

# Postgraduate English

[www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english](http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english)

ISSN 1756-9761

---

Issue 32

Spring 2016

Editors:

Arya Aryan, Daniel Norman and Douglass Virdee

---

**Engaging with David Foster Wallace's *Hideous Men***

**Alexander Matthew**

University of Liverpool

## Engaging with David Foster Wallace's *Hideous Men*

Alexander Matthew

University of Liverpool

Postgraduate English, Issue 32, Spring 2016

---

In 1999, following his success with *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace published *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a collection of short stories written in a range of styles that include dictionary entry, transcript, and pop quiz, to name but a few. At first glance its themes appear to contrast wildly with each other, where the difficulties of person-to-person communication, the awkwardness of familial relations, a consideration of the mediated gaze, and acts of sexualised violence and rape are juxtaposed to create an unsettling effect. These stylistic and thematic elements of the text serve to inhibit the reader's experience of working through the book, as the reader has to adjust to the changes that take place as one story ends and another begins, particularly with respect to narrative voice, diction, and form. Upon reading the book for the first time it is unclear how the pieces are meant to work together as a collection, and so multiple re-readings of the text are required in order to explicate this. By way of guiding this essay we begin with a question: what purpose does the use of rape and sexualised violence serve in Wallace's text? Considering that the work seems to be deliberately provocative, it is surprising, then, that there exists little in the way of critical commentary, and in terms of what does exist, many such articles and essays do not deal with the hideous elements of the stories in the way that this essay intends to.

In the decade following its publication (1999 - 2009) there is a lack of engagement from critics, although Marshall Boswell does devote a chapter of his book, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), to *Brief Interviews*. Yet, there are flaws in Boswell's criticism, most of which stem from carelessness in his reading of the text. According to Boswell, 'Hegelian synthesis' is pivotal to Wallace's text and he asserts that the short story 'Octet'

‘provides the key to [understanding] the entire book.’<sup>1</sup> Boswell notes the importance of the number eight, the number of pop quizzes the story is meant to contain, but does not: it contains five (with one such quiz numbered as Pop Quiz 9):

The number eight is ‘organically unified’ with its ‘two-times-two-times-two’ structure, and creates ‘a Manichean duality raised to the triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis’ (151). Careful readers of the book will note that Wallace provides sixteen ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,’ that is, two-times-two-times-two-times-two, the whole of which not only achieves the interrogative structure proposed in the ‘Octet’ but also constitutes, thematically, a Manichean duality resolved by a ‘Hegelian synthesis’.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for Boswell a careful reader will note that there are indeed *eighteen* ‘Brief Interviews,’ not sixteen. Therefore, the idea of an interrogative structure falls apart and cannot achieve the synthesis Boswell longs for. Earlier in the same text Boswell states again that there are sixteen interviews, which he refers to as a ‘random sampling of some seventy-five such documents’, when in fact the last interview is numbered ‘BI #72’.<sup>3</sup>

More recent, Christoforos Diakoulakis’s essay focuses solely on ‘BI #20,’ and makes the case for it being a story about love: ‘a love story – a story about a love story [...], an exemplary (if there is one), a proper “love story”’.<sup>4</sup> Diakoulakis goes on to assert that

Wallace knows it is nothing but the submission to the story of love/the story that is love, nothing but ‘love’ that makes love possible. Simply put, one *must* reduce love to ‘love’ and so betray love, in order to make love possible. One *must* tell a ‘love story’ in order to love. ‘Love’ is the necessary presupposition of love. This is the hypothesis of ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20’.<sup>5</sup>

Diakoulakis’s assertion marks a rather unambiguous start to a piece of criticism dealing with ‘the fourth and last homonymous short story from his [Wallace’s] homonymous collection of short stories,’ which is remarkable given that Diakoulakis’s notion of ‘BI #20’ being a love

---

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> Christoforos Diakoulakis, ‘Quote Unquote Love... A Type of Scotopia’, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

story seems to overlook the fact that rape and sexualised violence are the dominant themes at work within the story.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Clare Hayes-Brady, in the introduction to her essay, makes her objectives clear as she complains of a ‘surprising absence of direct feminine narrative: those female characters that appear are remarkably quiet’, whilst going on to say that ‘by contrast, the masculine figures that populate Wallace’s writing are physically solid, vibrant and vocal’. Furthermore, in somewhat of a Foucauldian move she goes on to note the ways in which

Wallace’s awareness of the inviolable strangeness of the female to the male consciousness leads to the opacity of his female characterizations, providing an oppositional balance with the forceful, dynamic males. Wallace’s women, who wield the influence if not the power, form the silent, shifting center around which his representations of masculinity can locate their stable orbits.<sup>7</sup>

Here it seems that Wallace, according to Hayes-Brady, does nothing interesting or original with his topic, in this case gendered relations. Indeed, he would appear to be the sort of writer that is merely a step away from the kind of misogyny that views woman as second-class citizen. Hayes-Brady’s essay will feature throughout this essay, as will critical essays on *Brief Interviews* written by Zadie Smith and Marshall Boswell, respectively: none of these deal satisfactorily with the hideous elements of the stories.

