

The Pale King Study Guide

The Pale King by David Foster Wallace

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Plot Summary

The Pale King is an unfinished novel and as such presents only a tentative plot. Much of the novel's material is tangential or unrelated to the main narrative plot action. For this reason, the novel is best read as a tone or texture novel and not a novel overly concerned with plot. The central character of the novel is one David Foster Wallace, who narrates major sections of the novel and claims to be the author of the book. The narrator also makes numerous claims that the novel is in fact non-fiction. Presumably, the autobiographical memoir is presented as fiction at the demand of the publisher who feared legal ramifications for publishing the memoir as written. One of the central conflicts in the novel surrounds the protagonist David Foster Wallace presenting for his first day of work as a new hire at an IRS center where he is mistaken for another person also named David Foster Wallace who is also appearing for his first day of work as an experienced senior IRS employee being transferred to the same IRS center. This case of mistaken identity finds both men placed in the wrong intake and assigned to the wrong jobs. When the situation finally is rectified, the hapless protagonist David Foster Wallace is almost fired for possibly manipulating the system to his own advantage.

The backdrop of the IRS features the agency undergoing a major internal reorganization that involves a serious shift in emphasis. The old guard of the staff in the novel view the IRS as a sort of law enforcement agency. In this ideology, the IRS code is held as the law and individual tax returns are measured against the code. Any infraction is to be corrected, regardless of severity. The new idea focuses on the IRS' mission to generate revenue. In this ideology tax returns are examined to determine whether or not they have the types of infractions that likely will generate additional revenue. Mistakes or deliberate errors that likely result in only small monetary differences are to be ignored; mistakes or deliberate errors that likely result in large revenues are pursued aggressively. Much of the novel focuses on the friction between these competing ideologies. These changes also go hand-in-glove with the gradual adaptation of technology for automated processing and automated review of taxpayer filings. Most employees feel that computers have a very limited role in the review process. A few employees, led by a rising star in the IRS, believe that most employees can be replaced by computerized automation. This division of theory also leads to friction within the novel though this aspect is not as fully developed as the general shift in attitude.



Chapters 1 through 8

Chapters 1 through 8 Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the book with a fairly cryptic statement that does not impact the plot. In Chapter 2 Claude Sylvanshine is introduced. Sylvanshine works for the Internal Revenue Service, or IRS, at IRS locations known as Regional Examination Centers, or RECs. His boss is named Merrill Errol Lehl. Claude reflects on an unspecified business disaster that occurred at his last posting at the Rome (probably New York) REC. Sylvanshine feels grateful to Lehl for rescuing him from the Rome situation and getting him reassigned to the Peoria, Illinois, REC. Sylvanshine takes a plane trip as part of his relocation. Sylvanshine reflects, in a stream-of-consciousness process, on the airplane travel, his boss 'Mel' Lehl, and his reassignment. He also thinks about his roommate, Reynolds. Sylvanshine is a GS-9 while Reynolds is a GS-11, making Reynolds Sylvanshine's theoretical superior. Sylvanshine and Reynolds share an unusually close relationship, though they are not homosexually involved with each other. They apparently always work together and apparently always room together. Chapter 3 presents a frank discussion of masturbation between two men traveling in an automobile; presumably these two men are Sylvanshine and Reynolds. Chapter 4 presents a news article noting the death of an IRS worker whose corpse was not found for days.

In Chapter 5, Leonard Stecyk is introduced as a young boy. His name is not given in the early chapter and his identity is only established later in the novel. Stecyk appears to be very intelligent and highly motivated. He is an over-achiever who insists on constantly helping everyone that he can. His selfless acts border on the compulsive and nearly everyone who spends any time with him comes to hate his constant well-meaning but ill-timed intrusions. Everything that Stecyk does is done well and he appears to have a vast surplus of energy and ideas. Everyone who spends a lot of time with him comes to hate him outright and several openly hostile encounters are presented. Stecyk's mother is said to have an accident that requires hospitalization and prolonged convalescence. The narrative makes it clear that her accident is in fact a failed suicide attempt though Stecyk remains oblivious to his causative role in his mother's despondency.

In Chapter 6 Lane A. Dean Jr. is introduced as a teenager. Dean is particularly religious and spends much time focusing on his Christianity and how it does, or at least should, impact his life. Dean's girlfriend, Sheri Fisher, is also devoutly Christian. The young couple struggles against controlling their sexual feelings within their Christian milieu. Fisher in particular appears to conflate Christian earnestness with sexual desires. The couple has sex a few times and Dean becomes discouraged with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. He plans to break off their relationship but then learns that Fisher has become pregnant. The two hold a short and inconclusive discussion contemplating abortion—Dean tentatively suggests it as an option, Fisher rejects it as outside her religious experience. They eventually determine to marry instead of having an abortion



—other options do not appear to occur to them, or at least are rejected before they are openly discussed.

In Chapter 7 Sylvanshine transfers from the airport to IRS temporary housing. The transfer occurs on a minivan that is packed full. Sylvanshine sits between two GS-9 employees, Bondurant and Britton. They take turns talking to him as he psychically learns random and useless facts about them. Bondurant and Britton are familiar with the Peoria ERC and Sylvanshine listens to their nearly pointless banter with moderate interest.

In Chapter 8, an unnamed young girl (identified later in the novel) lives with her mother. The family is homeless and the mother is a drug addicted wanderer. Various horrible things happen to the family, often perpetrated by the mother's current boyfriend. The young girl is raped and sexually molested as well as being physically abused. But she remains near her mother always. Her mother, likewise, is physically abused, sexually abused, and occasionally raped. The family lives in several temporary situations and then the mother and daughter begin a lengthy drive with a physically abusive partner. When the opportunity presents itself the mother steals the man's truck and the mother and daughter drive away alone in the stolen vehicle.

Chapters 1 through 8 Analysis

Sylvanshine and Reynolds are recurrent characters in the novel. Their respective ranks, GS-9 and GS-11, are pay grades or pay scale designators, indicating that Reynolds is two grades above Sylvanshine. This designator refers to a governmental classification system and much of the esoterica of the novel features Federal governmental terminology and IRS terminology. Sylvanshine is a 'fact psychic', described more fully later in the novel. He simply somehow metaphysically 'knows' random facts about things. Whether or not his knowledge is truthful is only partially considered in the novel. Reynolds is never specified as a surname or a given name. The two men's relationship is specified as not sexual but they function nearly as a married couple throughout most of the narrative. The discussion about masturbation in Chapter 3 is between unspecified characters but almost certainly is intended to be understood as having transpired between Sylvanshine and Reynolds. Chapter 4's death notice apparently is unrelated to any specific character in the novel though the implication is that IRS workers who live alone are not missed when they die. This idea is carried throughout the novel where in general IRS workers are presented as strange, isolated, eccentric, and introverted.

In Chapter 5, Stecyk is presented as a paradox—a well-meaning, over-achiever that somehow comes off as offensive and abrasive. All his associated despise him and his cheery attitude, and even his mother attempts suicide to escape him. Stecyk's mother's motivation is not directly addressed so the reader is unsure whether she fully understands her own feelings toward her son. Stecyk recurs throughout the novel and was obviously intended to be a major character, though in the current form he remains a minor character regardless of his lengthy portrayal here as a young man. Dean appears in Chapter 6 and throughout the novel, and in the current form of the novel emerges as



one of the more-normal characters. He also is critical to the novel's portrayal of the boredom of IRS work. This portrayal of the normal Dean's impossible task of surviving the bureaucracy of the IRS contrasts with the ease with which other eccentric characters navigate the IRS system. Dean and Fisher's relationship is typical of many young Christians. The writing in this section is fairly unremarkable aside from the excruciating detail devoted to Dean's evolution of thought.

The language in Chapter 7 focuses on the dreary, uncomfortable process of being stuffed into a transfer van with a bunch of strangers. The chapter precisely develops the uncomfortable, claustrophobic feelings. Particular attention is paid to individuals being pressed up against strangers' bodies and sitting in close proximity to strangers who often speak of seemingly random things. The transfer itself is inconsequential and Bondurant and Britton, so developed here, do not recur in the novel. As GS-9 employees they are nominally peers with Sylvanshine though obviously he considers himself superior to them. The Chapter 8 material is decidedly unpleasant; the text does not shy away from the difficult life of the young girl, nor does it euphemize the reprehensible behavior of several adults. The girl is the only major female character developed in the novel. The story directly continues later in the narrative which is unusual for the novel's construction.



