



Institutionen för Språk och Litteraturer

# Lost in a Bureaucratic World

A Thematic Study of Boredom in David Foster  
Wallace's *The Pale King*

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# Abstract

**Title:** Lost in a Bureaucratic World: A Thematic Study of Boredom in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*

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**Abstract:** In David Foster Wallace's novel *The Pale King*, two themes appear connected to each other. The first is that of boredom. This theme includes the characters' feelings of boredom at work, the nature of the boring work they do, and the manifestation of boredom within the reader as he or she reads through page after page of repetitive and confusing stuff. The second theme is bureaucracy. The characters of the novel work at the Internal Revenue Service: a major bureaucratic institution in America. Their work involves auditing forms and tax returns, trying to spot mistakes therein, which is a repetitive and dull task to perform. The theme of boredom is expressed through the use of bureaucratic methods and this essay aims to illuminate this connection, and offer an explanation of why these two themes can be linked as closely as they are in the novel. The connection between these two themes is underdeveloped critically, and furthermore, often presented as separate themes. Boredom and bureaucracy together can be further expanded upon in the field of criticism.

In this essay, the theoretical framework is used to establish the intricate and strong connection that bureaucracy has to boredom, to the point where it can be said one depends on the other. However, it is important to elucidate the historical changes the concept of boredom has gone through, in order to find the common denominator it shares with the concept of bureaucracy as it is represented in *The Pale King*. The analysis focuses on thematic expressions of boredom and the character's experiences of boredom. The second part focuses on stylistic expressions and how the book itself manages to create boredom and be boring to its readers. The essay concludes with gathering the previous analyses' connections to bureaucracy and presents the aspect of bureaucracy which is ever present in the different expressions of boredom in the text. The final section will also demonstrate how the text itself overtly states this connection between boredom and bureaucracy, and ultimately aims to have shown precisely how and why the bureaucracy is entwined with contemporary boredom.

**Keywords:** David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, boredom, bureaucracy, personal meaning, lack of personal meaning, IRS, ennui, melancholia, acedia

## Table of contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Previous criticism .....	4
3. Theoretical framework .....	12
4. Analysis .....	20
4.1 Claude Sylvanshine .....	20
4.2 Lane Dean Jr .....	22
4.3 Chris Fogle.....	26
5. David Wallace as character and author.....	36
5.1 David Wallace as author.....	40
5.2 David Wallace, lost in a bureaucracy.....	43
6. Conclusion .....	46
7. Bibliography .....	50

# 1. Introduction

*The Pale King* is David Foster Wallace's third novel. Published posthumously, it was edited together by Michael Pietsch from the stacks of manuscripts found by Wallace's wife and his agent after his suicide in 2008. The novel as it stands today was published in 2011 but what it could have looked like had Wallace himself finished it, we will never know.

Wallace's literary career began while in college, where he wrote *The Broom of the System*, published in 1987. This novel was part of the thesis project for his double major in English and Philosophy at Amherst College, Massachusetts. His second novel, *Infinite Jest*, which is arguably his most influential work, was published in 1996 and written while Wallace worked as a university teacher. This novel is what launched his authorship into the public eye. In the wake of *Infinite Jest* and its book tours, David Lipsky accompanied Wallace on the subsequent book tour, and based on their conversations wrote the non-fiction novel *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself*. This novel is the basis for the 2015 film *The End of the Tour*, directed by James Ponsoldt. Wallace's third and final novel is *The Pale King*, published three decades after his first. The majority of his authorship consists of the many non-fiction and short stories that he wrote. His non-fiction spans a range of topics, including a book on mathematics, the coverage of John McCain's presidential election campaign and an essay on the history of rap and hip hop and its connection to historical events.

Arguably, one of the most important non-fiction articles in Wallace's literary body of work is the essay entitled "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction" where he outlines his thoughts on the conflict between cynicism and naiveté and the seemingly accepted idea that the two are mutually exclusive in contemporary literature. In other words, Wallace wondered why it seemed to be impossible to be both ironic and sincere in the same text. Wallace wanted to find a way to take a step beyond the postmodern irony of the generation before him, without "merely rejecting it and returning to the mode of the prepostmodern" (Boswell 18). *Infinite Jest* combines postmodern irony with sincere themes of loneliness, addiction, depression and boredom, and it may have been Wallace's step beyond what he saw in contemporary postmodernism. The same can be said for *The Pale King*, where vivid character portrayals are combined with extremely dull chapters and bureaucratic mimicry. The book is at times very boring to read. However, an interesting book on boredom would have perhaps been too ironic for Wallace. When characters and reader both experience the same emotion, the boredom transcends the separation of text and real life, and the characters become more

sincere. Due to this, one could argue that boredom in the novel is not ironic, in the sense that it does not separate the reader from the emotions the characters experience. The reader is not reading a book about boredom while being interested and entertained all the time. *The Pale King* is a book about boredom with parts that bore the reader too. It is both ironic and sincere.