More recent still, Rachel Haley Himmelheber’s essay actually does deal with the hideous elements within *Brief Interviews*, and to date is one of the only articles to do so. Himmelheber makes the case for ‘BI #20’ ‘function[ing] as intricate portraiture of an ever-morphing, cunningly adaptive rape culture’, and that Wallace’s story serves to highlight the normativity of sexual violence in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Himmelheber takes Diakoulakis to task, accusing him on a number of occasions of ‘misread[ing]’ the text and even of offering an ‘irresponsible interpretation’ of it. Himmelheber goes on to conduct a thorough analysis of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, “‘...’: Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace,” p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Haley Himmelheber, “‘I Believed She Could Save Me’: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20’”, p. 522.

‘BI #20’ and makes it clear to the reader that Diakoulakis’s ‘vision [of the text] is disturbing,’ and that ‘Diakoulakis misses multiple layers of Wallace’s narrative by aligning himself in his reading with [Wallace’s] hideous man’.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, in her critique of Diakoulakis’s essay, Himmelheber reveals the pitfalls, intricacies, and ambiguities that exist in Wallace’s use of language, all of which contribute to Diakoulakis ‘misrepresent[ing] the story’s meaning as focused on love rather than a critique of rape culture’.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Himmelheber exposes a lack of engagement with the more disturbing elements of Wallace’s *corpus*.

Close to two decades on from its publication, we may surmise that the relative silence that exists around *Brief Interviews* has something to do with Wallace’s use of rape and sexualised violence, where the reader is confronted with hideous behaviour, and quite often in explicit detail. However, perhaps the style of the stories, where the reader is positioned oddly, may be viewed as an opportunity from which to proceed with a reading of the text. A female interlocutor, Q, interviews various men referred to by a number that is attached to their particular interview.<sup>11</sup> The question and answer style of the interviews is made more challenging for the reader because we only have access to a partial transcript: the words of the interviewees, never the interviewer. The narrative style creates a form of distancing, perhaps making it easier for the reader to engage with such challenging aspects of the text – the reader remaining sufficiently detached from them in order to deal with their effects. It must be stressed here that the text appears to be dealing with the language used around rape, the rhetoric of rape, a term borrowed from Sabine Sielke, and not merely the actual act of rape.<sup>12</sup> It is here that this essay differs from that of Himmelheber in that rather than concentrating on the prevalence of the notion of rape culture rhetoric within the stories, this

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 525.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 528.

<sup>11</sup> For example: BI #20 (hereafter, all of the stories’ interviewees will be referred to in this manner; similarly, the stories will also be referred to in this way but with inverted commas added to denote that it is a story, for example: ‘BI #20’).

<sup>12</sup> Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*, pp. 8-10.

essay suggests new ways in which this may be read in order to challenge existing, and somewhat axiomatic views about rape culture itself.

In order to achieve this aim we will enter into a discussion of the ways in which Wallace uses language to create certain effects. Here, we turn to consider Wallace's words during a radio interview with Michael Silverblatt in 1999 whilst promoting *Brief Interviews*. Wallace admits to being 'interested in misogyny' and interested in 'hostilities, both political and emotional, between males and females'.<sup>13</sup> Wallace then moves to theorise on the root cause of misogyny, briefly, basing it in a 'weird kind of fear', stating that although we as readers are hyper-aware of what has come to be widely known as the objectivity of women under a male gaze, there is little in the way of discussion about 'men's terror of women's judgement of them, and not just judgement sexually but judgment of them existentially, humanistically'.<sup>14</sup> Wallace expands on this by saying that 'being perceived and judged by another subjectivity is incredibly horrifying', and that 'the kind of anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust can be read in the same terms'.<sup>15</sup> Wallace concludes this part of the interview, and faces no further questions from the interviewer about what are, arguably, some inflammatory statements, by stating that the 'instinct to dehumanize the other, the instinct to turn the other into a means rather than an end is what a tremendous amount of our cultural flux and our cultural pain is about'.<sup>16</sup> Does Wallace's use of rape and sexualised violence serve to interrogate such 'cultural flux' and 'cultural pain', or is this just another form of misogynistic, sexist, rape culture rhetoric at work?