Chapters 9, 10, and 11

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 Summary

Chapter 9 is presented as the authorial foreword to the novel. The narrator here self-identifies as David Wallace and claims to be the self-same David Wallace, author. The narrator gives his background as a writer, offers his social security number which newly was assigned after working for the Internal Revenue Service. The chapter explains at length that the novel is in fact non-fictional. However, for reasons of legal problems, trade secrets, and so forth, the publishers have insisted the book be published as fiction. The author argues the novel is not merely a fictionalized account of historic events but is in fact a historic account of historic events. The narrator implies the publisher has been intimately involved in extensive editing and re-editing of the novel and that the novel's present form owes much to a struggle between the author and lawyers. On the one hand the author wishes to present the truth; on the other hand the lawyers wish to avoid lawsuits. The narrator also provides a great amount of biographical notes and details, explains why he has written the book, and then repeatedly insists that the book is not fiction. The narrator seeks to establish the book as a kind of memoir, or auto-biography, about the narrator's experiences at the IRS. The chapter includes extensive footnotes on a variety of subjects - some are topical, while others are somewhat random. Some of the footnotes have footnotes of their own.

Chapter 10 presents a brief analysis of bureaucratic systems and their own self-justifications. Chapter 11 presents a lengthy memorandum listing forty-two physical symptoms most likely to be associated with lengthy postings to IRS examinations. None of the symptoms are favorable.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 Analysis

The construction of Chapter 9 marks a notable shift in tone with a very tongue-in-cheek self-awareness. The so-called foreword, by being placed squarely within the middle of the fictional narrative, poses a meta-fictional conundrum to the reader—a limited sort of "liar's paradox." The posthumous publication of the novel strongly argues that no publisher was involved in legal disputes with the author during the actual publication process. The many fictional elements of the novel - for example, the IRS REC locations - argue the novel is in fact a novel. Because the narrator presents himself as a character, the chapter is understood best as a fictional soliloquy by a character in the novel. The question then arises whether to associate this narrator character with the novel's character named David Wallace (in later chapters). Naturally, the reader's tendency will be to conflate the narrator with the character and, possibly, with the author. A close reading of the novel would suggest there are at least three significant actors within the novel's sphere with the same name—the author, the narrator, and the character. The fact that yet another character with the same name is presented later in the novel (as well as the fact that that much confusion within the narrative occurs



because of this) points to the author's savvy use of meta-fictional devices to unbalance the narrative. This uncertainty disorients the reader and leads to a certain confusion that mimics the character's disorientation and confusion upon first reporting for work at the IRS REC, later in the novel.

Chapter 10 is the shortest chapter in the novel, at ½ page. Chapter 11 is also very short at two pages. Chapter 10 briefly explains how bureaucratic systems create and maintain their own justification; Chapter 11 strongly suggests that being an IRS examiner is not a particularly healthy occupation. Many of the symptoms associated with the post are psychosomatic; others are repetitive motion injuries.



Chapters 12, 13, 14

Chapters 12, 13, 14 Summary

In Chapter 12, Leonard Stecyk as a young child canvasses his neighborhood delivering ZIP Code directories. He appears well-meaning and has a large stash of the presumably free-from-the-Post-Office guides. However, the neighbors clearly are irritated by his efforts to assist them. This pattern holds true for most of Stecyk's life—he is an over-achiever and apparently means well but is received with open hostility. Some of Stecyk's adult work is presented in Chapter 14.

Chapter 13 describes the youth of an unnamed character, revealed later in the novel to be David Cusk. Cusk's earliest memories are about sweating since he suffers from flop sweat attacks that leave him soaking wet and streaming sweat. Cusk's sweat attacks cover his entire body and soak his hair and clothing. His entire life is dominated by his attempts to prevent sweat attacks or, in the event that a sweat attack occurs, how to escape from public view. Many of Cusk's acts aimed at ameliorating sweating in fact make it all the more noticeable. The way he sits; where he sits in a room; how he speaks and engages with other people; the places he walks and goes; the activities he engages in—all these things are determined by his interpretation of how likely they are to make him sweat or reveal his sweating if it occurs. Cusk's sweat attacks basically are caused by his fear of having sweat attacks. Sometimes elevated temperatures start them; other times being inadvertently thrust into the spotlight starts them. Once an attack starts or even once Cusk fears an attack is imminent, the fear of the attack itself and the social phobia of them, ensures that Cusk will suffer a devastating, shattering sweat.

In Chapter 14, Stecyk has prepared dozens of videotaped interviews with various IRS workers. Stecyk, working under supervision, is attempting to demonstrate how important the revenue work of the IRS is; how human the process is. He is trying to capture, during the interviews, the human side of the IRS employees and also the human interest facet of IRS revenue generation. The numerous excerpts from the video interviews are presented by Social Security Number. The topics include the transformation of the IRS from a law-enforcement organization to a revenue-generating organization (sometimes referred to as the Spackman Initiative in the interviews); methods of increasing voluntary compliance through simple social engineering; and the fact that the then-contemporaneous performance reviews of IRS examiners was based largely upon the amount of money each examiner's examinations gathered through corrective action on the part of the IRS against the filing taxpayer. Apparently, new hires such as David Wallace are set to watch the excerpts though they clearly are not final video products.



Chapters 12, 13, 14 Analysis

Chapter 12 presents Stecyk delivering ZIP Code directories. The ZIP Code was introduced by the United States Postal Service in 1963. The use of ZIP Codes was made mandatory in 1967. This period, 1963-1967, coincides generally with Stecyk's apparent age in the novel during the period of his delivery. This implication is that Stecyk was out pushing the use of the ZIP Code on his neighbors, enforcing the government bureaucracy even at that young age.

Chapter 13 presents background on the youth of David Cusk. In the chapter, Cusk is not named specifically but later in the novel Cusk is noted as being the flop sweat attack character. The irony of Cusk's sweat attacks is that they are caused by his fear of having such an attack. In other words, they only happen because he fears they will happen and he fears they will happen only because they happen. In any event, Cusk's sweat attacks control his entire social experience throughout the entire novel. Cusk's ability to sweat is profound, even sitting in an air conditioned room he can sweat so much his hair is wet, his clothes are wet, and he leaves a puddle on a chair.

Chapter 14 presents a large amount of material that spans nearly the entire novel's essence. The material is presented as excerpts, or outtakes, and as such is scattered and disorganized. One lengthy excerpt refers to something called the Spackman Initiative; this term is not carried throughout the novel but here refers to a portion of the large transformation taking place within the IRS in c. 1985. At this point the organization ceased to be strictly a compliance enforcement organization and instead sought greater revenue. The theory was that minor errors leading to no or minor revenue could simply be ignored—instead, examiners should focus more attention on errors likely to generate large amounts of revenue through corrective action. This gradual change led to various consequences, including the idea that computer evaluation could reliably replace human evaluation for major parts of the review process. Most long-term employees appear to have viewed the change as a negative occurrence, believing that taxpayers should all be held accountable to the IRS code regardless of whether large revenue amounts were in dispute. This seems to be the focus of the excerpts produced and selected by Stecyk, which should be no surprise given his character. Presumably, the video selections will be refined and professionally produced as the apparent intention is to make a sort of IRS marketing video to be released to the public.



Chapters 15 through 21

Chapters 15 through 21 Summary

In Chapter 15, Claude Sylvanshine is presented as having a special supernatural ability—he is a so-called fact psychic; random facts simply pop into his mind. Whether these facts are correct or imagined is not fully developed in the novel though several of the facts appear to be correct and also unknowable by normal means. Sometimes these facts are applicable to the person Sylvanshine is talking to; sometimes they are applicable to the area or process Sylvanshine is investigating; usually they are simply random facts about whatever. Within the narrative, Sylvanshine's ability is accepted as real. In Chapter 16, Lane Dean Jr. and two other examiners stand outside of the IRS REC on a lunch break. The two other examiners obviously are old co-workers and they gossip about various people unknown to Dean. Dean feels excluded, wonders if he's being deliberately excluded, and makes a few feeble attempts to include himself in the conversation. Dean continues to feel like he's going slowly insane because of the tedium and boredom of his job and because of the strange milieu of the IRS working environment. Chapter 17 is an unattributed quote about a childhood view that IRS workers were equivalent to police or firemen. Chapter 18 considers the IRS phenomenon of Desk Names. Desk Names are made up names that are intended to project power, decisiveness, and authority. They are used by IRS examiners during person-to-person interviews with taxpayers to help create an aura of IRS infallibility. From time to time, depending on senior management, Desk Names are either used or forbidden.

Chapter 19 presents a lengthy discussion about civics with much of the dialogue focusing on 'what's wrong with America' type topics. According to one speaker, the failings of the United States largely can be traced to the lapse of teaching civics courses in public education. DeWitt Glendenning is one of the participants of the conversation, though he does not offer much of an opinion. The major speakers are unidentified. In Chapter 20, an man named Lotwis confronts his neighbor about a persistently barking dog. The abusive and aggressive neighbor dismisses him with a threat. Chapter 21 presents an IRS interview with a taxpayer; the IRS worker conducting the interview uses a variety of methods to confuse, disorient, and direct the taxpayer.