The boredom which *The Pale King* expresses is partly through the use of taxation theory. During the time of writing the novel, Wallace had sat in on college accounting classes and one can assume from reading the book that he delved deeply into the subject. In D.T. Max's biography, Wallace is quoted saying that “[t]ax law is like the world’s biggest game of chess [...] with all sorts of weird conundrums about ethics and civics” (292). Max himself states that Wallace “wanted to write a premodern novel about tax code, one that took code as holy writ” (292), and tax code and the IRS are raised to a near-religious level in the novel. One example is how the Internal Revenue Service is often referred to as just The Service. However, what happens when the nearly holy concept of tax code is the very thing used as one of the elements that create boredom in both characters and readers? This has a parallel to the history of boredom, which shows how an understanding of the concept of boredom plays a key role in understanding the book.

The theme of boredom is expressed in many aspects of the novel, and it is present both thematically and structurally. The thematic aspects can be seen in the characters’ daily life at their jobs, examining tax returns and forms. The structural aspects express themselves through the manner in which the novel is outlined, the use of footnotes, citations of tax theory and bureaucratic mimicking. The theoretical framework in this essay functions as the foundation from where a common denominator between boredom and bureaucracy can be uncovered, both thematically and structurally. It aims to be the key to unlocking the reason of why and how bureaucracy is used to create boredom in the novel. In doing so, it will establish a coherent understanding of what boredom is, the history of the word and the concept and what it has come to mean today. By looking at boredom as an adaptive emotion as well as a cultural idea which has emerged in historically different contexts, it becomes defined as a concept in flux rather than a word with a set meaning. Just as other emotions such as love or fear are dependent on context, yet stem from a biological necessity, boredom in *The Pale King* is dependent on both its historical development as well as its bureaucratic context.

In the academic criticism of *The Pale King*, scholars touch upon subjects relating to the theme of boredom in the novel, but only one essay, by Ralph Clare, explicitly investigates it. This essay takes a socio-historic look at boredom and politics in the novel, and compares real life events with elements featuring in the novel. The thematic and structural aspects of

boredom are as of yet not explored academically. As there are a limited number of critical articles on *The Pale King*, and especially on the subject of boredom in the novel, I will conduct a thematic analysis. The aim of this method is to gather information on this theme in order to show its significance and prevalence in the novel. Additionally, the theme of boredom is strongly connected to the theme of bureaucracy, and the novel makes claims for boredom being a basic component in the way a bureaucracy operates. At this point of academic research on *The Pale King*, a more exhaustive thematic study which incorporates broad arcs and smaller details is a necessary first step. The absence of previous criticism in certain areas of my analysis is a regrettably unavoidable concern. The aim must instead be to offer a coherent analysis which proves the importance of the theme of boredom and its inherent position in the representation of bureaucracy in the novel.

## 2. Previous Criticism

The criticism on David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* is rather small at the time of writing. Most prominently, there are two journals that featured a special issue on the works of David Foster Wallace after the publication of *The Pale King* in 2011, namely *Studies in the Novel* and *English Studies*. Featuring in this chapter is an extensive look at one article which focuses on boredom in the novel followed by a more restricted look at other articles which are about *The Pale King*.

Ralph Clare's essay "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" is a socio-historic investigation into the themes of boredom in relation to politics in *The Pale King*. This essay sets out to specifically examine boredom in the novel and it is the only article with this aim. Clare states that his understanding of the novel is that "Wallace is primarily interested in the roots of boredom as a specific historical formation of late capitalist American life" (429). Clare's socio-historic investigation, therefore, first deals with the etymology of boredom. Clare provides an overview of the history of the word from the related Ancient Greek concept called *akedia* to the modern notion of what boredom is, and, albeit briefly, mentions the major authors on the subject. My essay aims to take the analysis deeper, and thus arrive at a different conclusion than that of Clare. One of the underlying reasons a deeper analysis is fruitful to perform is because Clare begins with trying to define boredom but fails to adequately do so. He says that "boredom is given numbers of forms and representations in *The Pale King*" which "only reinforces the difficulty of defining boredom once and for all" (429). As Clare does not find a perfect definition of boredom, he looks instead at certain groupings of boredom out of those "*The Pale King* documents", ranging from, for example, "the existential life-crisis to those of the daily grind and to those resulting from stultifying political and economic systems" (431). These two groups, the existential life-crisis or the one resulting from political and economic systems may indeed be found in *The Pale King*, but what Clare's analysis lacks is a unifying aspect that ties the two together. How and why are they similar and tied to the feeling of boredom?