There are certainly critics who view Wallace's works as espousing more of the latter than the former, with Wallace coming under fire for providing, via his written works, not only a form of "misogyny" [...] based in instability, in which the feminine functions as a

---

<sup>13</sup> 'David Foster Wallace on Bookworm', Web.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

stabilizing Other for the masculine Self”, but also for producing ‘explicitly sexist’ works.<sup>17</sup> However, despite such criticism there is sufficient ambiguity surrounding Wallace’s work to permit an engagement with such a question. Much of the ambiguity resides in Wallace’s use of language and philosophical enquiry, and therefore whatever conclusions may be reached we must be mindful that they will most likely be theoretical tools to develop and further engage with. This is where Himmelheber’s article is most careful in its analysis of ‘BI #20’, for although we have seen that she views this particular story as being about rape culture, Himmelheber does not attempt to position Wallace’s work as something that further promotes such a culture, merely that rape culture *is* the dominant theme of the story.

Returning to Wallace’s direct reference to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, for a moment, it is with this in mind that Herbert Marcuse’s essay, ‘Repressive Tolerance’ (1969), is positioned alongside Sharon Marcus’s influential work on rape prevention, ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words’ (1992), in order to engage with what Marcus views as the necessity for ‘female violence’ in order to challenge the dominance of current rape culture.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Marcuse troubled the neutrality of the academy by appearing to posit a will to violence that to this day has not been fully resolved, and this essay suggests that there is indeed a growing voice in certain strands of feminism today, Marcus’s included, urging such a will to violence.<sup>19</sup> This is no doubt exacerbated by the continuation of certain kinds of intolerance that are fuelled by misogyny and sexism, to name but two factors, and that lead to the prevalence of rape and sexualised violence, which appear to affect women disproportionately.

---

<sup>17</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Op. Cit.*, p. 134; Nixon, Charles Reginald. ‘The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism’, p. 225.

<sup>18</sup> Sharon Marcus, ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention’, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Kelley Anne Malinen, ‘Thinking Woman-to-Woman Rape: A Critique of Marcus’s “Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention”’, p. 368-9.

With respect to Marcuse's 'Repressive Tolerance', critics have noted that 'what is contested and disputed [about the content of his essay] is the *actual point* at which tolerance is so threatened that *intolerance* is a possible and justifiable response [and that] Marcuse seems to have had in mind his experience in Nazi Germany before he migrated'.<sup>20</sup> Marcuse is often accused of using the events of the Holocaust as an attempt at making the case for legitimising certain forms of violence. Perhaps we may question whether intolerance thus becomes an acceptable response in a society where tolerance is preached but is rarely distributed evenly. Himmelheber picks up on this as she discusses the moment where the story of a rape is retold in 'BI #20'. Himmelheber views the '[v]iolence [of the scene as] thus clearly linked with the phallic, but it is also responsible for profound revelation'.<sup>21</sup> From here she asks the following question, '[a]re sharp objects vehicles of truth or vehicles of aggression', before stating that the imagery of the scene 'blur[s] the distinctions we crave, the distinctions a rape culture's untruths represent'.<sup>22</sup> Here, Himmelheber recognises that Wallace's narrative conjoins around two sharp instruments: the rapist's knife; and the imagery of a needle's point, a metaphor for the victim's focus and concentration in an attempt at avoiding being killed following the rape.

With Himmelheber's thoughts in mind we now turn to consider the story of 'BI #46', with 'BI #20' receiving a brief mention. As stated earlier, the interlocutor conducting the interviews is only ever referred to as Q in the transcripts, and although we know she is female, there is a good deal of ambiguity that exists because her words are not recorded for us: we only have access to the words she transcribes from the interviews. In 'BI #46' we encounter yet another Holocaust reference when we learn of the protagonist's unique treatment of Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. BI #46 tries to sustain the argument that if something good (Victor Frankl's book) stems from something bad (Frankl's

---

<sup>20</sup> Rodney Fopp, 'Herbert Marcuse's 'Repressive Tolerance' and His Critics', p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Himmelheber, *Op. Cit.*, p. 534.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



experience of the Holocaust) then we must not exhibit a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction towards the bad: ‘It’s a totally great book and now think about it, if there wasn’t a Holocaust there wouldn’t be a *Man’s Search for Meaning*’.<sup>23</sup> In this instance BI #46 is talking about violence, suffering, degradation, and the practice of stripping away a person’s humanity by viewing them as something *other* than human, as being beneficial in certain circumstances.