Chapters 15 through 21 Analysis

These seven chapters are quite short, some being barely one page in length. Sylvanshine's ability is held in high regard by his boss Merrill Lehl. Throughout the novel, Sylvanshine and his partner Reynolds use Sylvanshine's ability and their own insightful sleuthing abilities to assemble quickly a sort of information portfolio for Lehl's use. Lane Dean Jr., probably more than any other character in the novel, epitomizes the major theme of the novel that of boredom, tedium, and the soul-killing work of the modern information age. Dean also appears as one of the most completely

characterized characters in the novel; here, the tight writing is indicative of the fact that Chapter 16 was published originally as a short story under the title of "A New Examiner" in *The Lifted Brow* and again in *Harper's*. The Desk Names cited are sometimes joke names ("Mike Hunt", p. 128). These seem to be preferred by the workers themselves, but are more-often names making the taxpayer feel uncertain or disoriented ("Eugene Fusz", p. 128). Glendenning allows the use of Desk Names, which makes him popular with employees.

The Chapter 19 civics discussion informs a central tenet of the novel, albeit one that is only partially developed. The argument appears to be that truly civic-minded people can be created through education. These civic-minded people would then understand the need for governmental revenue and would voluntarily participate in the system with an increased desire for accuracy—there would be less tax 'cheating' by taxpayers. Ergo, investing in civics education should prove to be profitable, aside from improving the national political environment. None of the participants in the discussion are critical of this rather outré viewpoint—demonstrating again the self-justification of bureaucracies. Glendenning's presence here is also indicative that these views, at least in some form, are held at the senior management level. Glendenning's presence at this break-room chit-chat also characterizes him as 'one of the guys', even though clearly he stands apart. This rare appearance of Glendenning or the 'Pale King' himself, for reasons not considered in the novel—is unusual within the narrative. Lotwis, not even a tax worker, is a non-person in the novel and the inclusion of Chapter 20 in the final edit of the incomplete novel is puzzling. The IRS interview in Chapter 21, like many of the smaller chapters before it, provides context and background. It also demonstrates that the interviewer is far more interested in capturing easy revenue than in enforcing the IRS code.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

The quite lengthy chapter 22 reads as an autobiography, though of course it is fictional or perhaps meta-fictional. The narrator is David Wallace, again the character as narrator asserting himself as author, as in Chapter 9. The chapter begins with a sprawling and lengthy look at 1970s and 1980s popular culture in the United States. Wallace's father was a Certified Public Accountant, or CPA, and thus Wallace grew up with at least a fair amount of tax and financial knowledge circulating in his home. Wallace grew up as a self-labeled "wastoid" (p. 154). This term encapsulates some frequent illicit drug use but goes well beyond simply using drugs—instead, it is meant to encompass the basic lack of any motivation or desire for constructive behavior. Wallace uses whatever illegal drugs are available and appealing but has a strong preference for a prescription drug called Obetrol, an amphetamine. Wallace's continual drug use and lack of motivation finds him in and out of various colleges, usually for disciplinary action. Obviously, Wallace's relationship with his father is quite strained. Wallace's mother suffers a nervous breakdown in 1971; his parents divorce in 1977. Wallace largely blames his father for his mother's mental condition and feels that his father abandons his mother. Wallace thus provides background and context for his young and upbringing.

Shortly after the divorce Wallace accompanies his father on a shopping trip in Libertyville. After shopping, Wallace's father hurries to catch the subway train home. Wallace, peeved at his father, demonstrates his usual lack of initiative and lollygags along. As they near the platform, Wallace's father sees they are about to miss their train and rushes through the crowd to get to the train. Wallace follows but only slowly. Reaching the train, Wallace's father puts his arm into the automatic door to prevent it from closing—effectively holding the train for Wallace. However, the doors malfunction and tightly close upon Wallace's father's arm. The train then starts and Wallace watches as his father is dragged along the platform, unable to free his arm. Wallace's father is killed when the subway enters the tube and his body is flung against the retaining wall, severing his arm. Over the next years, a lengthy and complex series of lawsuits occur. Wallace and his mother are involved as the next-of-kin. None of the lawsuits ever generates results and they are seemingly incapable of generating any money. Eventually, sickened of dealing with attorneys, Wallace's mother drops her involvement. Wallace soon after follows her example.

In 1978, Wallace hurries around a new college campus to find a class. He enters the wrong classroom and accidentally sits in an Advanced Tax class. He finds the subject fascinating and remains for the entire period, then transfers into the class and begins to enjoy tax theory. This eventually leads Wallace to the IRS where his application process is aided in unspecified ways by a relative already working for the IRS. The entire application is very tedious and full of bureaucratic red tape. Wallace completes the appallingly complicated process simply to apply. He then goes through a recruitment



interview that lasts four hours. Completing this, he begins to work for the IRS. Wallace offers a lengthy apology, in both senses of the word, for working at the IRS.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Chapter 22 is the longest chapter in the novel (18% of the total novel). The narrative discussion of the accidental death of Wallace's father is spread throughout the chapter. The clear implication is that Wallace killed his father because a) he knew his father was always a hard-charger; b) he lollygagged on purpose because he was irritated with his father, thus delaying his father's arrival at the train; and c) his father's delayed arrival at the train directly was responsible for his death. Yet of course it was Wallace's father who thrust his arm into the door, and a series of mechanical, signal, and process failures which subsequently resulted in death. Clearly, however, the event marks Wallace for life and casts significant doubt on the narrative credibility and accuracy of his portrayal of his youth. For example, Wallace states he found the Advanced Tax class fascinating because of the subject. Yet he was feeling guilty about his father's death and the class clearly offered an avenue to connect to his father, a CPA. In any event, Wallace ends up taking the tax class followed by more education in tax theory, followed by applying for a job at the IRS. Like all of the IRS workers in the novel, Wallace feels he must justify his position at the IRS to the reader. The narrative assumption projected onto the reader being that all IRS workers are wicked and vindictive. The chapter thus tracks Wallace from a drug-abusing slacker to an employed tax examiner. Clearly, the defining turning point in his life is the death of his father. Obetrol is pharmaceutically analogous to today's popular illicit use of Adderall.

Chapters 23 through 26

Chapters 23 through 26 Summary

In Chapter 23, the speaker relates a dream about boredom. In Chapter 24, the narrator, again David Wallace, continues to present himself as the author. Wallace is hired by the IRS as a GS-9 examiner, an entry-level position. He and several other new hires are picked up from an IRS temporary housing facility by a van seized for tax default. The van is full of people and Wallace sits next to Cusk; the two characters are squeezed together. The drive is related in agonizing detail and the last portion of the commute—the turn from the road into the IRS REC parking lot—takes forever. The entire history of the road, the parking structure, and the intersection is examined with the narrator concluding it was designed on purpose to be inefficient and irritating. When the van finally arrives all of the new hires are taken to intake processing, except for Wallace. When he exits the van he finds one side of his body soaking wet with Cusk's sweat. Wallace sees an attractive Iranian woman holding a placard with his name on it. He approaches her and she introduces herself as Ms. Neti-Neti. Wallace, unaware that his treatment is unusual, follows Neti-Neti through a labyrinthine trip through the REC. She makes one wrong turn and Wallace sees a huge but silent room full of examiners for just a moment. The narrator then observes large amounts of antiquated electronic equipment that was designed specifically for the IRS. The equipment is antiquated and retrofitted beyond reason, but still in active use. Wallace eventually arrives at the office of Stecyk and observes him, through the slightly opened door, down on his knees trying to conform an unidentified fellow worker.

Chapter 25 relates events in an examination room over the course of perhaps an hour of a typical work day. The chapter summarizes who turns pages, who examines what, who checks what, etc. Chapter 26 introduces two so-called phantoms. Phantoms are some type of metaphysical manifestation of ghostly individuals, though they are not frightening. Two phantoms are mentioned; Garrity, a very old phantom from pre-IRS REC times and Blumquist, an IRS examiner who died at his desk a few years previous to the narrative. Many workers know the phantoms' names and life details because Sylvanshine has learned them through his fact psychic ability.

Chapters 23 through 26 Analysis

The prescient dream of boredom of Chapter 23 breaks Wallace's lengthy narrative into pre-IRS and post-IRS hiring phases and within the narrative construction warns the reader what to expect next. Chapter 24 returns to the style first encountered in Chapter 9, with many footnotes, first-person narration, and so forth. Wallace's first turn into the REC parking lot is described in agonizing detail, setting the narrative tone for the remainder of his work stay at the IRS. Humorously, he is seated next to the sweating Cusk. At the arrival and intake point, all the new hires are herded together except for Wallace who receives special handling. Clearly this should, and in some respects was,



a red flag to him. He worries that his relative working at the IRS somehow has overdone the welcome though of course this interpretation is off the mark. Wallace has been mistaken for a high-level, long-term examiner of the same name transferring to the REC on the same day. When Wallace arrives at Stecyk's office, he sees Stecyk doing what he does best, which is concerning himself with others.

Chapter 25 is presented in double column format, the typography reading somewhat like a newspaper. The litany presented captures the action of a typical period in the examinations room. This chapter often is noted in book reviews of the novel as capturing the essence of tedious boredom. The two phantoms discussed in Chapter 26 are interesting but play a minor role in the novel. They are not ghosts though the distinction is rather hazily drawn in the novel. Blumquist makes a later appearance at Dean's desk. The reason the phantoms have names that are known, as well as personal details, is because Sylvanshine has apparently received facts about them via his psychic ability. Of course Sylvanshine could simply make up stories about them and nobody could question him.