While Clare answers questions of what representations of boredom exist in the novel, the question which remains to be discussed is what all these representations have in common. A deeper analysis of the history of boredom could uncover both the changes the concept has gone through and whether there is an aspect that remains the same. The discursive historical development may have a common denominator which one can find in the groupings of

boredom that “*The Pale King* documents” (431). Additionally, Clare states that “boredom is, quite simply, a modern problem and this is something that *The Pale King* attempts to investigate in all of its facets” (430). If this is true, then what aspect of boredom is it that ties it so closely to modernity? Clare provides a limited explanation of this claim, as he states that “theorists concur that boredom has explicit ties with modernity and marks a radical change in how subjects experience the world and boredom itself” (429). However, this leaves room for further investigation as to what unifies all types of representations of boredom as well as what makes it conceptually dependent on modernity.

Moreover, Clare’s essay has the secondary aim of explaining his understanding of how “Wallace engages in a kind of ‘aesthetics of boredom’, which examines boredom in both the novel’s content and form” (429). This is mostly about showing that Wallace uses an aesthetics of boredom to show three things. Firstly, he shows how it can be seen as a development of themes dealt with in other works by Wallace. The themes of depression, entertainment and anxiety of *Infinite Jest*, for example, can be seen as relating to boredom thematically. Secondly, he focuses on how boredom is connected to the cultural climate of the neo-liberal era, at which point he does a socio-historic reading of the novel and finds parallels between the novel’s representation of the 70s and 80s and historically documented events. The last aspect of Clare’s analysis regards how the presentation of boredom in the novel becomes an analogy for the relationship the reader has to the book itself. In this final section of the article, Clare refers back to an interview with Wallace, explaining how “the reader must, as Wallace once said in his interview with Larry McCaffery ‘do her share of the linguistic work’ to glean meaning from the text” (441-442). This is a fascinating statement, as it essentially points to how the book *The Pale King* bores its readers. Clare’s analysis could certainly be extended at this point, but furthermore, it can be completely reworked to show the connection to his other two theoretical questions, that of the definition of boredom and its connection to modernity. A unified conceptual understanding of what may be a common denominator to all forms of representations of boredom, not only thematically but also stylistically, will form the foundation of how *The Pale King* is a novel about boredom and also one that creates boredom.

Several of the other articles published about *The Pale King* tangentially touch upon the topics of this thesis, despite not being overtly about boredom. A brief overview of the articles in the two editions of journals follows below, with particular focus put on the aspects that are relevant to the analysis chapter in this essay. The first three critics deal with the narration in *The Pale King*, which is one of the more commonly researched areas of the novel’s criticism. Some of these narrative aspects in the novel are components of the way the novel creates



boredom. As mentioned above, this is one aspect that is particularly interesting to further develop beyond Clare's article and the “aesthetics of boredom”, which he outlines. The three critics that follow here, all include aspects which narratively create boredom. One character in particular that does this is David Wallace, the in-text author to whom *The Pale King* is his own memoir about the time he spent working at the IRS. The character will always be referred to as David Wallace, while the author will be referred to as David Foster Wallace, or Wallace. Character David Wallace's narrative is the focus of the last two critics, while the first one focuses on other characters and builds two universal methods of narration based on *The Pale King*.

Andrew Warren's article “Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*” focuses on two models of narration which he calls Contracted Realism and Spontaneous Data Intrusion. The first one narrows in on the supernatural occurrences in the novel, such as Lane Dean Jr. being visited by a ghost. Since several aspects of the novel, according to Warren, “make for a poor story” (392), such as descriptions of the IRS and the repetitive, often abbreviated language of taxation theory, the story therefore compensates with the supernatural elements, such as “the ghosts; the talking infant; the lyricism; the levitation” (392). This is because Contracted Realism's “alternate goal” is to “faithfully [represent] the lived experience of human reality” (392). Warren's claim is that “[l]evitation or lyricism is perhaps indirect techniques or analogies for conveying [...] human bliss” (392). To clarify, what Warren interprets as realism here is the monotony at the IRS as well as the repetitive language of taxation theory. These are two things which could of course be seen as *The Pale King*'s illustration of boredom. Warren's examples of realism are all quite boring, and to this it follows that their counterparts, the supernatural aspects, are quite interesting.

The second model, the Spontaneous Data Intrusion model, is based on the character Claude Sylvanshine and his supernatural Fact Psychic abilities. This is a condition where random fragments of facts pop into Sylvanshine's consciousness, all seemingly unconnected and without context or use. Sylvanshine simply knows facts about the world or the people around him without having to ask or look them up. Warren states that “[t]he SDI's signal a certain horror implicit in something like third-person omniscient narration or a “God's-eye” point of view” (402). Additionally, Warren states that as readers, we “hope for something like an organizing, negotiating principle at work behind the text” (402), so that the experience of reading a book is not like being Fact Psychic with random bits of the story appearing without coherent narrative. A reader desires the information to be relevant, of use and within a known context. The Spontaneous Data Intrusion threatens the reader with the absence of such a

principle at work, which is also the world in which Sylvanshine constantly resides. Without context, or narrative structure, information like that which Sylvanshine knows becomes quite pointless. Not only does the reader sympathise with Sylvanshine and his strange condition, they also experience it as they are reading the novel. The experience of random facts appearing in one's consciousness happens to Sylvanshine and the reader at the concurrently. This is an example of where character and reader come closer to one another by way of the experience of boredom coming through in the very text we read.