However, we soon learn that BI #46’s primary concern is not the Holocaust as he moves the discussion on to rape and sexualised violence, and the ‘positive aspects’ he feels these may have on a ‘human being in the long run’.<sup>24</sup> BI #46 states that he is concerned with the ‘afterwards’ of such events:

[Who] are we to say getting incested or abused or violated or whatever or any of those things can’t also have their positive aspects [...] in the long run. [...] Not that anybody ever ought to get raped or abused, not that it’s not totally terrible and negative and wrong while it’s going on [...] But that’s while it’s going on. [...] What about afterwards? [...] It’s not impossible there are cases where it can enlarge you [*Sic.*].<sup>25</sup>

Controversially, ‘BI #46’ clarifies that he is not stating that every case of violation, incest, or abuse ends with a positive outcome for the recipient of such acts, but that some do end positively, and that he just is not being ‘knee-jerk’ about it. Following this, BI #46 introduces us to the example he uses to state his case: a gang rape. BI #20’s opening takes a different approach as he leads with a confessional moment where he declares that he ‘did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed’.<sup>26</sup> The personal pronouns ‘her’ and ‘she’ refer to a character known only as the Granola Cruncher, a character subjected to rape, and about whom the story revolves, but whose voice we do not hear at first hand, and whose naming as the Granola Cruncher stands in obvious contrast to BI #20’s confession of having fallen in love with her, as here she remains forever the generic ‘her’.

<sup>23</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Here we have two separate stories that have rape and sexualised violence as the dominant trope. In a discussion of these stories Zadie Smith, a devotee of Wallace's work, appears to dismiss BI #46's narrative because of the Holocaust reference. Smith comments that '[t]he Granola Cruncher is one of the few people in *Brief Interviews* not using another person as an example or as an object of 'moral gymnastic equipment'. She exists in a quite different moral realm from [...] the guy who twists Victor Frankl's Holocaust memoir [...] into a perverse apologia for destroying another human being'.<sup>27</sup> Smith's analysis differs from Marshall Boswell's stance on the stories in question. Boswell states that 'as always in the Interviews, the actual reader is right there inside the piece, as both 'object' and 'subject', as the person addressed directly and whose empathy becomes the work's silent and therefore living dynamic force'.<sup>28</sup> What follows next may render both Smith's and Boswell's analyses moot as we pay close attention to the text.

There are obvious complications within the stories that link with the shared ambiguity of the collection as a whole. Q's narrative absence is problematic, as is her role as interviewer, as we do not know in what capacity she is acting. In addition to this is the lack of specificity about the type of location where the so-called interviews are held. In her essay, Hayes-Brady concludes that 'Wallace's attitude to and representation of women is by no means beyond reproach; [...] his characterizations are frequently archetypal, almost stereotypical'. Hayes-Brady ends by saying that 'it seems clear that the gender power dynamics in Wallace's writing both depend on and reinforce the active presence of the masculine and the absent opacity of the feminine'.<sup>29</sup> This article argues that there may be another way of viewing Q's narrative absence, and that this stems from Judith Butler's discussion of embodiment in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where Butler states that the 'association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female

---

<sup>27</sup> Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p. 297.

<sup>28</sup> Boswell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>29</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Op. Cit.*, p. 148.

sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom'.<sup>30</sup> A little further on Butler asks the following question: 'If there is no recourse to a 'person', a 'sex', or a 'sexuality' that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity'?<sup>31</sup> Here, Butler's description seems befitting of Q, the silent interlocutor.

It is suggested that it is possible to view Q as an example of such an inversion, subversion, or displacement. Indeed, it is the case that Q does not have a voice, for Q's narrative is absent, but this means that Q is not bound by the inadequacies of our present language system, where meaning is always and ever contested via the inconsistencies of signifier and signified. Q is not readily marked in terms of gender, or anything else for that matter. Could this be a sign of the 'incorporeal' that Butler describes, and does this make space for Q to act as an instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom as Butler suggests is the case with the incorporeal, and which Butler states has previously only been reserved for males?