Chapters 27, 28, 29

Chapters 27, 28, 29 Summary

In Chapter 27, all of the new hires receive their formal orientation. The chapter first examines the treatment of the rank-and-file new hires and focuses closely on David Cusk. As Cusk enters the conference room he carefully selects a seat that puts him near the exit, away from heat sources, and behind everyone else. Unfortunately for Cusk, shortly after that a woman enters the class and sits closely behind him; he deliberately avoids looking at her because he knows it will make him nervous and he doesn't want her to try to chat with him. Cusk spends the next few hours trying to pay attention to the orientation so that he will not focus on the woman and start sweating. He imagines her to be beautiful, young, and sexy, which is exactly the kind of woman that would make Cusk sweat. His mental gyrations about the woman eventually bring on a sweat attack and during a break he rushes to the restroom to swab off with paper towels. Upon returning he ironically discovers that the woman behind him is heavy, old, and unattractive.

The topics covered in the orientation are varied and not narrowly focused. First, there are no formal quotas for performance but in fact there are unofficial quotas that are tracked closely. Another IRS site, Martinsburg, performs much pre-work on filings and produces a computerized punch card and report for filings that are then forwarded to Peoria. The Martinsburg work is complicated and covers many aspects of the most-common errors on filings. The Martinsburg card and report are considered the basic triage tool for the Peoria REC. The goal of the REC is to gain revenue. Revenue is gained mostly through audits, though the capacity to audit is only 1/7th of 1 percent of all filings. Thus, the capacity for audits, as well as the cost of the audits, must be weighed against the likely revenue generated by audit. Although the REC claims it does not want to search for "profitable" (p. 333) filings, the orientation makes it clear that in fact this is exactly what the REC wants to do—though it calls such profitable filing audits "noncompliant" (p. 333). Cusk and the other new hires appear to understand the orientation materials.

Meanwhile, Wallace is taken to an advanced training class where he receives highly technical orientation about complex and advanced filing procedures. He is completely lost and feels like the orientation topics are things he's never heard about before. Instead of talking about profitability and noncompliance, here the orientation defines the difference between the role of "cops" (p. 338) and "business men" (p. 338); the idea being that these examiners are not in code enforcement but are in revenue generation. Wallace still has no idea that he is being treated radically different than all the other new hires.

Chapter 28 asserts dogma about working for the IRS; namely, that all GS-9 level employees want to be GS-11 level employees and so forth. Chapter 29 presents a lengthy and rambling discussion between a few examiners at work. Each statement is



followed by a few minutes of silence before a response is offered. One examiner, Gistine Hurd, listens to an unnamed examiner tell a story about college hazing involving a fat man sitting naked on other students' faces in the middle of the night.

Chapters 27, 28, 29 Analysis

Chapter 27 presents a parallel narrative development between similar experiences of similar employees at the same time. Cusk and Wallace serve as the narrative exemplars. Cusk goes through a rather banal and typical orientation process where basic facts and procedures are served by presenters who, quite literally, are counting the days to suicide. Wallace receives a highly technical review by a clearly experienced professional presenter. Cusk's orientation is boring and the new hires appear bored and unmotivated. Wallace's orientation is lively and the participants ask questions and appear interested. Clearly this is because Wallace is accidentally in an advanced orientation for advanced employees—though he's too naïve to realize this. Chapter 28 summarizes some minor facts about IRS service. The grotesque face-sitting exploits in Chapter 29 have relatively no impact on the narrative development since Hurd does not recur in the novel and the storyteller is not identified.



Chapters 30 through 35

Chapters 30 through 35 Summary

In Chapter 30, Sylvanshine and his intimate associate Reynolds have a lengthy telephone conversation. Sylvanshine is in Peoria and Reynolds is somewhere else. Sylvanshine has been dispatched to Peoria to perform fact finding and reconnoitering prior to Lehl's, and Reynold's, formal relocation. They are holding a high-level review and Sylvanshine is telling Reynolds all of the facts and impressions he has gathered, much of it derived from his fact psychic ability. Sylvanshine is particularly interested in DeWitt Glendenning who clearly will be Lehl's principle competitor. Sylvanshine tells many things about Glendenning and enumerates all of Glendenning's confidants and assistants. He discloses their names, facts about them, and how they work. He discusses which office is reserved for Lehl; where it is located, how big it is, and how it corresponds to Glendenning's office. Sylvanshine relates the physical layout of the examinations work space, the general process of examinations, and the staff. He notes that the staff and work appear typical in all respects except that somehow Glendenning is able to get the staff to be far more productive than similar groups elsewhere in the IRS. Reynolds repeatedly asks how Glendenning can do this, and Sylvanshine repeatedly responds that he doesn't know. Finally, Sylvanshine mentions the extensive use of antiquated and jury-rigged electronics equipment, in particular punch card processors. In Chapter 31 some examiners await pickup for work from an IRS temporary housing facility. In Chapter 32 one examiner, at work, telephones his sister and requests her to perform her impersonation of a possessed character in a film. While she speaks in a creepy voice other examiners listen and laugh.

In Chapter 33, Lane Dean Jr. sits at his desk and performs return examinations. He is exceptionally bored and finds the work soul-killing. Dean works a little, checks the clock, works a little, checks the clock, and then lets his mind wander. He fudges work and hopes no one will notice. He is in mental agony and sees his entire life stretching out in a series of meaningless work. He wonders how other examiners can do it—have done it for decades. As the minutes inch by Dean continues to become increasingly bored and stressed. Then a phantom appears and lectures Dean about boredom—the process, the history of the concept, and the impact of boredom on the work. Dean finds the phantom interesting but it doesn't really change his situation. Chapter 34 displays several IRS formula fragments.

In Chapter 35, the narrator is called to Gary Manshardt's office. Manshardt is the narrator's group manager. Manshardt has an infant son, less than a year old, that he brings to work. Manshardt's office has a special small section set aside for childcare, including a type of walker that is suspended from the ceiling. The infant appears notably self-sufficient and does not cry. Nevertheless, Manshardt must leave for a meeting and calls the narrator in to sit with the infant in case anything needs to be done. Manshardt routinely calls his employees in for this reason, in a sort of round-robin. The narrator sits



in the office doing his own work and becomes freaked out by the intent stare of the infant, and even believes the infant is questioning his work ability.

Chapters 30 through 35 Analysis

Chapter 30 is central to the novel's overarching narrative plot development. Here the new ideas of Lehl begin to come into direct confrontation with the old ideas of Glendenning. Glendenning is the so-called Pale King of the novel's title, though the reason for this is not examined in the novel. Glendenning's staff demonstrates excellent output but utilizes old-fashioned methods; many of them hold old-fashioned opinions about the nature of the IRS. Glendenning represents the old-guard; highly efficient and refined but not current with modern thinking. Lehl is unproved, somewhat, and has risen through the ranks quickly. He represents new thinking, new methods, and a vastly changed opinion about the nature of the IRS. Glendenning's people view the IRS as a type of impersonal compliance enforcement; Lehl's people view the IRS as a money-making operation. Glendenning's focus is on people and human resources; Lehl's focus is on automation and efficiency. One of Lehl's quirks, not fully developed in the novel, is his fascination with individuals who demonstrate some type of metaphysical or supernatural ability. Thus, most of Lehl's underlings demonstrates some type of bizarre trait à la Sylvanshine's fact psychic ability.

Chapter 33 sees Lane Dean Jr. being visited by an IRS phantom or sort of ghost as described earlier in Chapter 25—this phantom presumably is Blumquist though its name is not specified. Unlike the previous description, this phantom interacts directly with Dean and speaks to him at length. Also unlike the previous description, Dean's performance does not appear to improve because of the visit. One may speculate that Dean finally has arrived at that spectacular level of boredom that the phantom has been looking for.

Chapters 31, 32, 34, and 35 are not central to the narrative plot; instead they establish a sense of place and setting. Chapter 32 is unique in the novel because it presents IRS examinations workers, at work, having a good time. Obviously, their break is very transient but their laughter sits in stark contrast to the remainder of the novel that focuses on the crushing boredom and tedium of working at the IRS REC. Note the ironic surname of the infant in Chapter 35. Chapter 33 previously was published under the title "Wiggle Room" in *The New Yorker*. Chapter 35 previously was published under the title "The Compliance Branch" in Harper's.



Chapters 36 through 50 and Notes

Chapters 36 through 50 and Notes Summary

Excepting Chapter 46, the remaining chapters in the novel are quite brief. Chapter 36 relates the story of a boy who decides at a young age that he would like to be able to press his lips to every square inch of his body. He spends the remainder of his life doing stretching and contortion exercises to gain the flexibility required and carefully tracks his performance. His parents find him eccentric but he pursues his activity in more or less secrecy. As he nears puberty he realizes that some area of his body - notable the face and head - are going to be a problem. In Chapter 37 two people chat in a restaurant. Chapter 38 details briefly the IRS's attempts at integrated automation through the mid-to late-1980s. About half of the short chapter's text is presented as footnotes.

