that the individual is dependent on others, yet also recognizing that the individual self must, at times, choose not to participate in a culture in which selfishness and disaffection are the norm. Wallace's post-postmodern Adam, as the cases of Fogle and Edilyn suggest, does not leave the Garden mourning a lost innocence, as it might be argued Young Goodman Brown or Prufrock does, for that would simply be nostalgic or reactionary. Nor does this newly exposed Adam employ irony as a defensive shield or a weapon, as can be seen in “Daisy Miller” and “Good Country People,” because that might lead only to solipsism and despair. Instead, Wallace's American Adam must make an earnest decision to fall openly into the world, to embrace sentiment but not sentimentality, and to recognize the difference between received knowledge and lived experience.

What is at stake in teaching Wallace in the survey is nothing less than his critical reputation. If Wallace is to be seen as more than just a postmodernist, then it will be incumbent upon literary critics to make the case for his continued inclusion in the American canon, a highly contested area these days. If you want to know how a battle is really going, outside the maps, the statistics, and the generals' generalizing, getting a look at the ground might be a good way to start. In the battles of canon formation, the trenches are surely in the surveys. How the survey is conceived, taught, and received today will affect literary and cultural transmission tomorrow. Including Wallace in the survey in a truly thoughtful and productive fashion, one that affects both our reading of his work and our conception of American literary history, requires some imagination and a willingness to let Wallace roam outside his, and our, postmodern comfort zone. Doing so will ultimately strengthen the case for the importance of one of the most engaging and transformational American writers of our time.