To consider such a question we must pay attention to Wallace's choice of topic: rape. Again, we must be mindful that we are not here merely discussing the actual act of rape, but also the rhetoric of rape and how Wallace deploys this in his text. It could certainly be argued that Wallace's text may be yet another example of rape being used, according to Sielke, as a 'discourse that establish[es] gender differences as differences in sexuality and [that] also construct female sexuality as victimization'?<sup>32</sup> If we follow Smith and Boswell's reasoning we may end up reading the text in just such a way. However, we have already learnt that Smith will not allow herself to consider BI #46's story because of his unpalatable use of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Sielke, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

Holocaust and that she is happy to make pronouncements about the ‘moral realm’ of the Granola Cruncher. Smith takes this approach without any clear justification for doing so, presumably making use of the equation, woman + rape = victim, without considering that to do so serves to further disempower a person who may not view herself in that way. Likewise, Boswell is willing for us to ‘play’ the victim because this fits neatly with his notion of Hegelian synthesis. Furthermore, it is Boswell’s flawed notion of Hegelian synthesis that is responsible for his suggestion that we should ‘empathise’ with how it feels to suffer such a thing whilst also feeling empathy for BI #46 because, as it turns out, BI #46 may have been the gang rape ‘victim’ after all – a suggestion made even more problematic when at the story’s end he threatens to rape Q.

Wallace’s treatment of rape and sexualised violence is unusual if we consider that the rhetoric of rape used here differs from those examples seen in countless works before, by the likes of Hubert Selby Jr., Vladimir Nabokov, Anthony Burgess, Martin Amis, Bret Easton Ellis, for example. Admittedly, the introduction to ‘BI #46’ does not bode well in this sense, for no sooner does BI #46 mention the gang rape scenario than his narrative becomes heavily marked by gendered pronouns: ‘she’ and ‘her’. This may indeed seem to be apt if we are to consider the story as a misogynistic text replete with sexist attitudes, where the rape of a woman does little to alter the dominant modes of rhetoric with regard to female victimisation. BI #46 continues to promote the belief that having undergone such extreme acts of violence ‘she’ can become ‘bigger’, ‘enlarged’, ‘larger’, ‘deeper’, – ‘she can survive’.<sup>33</sup> Not content with promoting this belief, he is ready to defend his ideas when they are met with apparent hostility from Q: ‘That’s the knee-jerk reaction [...] taking everything I say and [...] saying what I’m saying is Oh so the guys that gang raped her did her a *favour*’ [*Sic*].<sup>34</sup> Such remarks

---

<sup>33</sup> Wallace, *Op. Cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

express extreme viewpoints and do little at this stage to separate Wallace's work from those of his contemporaries.

Following on from the moment where BI #46 tells Q about the gang rape, he confesses that the woman in question, the 'victim', is his wife. This, he states, is the reason he can speak with knowledge about such events. Little progress when one considers that 'she' has changed from being a gendered personal pronoun to a gendered pronoun indicating patriarchal possession: 'wife'. BI #46 goes into intimate detail of the gang rape and the on-going medical care that 'his wife' needs to this day due to the severity of the attack, before posing the question of what is left of a person who survives such horrors: 'What does *you* mean now'?<sup>35</sup> Where Wallace's works are concerned, 'you' occurs frequently in place of gendered personal pronouns. In fact, 'you' is a problematic pronoun that does not signify much in terms of the standard ways we are taught to classify, whether by markers of ethnicity, class, gender, etc. Following this, all the aspects of the story that BI #46 recounts for Q fall apart. He suggests that he may not even be married and continues to retell the details of the gang rape, but this time he inserts himself into the narrative as the recipient of such violence before serving to cast doubt on whether any of what he has told Q has happened at all – and then comes the threat: 'What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle? Do you think it would make any difference? Why? What are you? How do you know? You don't know shit?'<sup>36</sup> Again, we may feel that this does little more than reinforce existing notions of rape culture rhetoric.

However, further consideration of the passage and of Boswell's analysis may serve to shift our focus. If Boswell is correct in his assertion regarding the question of empathy, and it is argued here that he is not, with whom should we empathise? The answer is unclear. Do we empathise with BI #46, and is that as the man he is now or as the sixteen year-old boy at the

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

time of the attack; or do we empathise with ‘she/his wife’, who may not even exist, or presumably women in general; or do we empathise with Q, a woman about whom we know little? Our ability to empathise is problematised by the ever-shifting ‘facts’ of the story. Thus, the ambiguity that exists here speaks against the formation of neat conclusions, like Boswell’s example above, and instead demands that the matter be pressed further.