In Chapter 39 Sylvanshine continues to compile facts about various employees. The most-lengthy fact concerns Stecyk in high school industrial arts class. In high school Stecyk was hated and bullied. His industrial arts teacher one day lectured on safety around bladed equipment and in the process cut off his own thumb. Stecyk, alone among all the hardened teenagers in the class, reacted by staunching the blood, summoning aid, shutting down the equipment, and cleaning up afterward. Chapter 40 briefly presents Cusk in a psychiatrist's office. Chapter 41 presents a tiny fragment of conversation between two IRS workers. Chapter 42 presents a fragment of conversation about drugs. Chapter 43 presents a stream-of-consciousness monologue about several IRS workers, including Glendenning and Lehrl. Chapter 44 is very brief but states the central theme of the novel—that the key to success in business is to become "unborable" (p. 438). Chapter 45 presents more biographical information about Toni Ware, first presented as an unnamed young girl in Chapter 8. The material graphically portrays a sexual assault and rape as a very young age. She also appears again in Chapter 47.

Chapter 46 is lengthy. Many of the IRS workers gather on Friday afternoons at a bar called Meibeyer's. The bar is portrayed as a typical mid-western working-class bar. Toni Ware, Beth Rath, and Meredith Rand are three women who frequent the bar. Ware, essentially a minor character, is mentioned elsewhere in the novel. This chapter focuses almost exclusively on Rand. She is married but her husband usually does not appear. Instead, typically she sits in the bar for some minutes and then somehow knows that her husband is in the parking lot waiting for her. They married young and she is unhappy but faithful in the relationship. Rand is notable because she is supremely attractive and most men either make a point of ignoring her or fall all over themselves trying to impress her. She thus spends most of her time with her women friends. By chance on this occasion, however, she sits next to Shane Drinion, a fellow worker, and they become engaged in conversation.

Shane Drinion is a mid-level examiner at the IRS Peoria REC. He is not adverse to frequent relocation and thus drifts from location to location at the needs of the IRS.



However, he is not a seasonal or temporary employee. He appears always to live alone and also appears, at first glance, to have no personality whatsoever. His co-workers have nicknamed him "Mr. X" (p. 448), short for Mr. Excitement. During their conversation Drinion asserts that he has never been lonely in his life, has never had any feelings of friendship in his life, and spends nearly all of his time alone and relatively satisfied. He affirms this not only does not bother him but is his preferred arrangement. He also asserts that he has never had any sexual feelings of any kind for any one, being essentially sexually neutered though physically capable. This absolute lack of social and sexual desire allows Drinion to converse freely with the beautiful Rand while most other men act strangely around her. She finds Drinion compelling for this reason alone; compelling but also bizarre. Drinion also has the supernatural ability of levitation, though nobody knows of his ability, including himself, and it is not under his conscious control. As Drinion becomes wholly distracted by something he begins to levitate. Thus, as Drinion wholly focuses on Rand's conversation, he levitates an inch or two off his chair in the bar. Rand notices Drinion's perspective changes against the backdrop but does not deduce that he is levitating. Drinion and Rand do not appear outside of this chapter and remain irrelevant to the narrative plot.

In Chapter 47, Toni Ware purchases items from a specific list at a specific store as part of the IRS's field investigation process. Chapter 48 presents a fragment of conversation between some IRS workers reporting to their superior. The primary speaker is very obsequious and also occasionally uses pig-latin for no particular reason. This is made comical when he refers to another employee who is named Aylortay and brief confusion ensues when the other person assumes he's talking about someone named Taylor. Chapter 49 sees Lehl usurping Glendenning's office for a day. Sylvanshine and Reynolds sit outside and prepare Chris Fogle for an interview with Lehl. Fogle is noted, in the endnotes, to have a mystical number sequence that he can mentally iterate that gives him total concentration. This is perhaps why Lehl is interested in him. Sylvanshine and Reynolds confuse Fogle by giving him contradictory advice on how to handle the interview and Fogle rather obtusely realizes that the interview is some kind of a test. Chapter 50 is written in the second-person (e.g., 'you') and presents a brief conversation fragment between you and a psychologist. The unfinished novel concludes with eight pages of unrelated notes.

Chapters 36 through 50 and Notes Analysis

Few of the concluding chapters of the novel bear any tight relation to the preceding materials. The boy in Chapter 36 is unnamed and the narrative fragment appears adrift in the novel. The Chapter 38 discussion on automation returns to a frequent trope in the novel about the modernization of the IRS. Chapter 39 presents Stecyk in high school reacting appropriately to a terrible accident. His actions gain him a brief but begrudging admiration from fellow students but soon enough he again is hated. Of course, the entire episode is garnered from Sylvanshine's fact psychic ability and so is questionable in authenticity. Chapter 40 sees Cusk visiting a psychologist. His continued abject failure to control his flop sweats rather suggests these visits are a failure. The conversation in Chapter 42 is unattributed but bears a tone strikingly reminiscent of the



conversation in Chapter 29 and perhaps thus involves Mr. Hurd. The conversation is about hard-core drug use and dealing and the attitude seems to be that illicit drug use is entertaining and not that bad.

Chapter 44 is brief but captures one of the central themes of the novel. Those who succeed at the IRS REC must not be capable of becoming bored. Somehow, they must transcend boredom and find some meaning in the rote tasks that fill up their days, weeks, and years. Chapters 45, 46, and 47 all feature Toni Ware. Ware is one of the rare female characters in the novel that recurs. Like the other female characters, however, she primarily is defined by her physical appearance and her sexuality. Ware's sexuality appears to be informed by a history of sexual abuse and neglect; the narrative states she is dangerous and damaged. In this she is very stereotypical.

Chapter 46 is particularly well-written and finished. The conversation between Rand and Drinion is one of the most interesting conversations in the novel but bears little relationship to the remainder of the narrative. Rand is in most respects a stereotypical female character. Drinion is quite exceptional, however. He appears to be socially neither male nor female but neuter. And he not only accepts this but finds it preferable to the difficulties experienced by his associations (one would not say friends). Drinion's ability of levitation appears somehow appropriate to his world view. Rand's ability, if one would call it such, is to be in tune with her husband's commuting needs.

Chapter 49 indicates that Lehl has completed his transfer to the IRS Peoria REC. He is presented as occupying Glendenning's office. Clearly, Lehl did have his own office set aside so this move can only be seen as office politics. Lehl not only uses Glendenning's office but conducts interviews there to make sure the rank-and-file workers realize he is using Glendenning's office. Clearly, the power struggle has begun and Lehl is demonstrating his mastery of office politics. Chapter 50 changes tone again and addresses a meta-fictional "you" in the second person. Whether this is intended to be you the reader is not fully made clear by the brief material presented. The unfinished novel concludes with about eight pages of notes and references that apparently were derived from the author's materials. They do shed some light on the novel's intended structure and themes.



Characters

David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace is arguably the central protagonist and definitively the central character in the novel. The meta-fictional presentation of Wallace as a character in a fictional novel adds a certain tendency to conflate the character with the author. This is compounded by the fact that the novel's principal but not only narrator also is named David Foster Wallace. Presumably the narrator and the protagonist are the selfsame individual. There is within the novel, however, yet another David Foster Wallace that arrives at the IRS Peoria REC on the same day as "the" David Foster Wallace and the two men are mistaken for each other, with the result that the protagonist is assumed to be a very advanced employee of long tenure while in fact he is a new hire with very limited knowledge.

Wallace gives much biographical background in the novel, growing up in a typical Caucasian household with typical family relations. He notes several times his adolescent problem with severe acne. His father was a Certified Public Accountant and his mother appears to have been a housewife. Wallace demonstrated a complete lack of motivation as a young man and flunked out of various colleges over a period of years. Wallace was a heavy user of recreational drugs, preferring Obetrol, an amphetamine. Wallace developed a confrontational relationship with his father after his parents divorced. Wallace was present at his father's accidental death and largely blames himself for the event. After his father's death, Wallace feels drawn to tax codes and laws, and ends up staying in school long enough to complete some tax classes. He then enters a career at the IRS. Various notes in the book make it obvious that Wallace's stint at the IRS was rather short-lived, but he remains there throughout the principle narrative timeline. Much of the book does not relate to Wallace directly, but he is the principle recurring character and the only character that receives a full characterization.

Merrill Errol Lehl

Merrill Error Lehl is a high-ranking IRS official who, during the novel, is in the process of transferring his office to the Peoria Regional Examination Center (REC). Lehl's history is given only briefly. He is said to have obtained original notice within the IRS for putting forward the suggestion that dependents listed on the IRS filing must also have their social security number listed. Although the IRS had no way, at the time, to verify the names matched the social security numbers the expectation of taxpayers—that the IRS somehow knows fraud when they see it, which caused extraneous dependent listings to drop notably on the first year of the new change to the form. Subsequently, Lehl appears to have functioned within the IRS as a sort of change-engine, driving relentlessly toward modernization and efficiency. Lehl dislikes the then-standard method of the IRS as viewing itself as a rules compliance organization. Instead, Lehl views the IRS as a revenue-generating engine. For example, incorrect filings that likely



will not yield much additional revenue are, to Lehl, not to be audited because the cost of auditing will exceed the additional revenue generated. Lehl approaches the IRS as a sort of business. He constantly urges better and newer methods of automation and has instituted several programs that predict with some accuracy the types of returns that likely will generate large amounts of income. Within the novel, Lehl is the "new way of doing things" and is viewed with much suspicion by those employees who know what is going on. During the novel's primary timeline, Lehl is just in the process of relocating and does not actually appear as a character in any of the novel's principle scenes but is discussed frequently however.

Claude Sylvanshine

Claude Sylvanshine is a GS-9 employee of the IRS. In other words, he is not a particularly high-ranking administrative assistant. He works for Merrill Errol Lehl and appears to hold Lehl in very high regard, bordering on infatuation. Sylvanshine's best friend and closest co-worker is named Reynolds. Sylvanshine and Reynolds are not homosexual lovers, but do live together, work together, and apparently spend most or all of their free time together. Sylvanshine and Reynolds appear to share a sort of merged thought process, and often when they talk to a third person they alternate sentences. This speech pattern is not unique in the novel but is developed to a remarkable degree between Sylvanshine and Reynolds.

In the novel, Sylvanshine travels to the Peoria REC to reconnoiter the facility and staff, and feed the information back to Reynolds via telephone. Ultimately, Lehl will receive the finished analysis prior to arriving at the REC. Presumably, this allows Lehl to appear far more informed than he really is. Sylvanshine's method involves standard information gathering techniques coupled with a large amount of fact psychic gathering. He often does not distinguish between the sources of his information and Reynolds does not appear to value one more than the other.

Reynolds

Reynolds remains a fairly minor character in the novel. It is unclear whether Reynolds is his given name or surname, and the novel plays with this uncertainty in several passages. Reynolds is a GS-11 employee of the IRS. In other words, he is a fairly high level administrative assistant within the tops rank of non-management personnel. He works for Merrill Errol Lehl and appears to hold Lehl in very high regard, bordering on infatuation. Reynolds's best friend and closest co-worker is named Clause Sylvanshine. Reynolds and Sylvanshine are not homosexual lovers, but do live together, work together, and apparently spend most or all of their free time together. Reynolds and Sylvanshine appear to share a sort of merged thought process, and often when they talk to a third person they alternate sentences. This speech pattern is not unique in the novel but is developed to a remarkable degree between Reynolds and Sylvanshine.



In the novel, Reynolds remains behind at the IRS Rome REC and receives debriefings from Sylvanshine who relocates early to the IRS Peoria REC. Reynolds appears to sift these lengthy debriefings in order to prepare situation reports for Lehl.

DeWitt Glendenning

DeWitt Glendenning is the section chief of the IRS Peoria REC. The novel presents a bewildering array of executives, supervisors, and managers, and does not fully elucidate the hierarchical structure in which they all operate. However, Glendenning obviously is either the top or one of the top executives at the REC facility. He is described as physically handsome but not overbearing; his personality is warm, friendly, and engaging. But he also uses a variety of firm and distant administrative assistants to retain an impermeable wall between his office and his employees. This allows Glendenning to be viewed as paternalistic and friendly but also maintain distance for managerial and supervisory tasks. He is very well liked and his employees like to be around him in personal settings as well as at work.

Aside from being in charge, Glendenning is a minor character in the novel. Many employees talk about him, but he appears actually very infrequently. On one occasion he stands in a break room and chats with some fellow employees, one of whom feels quite excited about being in the same room as Glendenning. His informal nickname is 'the Pale King'; a nickname that informs the novel's title. The rationale for this moniker is not examined in the novel.

David Cusk

David Cusk is one of the more intriguing characters in the novel. From a very early age, and coming to dominate his life in the early years of school, Cusk has suffered from excessive sweating. This sweating is so pronounced that it soaks through his clothing, mats his hair, and pools on his chair. Cusk becomes so obsessed with not sweating that he arranges his whole life in an attempt to keep cool or, barring that, having a good exit and sitting in a place that generally is not under observation. Needless to say, his entire youth is spent in isolation by preference. As Cusk grows older he develops a shattering psychological fear of sweating, and this concern, or phobia, of sweating generally brings on sweat attacks. Cusk thus is subject to flop sweats because of his fear of flop sweats, and any little thing that reminds him of sweating causes him to sweat. Because his entire life revolves around sweating and trying not to, nearly everything reminds him of sweating. Cusk eventually lands a job at the IRS Peoria REC as an entry level examiner. He does not think much about the job in the novel, but instead spends all his time thinking about not sweating and, as a result, sweating. Cusk remains a well-developed character without a central role in the narrative. He is quite memorable.



Lane Dean Jr.

Lane Dean Jr. is perhaps the most developed character in the novel and plays a central role in developing the novel's themes. He does not play a role in the narrative plot development, however. Dean grows up a Christian in a largely typical Caucasian family. He is devoted to Christian ideology but as a teenager engages in pre-marital sexual activity with his girlfriend. When she becomes pregnant they have a lengthy and difficult conversation about how they should react. Dean tentatively wonders about abortion but his girlfriend rejects that course of action. Predictably, Dean then proposes marriage and they become married. They do worry about their sinful behavior but appear to be able to move beyond that as they start a married life together.

While his wife remains at home, Dean travels each day to the IRS Peoria REC where he works as an entry level returns examiner. Dean is tormented by the unbelievable tedium and boredom of his work. Page after page of the novel details Dean's mental writhing in the agony of boredom as he sits at a desk in a common room and performs filing examinations. He spends his time trying to ignore the clock and finish work, but often daydreams and thinks of his utter frustration at his horrible soul-killing job. Dean wonders how the other employees manage to survive—particularly the ones that have been there for years or decades. He tries occasionally to insinuate himself into the office social life, such as it is, but meets with little success. On one occasion Dean is visited by a phantom, a type of ghost, that lectures him on the nature and history of boredom. Dean is central to these themes in the novel. It is worth noting that several of the chapters focusing on Dean previously were published as standalone pieces elsewhere.

Leonard Stecyk

Leonard Stecyk is a mid-level human resources manager at the IRS Peoria REC. His exact position within the management hierarchy is not fully noted but at least one new hire, believed to be a high ranking IRS transfer employee, is presented directly to Stecyk for orientation and intake processing. Stecyk is a complex character but is not fully developed in the novel. As a young child he demonstrated over-exuberance for being helpful, skilled, and intelligent. His happy over-achieving ways, coupled with his seeming omnipresence, led most people to hate him. His mother was so affected by his personality that she attempted suicide, though Stecyk apparently believed she simply had become seriously ill. As an adult, Stecyk is always well-dressed, well-informed, and very eager to help anyone in any way. As a result, nearly all of his co-workers despise him. This strange reaction is compelling and interesting but is not explored at great length in the narrative. Regardless of his extensive characterization and rather complete biography, Stecyk remains a minor character in the novel.

Shane Drinion

Shane Drinion is a mid level examiner at the IRS Peoria REC. He is not adverse to frequent relocation and thus drifts from location to location at the needs of the IRS.



However, he is not a seasonal or temporary employee. He appears always to live alone and also appears, at first glance, to have no personality whatsoever. He does have one lengthy conversation in the novel with a co-worker at a bar. The co-worker is a very attractive female who all the men at work chase after. During this conversation Drinion asserts that he has never been lonely in his life, has never had any feelings of friendship in his life, and spends nearly all of his time alone. He affirms this not only does not bother him but is his preferred arrangement. He also asserts that he has never had any sexual feelings of any kind for any one, being essentially sexually neutered though physically capable. This absolute lack of social and sexual desire allows Drinion to converse freely with the beautiful woman while most other men would act strangely around her. She finds Drinion compelling for this reason; compelling but also bizarre. Drinion also has the supernatural ability of levitation, though he is not conscious of his ability and it is not under his direct control. As Drinion becomes wholly distracted by something he begins to levitate. Thus, as Drinion wholly focuses on his co-worker's conversation, he levitates an inch or two off his chair in the bar. She notices Drinion's perspective changes against the backdrop but does not deduce that he is levitating. Drinion does not appear outside of the single chapter and remains irrelevant to the narrative plot and a minor, if memorable, character.