In order to do so it is necessary to borrow from Kelley Anne Malinen’s critique of Sharon Marcus’s ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words’. Malinen, although discussing in her essay the topic of woman-to-woman rape, provides space for a consideration of what she, borrowing from Butler, terms ‘gender transgressive rape.’<sup>37</sup> Malinen opens the essay by stating that ‘existing theories, both academic and commonsense, rely heavily on the male aggressor/female victim paradigm [and that] survivors who find themselves outside this framing are at an elevated risk for invisibility.’<sup>38</sup> Malinen goes on to note the dangers of such thinking and offers an argument that will lead to the acknowledgment of ‘myriad possible forms of sexual violence, something which cannot be done so long as we adhere strictly to the standard gendered paradigm.’<sup>39</sup> Although ‘BI #20’ seems to adhere to such a paradigm with its familiar tale of the violent stranger who commits an act of rape on an unsuspecting victim, it would appear that via ‘BI #46’ Wallace’s text offers something other than the standard gendered paradigm. However, there is also the question of whether BI #46 has a legitimate claim to tell such a story, and this is indeed complicated by the ever-shifting ‘facts’, but the prevalence of the male perpetrator/female victim paradigm is evidently being questioned at this point in the text where BI #46 asks Q,

[W]hat if I said it happened to me? Would that make a difference? You that are full of knee-jerk politics about your ideas about victims? Does it have to be a woman? You think, maybe you think you can imagine it better if it was a woman because her external props look more like yours so it’s easier to see

---

<sup>37</sup> Malinen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 360.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

her as a human being that's being violated so if it was somebody with a dick and no tits it wouldn't be as real to you? [*Sic*].<sup>40</sup>

The ambiguity that surrounds 'BI #46' and its narrative means that at the story's end we are left with no clear sense of what has happened. However, unlike Zadie Smith, we may be prepared to look past the overt hideousness of Wallace's *Hideous Men*, for this would appear to be a provocative gesture on Wallace's part that actively forces the reader to take up a position with which to empathise, or not.

This positioning of the reader is a recurring feature of Wallace's works, and perhaps an interesting one to consider if it forces us to confront the positions we adopt, sometimes unconsciously, by way of habit. In doing so, and with specific reference to the rhetoric of rape discussed here, we may find that by opening debates around gender transgressive rapes, and by ending the rhetoric that sees 'rape as the fixed reality of women's lives', and also by ceasing to rely on the male aggressor/female victim paradigm, that we may find ourselves working to destabilize certain cultural and social ironies that continue to promote clear-cut notions of aggressor and victim, where a space seems always and ever ready formed for us, depending on our own position.<sup>41</sup> The challenging aspects of Wallace's work, challenging not only because of their hideousness, but also because of their resistance to the formation of neat conclusions, serve as a timely reminder that there is much debate to be had in this area, but perhaps that that depends upon whether we are willing to engage with such works in the first instance.

---

<sup>40</sup> Wallace, *Op. Cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus, *Op. Cit.*, p. 168.

## Works Cited

- Boswell, Marshall. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- ‘David Foster Wallace on Bookworm [1999]’. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VO471NhQhY&index=9&list=FLkiCNI1gFR7rg7SqGwwOaiA>> (06:30-10:24 min.). Web.
- Diakoulakis, Christoforos. “‘Quote Unquote Love... a Type of Scotopia’: David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*”. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media, 2010. 147-155. Print.
- Fopp, Rodney. ‘Herbert Marcuse’s ‘Repressive Tolerance’ and His Critics’. *Borderlands E-Journal: New Spaces in the Humanities* 6.1 (2007): 5-. Print.
- Hayes-Brady, Clare. “‘...’: Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace”. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Eds. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 131-150. Print.
- Himmelheber, Rachel Haley. “‘I Believed She could Save Me’: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men# 20’”. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55.5 (2014): 522-35. Print.
- Malinen, Kelley Anne. ‘Thinking Woman-to-Woman Rape: A Critique of Marcus’s “Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention”’. *Sexuality & Culture* 17.2 (2013): 360-76. Print.
- Marcus, Sharon. ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention’. *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism*.



Eds. Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.  
166-185. Print.

Marcuse, Herbert, Barrington Moore Jr., and Robert Paul Wolff. *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969. Print.

Nixon, Charles Reginald. 'The Work of David Foster Wallace and Post-Postmodernism'.  
University of Leeds, 2013. Print.

Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape. [Electronic Book]: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.

Smith, Zadie. *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009.  
Print.

Wallace, David Foster. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. London: Abacus, 2001. Print.