Chahla Neti-Neti

Chahla Neti-Neti is the intake employee who meets David Foster Wallace upon his arrival and mistakes him for another man named David Foster Wallace, scheduled to arrive on the same day. Wallace follows Neti-Neti through a labyrinthine passage in the REC until she delivers him to Stecyk's office. Throughout the trip, Neti-Neti keeps up a running monologue that Wallace is unable to hear because she is walking so fast and so far in front of him. She makes a few wrong turns on the trip. Later in the novel, Neti-Neti is noted as being nicknamed "The Iranian Crisis", presumably because of her ethnicity. She is noted as being good looking and trim, and on at least one occasion spends time after work at a bar with other IRS workers. She is not particularly developed as a character as is typical of all the female characters in the novel. Neti-Neti is portrayed in the narrative mostly by her physical appearance, also typical within the novel for female characters. She is unmarried.



Objects/Places

IRS

The IRS or Internal Revenue Service is a branch of the United States Federal Government charged with implementing tax law and the tax code. Their primary function is monetary revenue generation to fund the government. The complex system of IRS processing and several IRS locations are the main texture and setting of the novel.

REC

Two Regional Examination Centers or RECs are presented in the novel. One REC is in Rome and one is in Peoria. The Peoria REC is the primary setting of the novel. The REC there comprises several large buildings and is an extensive campus. It appears to be a very typical Federal government installation.

Return

Every year each income-earning resident of the United States is required by law to file a tax return. The novel does not consider who or what has to file what type of return, but instead focuses almost entirely on the process of checking those returns once they are filed. Within the Peoria REC's, returns are divided into 'rote' or routine and easy returns to examine, and 'fats' or difficult and advanced returns to examine. Most of the characters in the novel work on rote examinations at the entry-level position.

Examinations

The examinations department has the largest concentration of characters in the novel. These individuals process individual tax returns and check them for errors and compliance with the tax code. The process of examination is partially computerized and automated but the final examination and evaluation is done by a tax examiner.

Wigglers

At the REC, rote examiners are disdainfully referred to as Wigglers. Wigglers sit at small desks pushed together into clusters and work in large common areas. Their performance carefully is monitored though senior management denies that any such monitoring actually takes place. Most of the characters in the novel are Wigglers.



Tingle Tables

IRS examiners sit at desks called Tingle Tables or Tingles. They appear to be more or less standard, low budget tables covered with wire racks of baskets, tax reference books, and tax returns. It is unclear whether a single desk is a Tingle or if the term applies onto to four or six or eight desks pushed together into a work center.

Cart Boys

Cart Boys runs wheeled wire carts through the examinations department, delivering new returns to the tingle tables and taking completed work away. Because they move throughout the REC all the time they often are well-informed about office happenings. Cart Boys are viewed as a lower class by Wigglers, but in turn Cart Boys view Wigglers as the lower class. The novel does not focus on cart boys but one, in Chapter 44, captures the essential quality of successful Wigglers.

Turdnagels

The IRS employs a large number of seasonal, or temporary, workers as examiners. Permanently-placed examiners are called Wigglers. Wigglers refer to seasonal temporary examiners as Turdnagels. The term obviously is intended as an insult.

Phantoms

The IRS Peoria REC's examinations department is 'haunted' by at least two, and possibly three, phantoms. They are not ghosts inasmuch as they are not frightening or evil. Instead, they roam the department occasionally and appear drawn to Wigglers that are nearing mental collapse from the tedium of the work. Lane Dean Jr. is visited by a phantom that speaks during the novel.

Meibeyer's

Meibeyer's is a typical suburban bar that is frequented by many IRS workers from the Peoria REC. The bar offers a one-hour happy hour on Friday afternoons that appears to be the primary draw. In all respects it is a typical working-class to middle-class bar. Chapter 46's setting is Meibeyer's and the bar does not appear elsewhere in the novel.



Themes

Boredom

The dominant theme of the novel is boredom. This is made clear by numerous passages and much introspection by several characters. The primary characters that focus on boredom are David Wallace Foster, the protagonist and often the narrator, and Lane Dean Jr. Foster theorizes much about boredom and realizes it as an unavoidable part of the job of being a tax examiner. Like many of his co-workers, Foster seems somehow to be able to cope with the daily tedium and boredom by doing his work but not dwelling on it. Dean, on the other hand, is unable to do anything but focus on his boredom and he finds the job intolerable and soul-killing. The management of the REC realizes that boredom is a major factor and many aspects of the job are arranged, in part, to ameliorate the impact of boredom on productivity. This is not to suggest that management particularly cares if the employees are bored—instead, they seek to use social engineering to make sure that the boredom does not slow down the work. Chapter 44, a brief but pivotal chapter, examines boredom from the angle of successful long-term employees of the REC by noting that successful employees must be able to be "unborable"; in other words, they must be impervious to the daily grind and the boredom that ensues. One employee, Chris Fogle, has a method—perhaps supernatural—of avoiding boredom by becoming fully engaged in the tedium (refer to note 22, p. 540-541). Another employee, Shane Drinion, appears to be immune to boredom because he is capable of being interested in even the most mundane things. Most employees, however, suffer. The phantoms of the REC appear to sense when boredom is nearing a critical level—at least one phantom appears to Dean when he is about to go off his rocker from boredom. And ironically then lectures him on the nature and history of boredom—itself fairly interesting.

Transition

The novel features many transitions in the social sphere, and can be viewed as a generational transition from the old to the new. The protagonist David Foster Wallace transitions from a life of drug-use and college to a life of full-time employment. Other characters such as Lane Dean Jr. and David Cusk also make this transition. Lane Dean Jr. transitions from being a young single adult to a married father. Tori Ware transitions from being a sexually abused young girl to being a somewhat difficult adult woman. Leonard Stecyk transitions from being a hated do-gooder boy to being a hated do-gooder adult. Against this backdrop of personal transition, the entire IRS transitions from being a law-enforcement agency to being a revenue generating agency. This transition involves modernization and mechanization, changes in training methods, changes in outlook and policy, and changes in attitudes. The IRS also transitions from being a nominally manual process to being more-and-more automated and computerized. Many of the minor characters transition from locale to locale as the IRS shifts its workforce around the country to where it is needed. Other characters, like Merrill Lehl, Claude



Sylvanshine, and Reynolds, transition from one REC to another on a permanent basis. Many of the novel's passages deal with characters talking about 'old times', mostly in a pleasant reminiscent ways even when these 'old times' were quite frightful. Indeed, no situation or character in the novel is presented as essentially static. What makes this constant transition depressing is the fact that all the characters are ending up at the IRS Peoria REC where they experience crushing boredom and soul-killing trivial routine. Thus the transition-to is not a bright future within the narrative.

Loneliness

It is difficult to identify a single character within the novel that is not suffering from loneliness, estrangement, and in most cases abject despair. The protagonist David Foster Wallace feels crushing guilt over the death of his father. Many of the characters come from broken families or failed relationships, and they feel the negative effects of their history. For example, not only is Wallace's father dead but he was divorced before death and his mother suffered depression thereafter. Leonard Stecyk's mother attempted suicide because she found him so offensive even as a little child. DeWitt Glendenning Jr. harbors massive self-doubt and is convinced that he is defective—even physically defective. David Cusk has entirely isolated himself in life to avoid contact with anyone who might see him sweat. Even the bizarre near-homosexual relationship between Claude Sylvanshine and Reynolds appears imbalanced, derived of necessity, and not particularly rewarding. All these characters are damaged—not roughed up by life, but ruined by it. Their loneliness is one of the major drivers that pushes them into the boredom and minutia of their jobs as IRS examiners. Perhaps the only character in the novel that is not lonely is Shane Drinion. But he is entirely alone and isolated and he just doesn't feel it acutely like the other characters. Thus, he too is alone but has adapted to it, or rather is pre-adapted to it. One could hardly call Drinion a typical or normal person. Loneliness is one of the prominent thematic themes in the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel features many points of view, from the first-person narrative sections of a variety of narrators to the third-person omniscient point of view of typical fiction narration. Chapter 50 even features a brief segment of second-person narration directed at the "you" of the reader. Many of the novel's extensive footnotes also have a second-person element. The primary point of view of the novel probably is the first-person and limited perspective of the protagonist David Foster Wallace. Most, but not all, of the first-person segments of the novel are directly attributed to Wallace or can be assumed to be attributed to Wallace. Some segments are clearly not narrated by Wallace but nevertheless are presented in the first-person point of view. Many of the shorter chapters are presented in the third-person point of view by unnamed and effaced narrators: the novel does not suggest or demonstrate any narrative identity consistency across chapters. Indeed, the point of view of the novel is very uneven and difficult and poses serious barriers to a comprehensive understanding of the novel as a single unit of narrative fiction.

The natural tendency to conflate the author, David Foster Wallace, with the protagonist and frequent narrator David Foster Wallace is best avoided. The book is a work of fiction and the eponymous character is a fictive creation, not an autobiographical representation (regardless of the footnoted claims). Likewise, the "you" directly addressed in Chapter 50 should not automatically be assumed to be "you" the reader. The author is far too canny and aware of meta-fictional elements to casually utilize these confusing methods and they are best understood as intentionally humorous, if confusing, constructions.

Setting

The novel features a sprawling number of distinct settings, from David Foster Wallace's home to Leonard Stecyk's industrial arts classroom in high school. All of these settings, however, are fairly transient and appear only in a single scene or chapter. By far the dominant setting of the novel is the IRS Peoria Regional Examination Center, or REC. The REC is a fictional location that seeks to capture the essence of a real IRS REC. The novel describes the REC campus in considerable detail—it comprises several buildings and huge parking lots. The turn from the main access road (perhaps the only significant access to the facility) is mind-numbingly inefficient and the rumor is that it was intentionally designed to harass employees. The REC is surrounded by IRS temporary housing units and is in a suburban setting near to at least one bar. The buildings are fairly nondescript from the outside, typical of Federal institutions. Inside they are warrens of confusing hallways and large work areas. Even after working there for years some employees occasionally get lost momentarily. The buildings are full of aging equipment such as desks and carts. The work areas are large open spaces full of



tables pushed into clusters. Outdoor break areas open on boring vistas; few people have windows. Obsolete and obsolescent computer equipment fills rooms and is stacked in hallways. In essence, the setting is the depressing office characteristic of the information age where it is old, run-down, boring, monochromatic, and conspicuously devoid of wall clocks.

Language and Meaning

The novel is related entirely in American English. Language is used often in a straightforward way to convey meaning, but the author also frequently plays with language in a very meta-fictional and self-aware process. Dialogue is usually crisp and quite distinctive. Occasionally dialogue and word-play intersect, such as Chapter 49's character named Aylortay being referred to during a conversation involving pig-latin. The language should pose no special barrier to comprehension for a high school student. Several scenes feature explicit language and one rape is graphically detailed, as is one murder.

Within the novel meaning is derived from both conventional and unconventional structures. Most of the major thematic elements are fairly easily derived through even a casual reading. Boredom, loneliness, and despair are common themes that easily emerge from the narrative. Other thematic elements such as transition require a closer reading. The meaning of the novel is difficult primarily because of the novel's unfinished state - not only are the materials incomplete but they are arranged in a method that presents some difficulty (refer to Michael Pietsch's Editor's Note on p. v-x). In essence, each reader must construct meaning from their own conception of what the novel should or could have been. Many of the notes at the end of the novel severely impact meaning and interpretation and it is unclear how much weight should be given the notes over the text itself.

Structure

The 548-page book is divided into fifty enumerated and unnamed chapters of very unequal length. One chapter is barely a paragraph long while another chapter is over one hundred pages in length. This clearly indicates that every chapter cannot be considered as significant as any other. Indeed, the novel's structure is problematic inasmuch as it is derived not from a clear authorial intent but from an editor's assemblage of many pieces of text into a novel (refer to Michael Pietsch's Editor's Note on pp. v-x). Somewhat ameliorating this difficulty is the fact that the editor has arranged the materials into roughly chronological order. This eases reading because characters are first introduced as youngsters and then revisited later as adults. Probably the author would not have arranged these materials in the same order; probably the author would not have selected the same fragments for final inclusion. Yet this merely is speculation.

The book features, in addition to the fifty chapters, an introductory Editor's Note, eight or nine pages of Notes and Asides (pp. 539-547), and a final page About the Author. The

concluding statement about the author: "He died in 2008, leaving behind unpublished work of which *The Pale King* is a part" (p. 548) is particularly telling about the novel's contents and structure.



Quotes

"Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nut-grass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping Charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek." (p. 3).

"Sylvanshine felt hemmed in; the seats were more a cushioned bench and there were no armrests to provide even the illusion or impression of space. Plus the van swayed alarmingly on the road, which was either a road or a sort of rural highway, and you could hear the chassis's springs." (p. 45).

"In clinical terms, he was fighting to re-repress a truth that had been too long repressed in the first place, a confinement from which it had taken on far too much psychic energy ever, once it had burst through the mirror (so to speak), to be willed back out of conscious awareness. Consciousness just doesn't work this way." (p. 93).

"'Checks and balances.'

'Power to the People.'

'They knew the tendency of power to corrupt—'

'Jefferson supposedly boinking his own slaves and having whole litters of mulatto children.'

'They believed that centralizing power in its dispersal among a concerned, educated, civic-minded electorate would ensure against America devolving into one more instance of nobles and peasants, rulers and serfs.'" (p. 133).

"And nor was it just good or pleasurable things you were aware of, on Obertrol or Cylert. Some of the stuff it brought into awareness wasn't pleasant, it was just reality. Like sitting in the UIC dorm room's little living room and listening to the roommate-slash-social-rebel from Naperville in his bedroom talking on his phone" (p. 184).

"Imputed Income—>Haig-Simons Formula

Constructive Receipt

Limited Partnerships, Passive Losses

Amortization and Capitalization—>1976 TRA §266

Depreciation—>Class Life System

Cash Method v. Accrual Method—>Implications for AGI

Inter vivos Gifts and 76 TRA" (p. 225).

"True, there had been silent rides aplenty with my own family, though the AM radio then



was always playing Easy Listening music at high volume, which helped explain-slash-cover the absence of conversation." (p. 269).

"It was this Assistant DDP who signed the internal Form 706-IC authorizing my being taken right up to the front of the line for service ID processing, although it took Ms. Neti-Neti over twenty minutes⁵⁶ to reach the front of Mrs. van Hool's office's line and present with her questions) doing nothing but sitting around on the taxpayer's dime in some kind of classic 'hurry up and wait' scenario." (p. 299-300).

"This is the great advantage of human examiners. Intuition, creativity.'

'Some people have a special talent for smelling a rat.'

'Guessing doesn't account for the nets of certain great examiners, some of whom are at this Post'

'A rat that's worth pursuing.'" (p. 345).

"IRM §781(d) AMT Formula for Corporations: (1) Taxable income before NOL deductin, plus or minus (2) All AMT adjustments excepting ACE adjustment, plus (3) Tax Preferences, yields (4) Alternative Minimum Taxable Income before NOL deduction and/or ACE adjustment, plus or minus (5) ACE adjustment, if any, yields (6) AMTI before NOL deductions, if any, minus (7) NOL deduction, if any (Ceiling at 90%), yields (8) AMTI, minus (9) Exemptions, yields (10) AMT base, multiplied by (11) 20% AMT rate, yields (12) AMT prior to AMT Foreign Tax Credit, minus (13) AMT Foreign Tax Credit, if any (Ceiling at 90% unless Exceptions 781(d) (13-16) apply, in which case attach Memo 781-2432 and forward to Group Manager), yields (14) Tentative Alternative Minimum Tax, minus (15) Standard tax liability before credit minus standard Foreign Tax Credit, yields (16) Alternative Minimum Tax." (p. 386).

"You sent Cardwell to get him?'

'What's the problem?'

'He's demented, Charlie, that's what's the problem.'

'He's a good driver. He's dependable.'

'He'll rant at the guy the whole way here; the guy'll think it's a post of evangelist goons. This is Lehl's aide, Charlie, Jesus.'" (p. 425).

"...The doctors in the suits could, so they were the scariest ones.'

'...'

'Plus the food was beyond gross.'

'You had been giving yourself small, hidden cuts as some sort of psychological compensation,' Shane Drinion says." (p. 465)

"The big Two-O,' the counter woman said, as if to herself, punching the keys with the slight extra force a 1280 takes.

A moment later Toni was out around the side of the store, sheltered from the lot's view by the Kluckman Ice dispenser, with the plastic bag's top whipping and popping



between her shoes as she removed a traveler's Kleenex from her handbag, tore it in two and again, and wrapped a quarter of the tissue around her little finger, whose nail was perfect and almond-shaped and done in arterial red." (p. 514).

"Since we all breathe, all the time, it is amazing what happens when someone else directs you how and when to breathe. And how vividly someone with no imagination whatsoever can see what he's told is right there, complete with banister and rubber runners, curving down and rightward into a darkness that recedes before you. It is nothing like sleeping. Nor does her voice alter or seem to recede. She's right there, speaking calmly, and so are you." (p. 538).

"§12 Stecyk flown in via Lehl's design to help drive examiners crazy." (p. 540).



Topics for Discussion

Which of the characters, if any, in the novel are sympathetic and likable? What features make a given character likable? What features make a given character despicable?

What is the narrative about? What meaning does the narrative convey? Is the novel simply a random and collection of text fragments? Or does a cohesive statement seem to emerge? Is it really a novel?

Consider the actual plot of the novel. What really happens?

Discuss the relationship between the novel's author and the novel's narrator and protagonist. Are they the same person? How is the narrator constructed as a character throughout the narrative?

The novel features few female characters, and those that do appear are minor characters that are described in terms of physical appearance and sexuality. Is the novel essentially a sexist text? Why or why not?

How do you interpret the Notes at the end of the novel? Should they be presented as end-notes? Should they have appeared at perhaps the headers of the chapters to which they applied? Should they be given essentially the same narrative 'weight' as the text itself?

Who is more responsible for the meaning of the novel? Is it the author David Foster Wallace or the editor Michael Pietsch?