Both these models touch upon the idea that *The Pale King* is a book about boredom. In the first model, the technique of conveying human bliss through supernatural events is put in direct opposition to the overtly realistic descriptions of the IRS, which “make for a poor story” (392), potentially because they are boring. In the second model, Sylvanshine’s repertoire of useless facts intruding upon his consciousness signals the irrelevance of facts or information that comes without a context. Additionally, it points to the hope readers have of the author being an organising force behind the text so that what Sylvanshine experiences is not the reader’s experience.

Another article that focuses on narrative aspects of the novel is Marshall Boswell’s “Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*” which explores the implications of the proclaimed autobiographical chapters in the novel narrated by David Wallace. Boswell states that the one of the consequences of such a character is that the novel “asks its readers to weigh the value of fictional truth over that of supposed non-fiction” (25), as many things in *The Pale King* and the David Wallace chapters have similarities to David Foster Wallace’s real life and career. These similarities between the real author and the in-text author point to how “the David Wallace narrative in *The Pale King* can be read as a coded memoir of [David Foster Wallace’s] development as a writer” (37) according to Boswell. Moreover, it alludes to how “the sense of intimate communication one might feel with the author of a text [...] is an illusion” (38) as both actual person David Foster Wallace, author of the novel and the “public signifier” (38) David Foster Wallace, and in this case, also the character David Wallace are all separate from each other. When discussing aspects of how the text creates boredom, one can therefore speak of the character David Wallace's first person narration, his third person narration as he will have transcribed interviews, relayed memories where other characters (his former co-workers) are speaking, and thirdly the David Foster Wallace who is the omniscient author whose name is on the cover and to whom all words in the novel can be attributed. What Boswell's article argues for is that it insignificant to try and

establish what form of David Wallace is narrating, as they all point to the illusion of “intimate communication” (38) with any one of them.

Additionally, Toon Staes’ “Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*” also focuses on David Wallace and the “‘Author Here’ sections [...] in which ‘David Wallace’ explicitly elaborates on the ‘contract’ between the writer and the reader” (416). He investigates the techniques this character’s narrative contains which evoke empathic reactions in readers. In a second, and more in depth, article by Staes, the authorial claims of the David Wallace character are the subject matter once more. The article “Work in Progress: A Genesis for *The Pale King*” has two purposes. One is, through genetic criticism, to look at the collected archives of Wallace’s gathered at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas for clues to the way the book might possibly have looked had it not been unfinished. The second, and more interesting purpose, is to investigate “the issue of authorship in the book from the perspective of narrative theory” (70) which looks at the three David Wallace chapters. Staes finds that the first two of these, chapter 24 and 27 “switches from first to third person. All of a sudden we are no longer limited to the supposed author’s side of things. To all appearances, the narrator’s involvement indeed shifts from homo- to heterodiegetic” (78). Finally, in the third of David Wallace’s sections, Staes points out that “unlike the previous two, this final chapter is told entirely in the third person” (80). This leads him to conclude that “[i]n a ‘memoir’ that is ‘also supposed to function as a portrait of a bureaucracy’, the narrative voice is distanced from the ‘self’ not by time, it seems, but by bureaucratic cluttering” (80) as the fictional contract and claims of being a true non-fiction memoir begin to collide. This is further information which points to the blurred lines between the different forms of David Wallace that exists in the text and it further supports the importance that the theme of bureaucracy plays in the novel.

In Conley Wouters’ article “‘What Am I? A Machine’: Humans, Information and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*” the theme of information overload is explored. He states that his article aims to “show that *The Pale King*’s characters possess an ambivalence in the face of these information avalanches that is at times healthy and at other times consuming” (448). This ambivalence is aimed towards the prevalent themes of boredom in connection to information featured in the novel as well as through “examples of humans in danger of becoming machines” (448). As an example, the character Lane Dean Jr. has a “job as a processor –as, essentially, a sentient computer” since his tasks at work “precludes some element of interpretation or wonder [...] human qualities that Wallace positions not as social luxuries but as biological necessities” (454). Wouters’ article brings forth information

overload as the cause of tension between humans and machines, which is an interesting and correlating reading to my analysis on boredom. The difference is that my analysis argues for boredom being the consequence created by the same information-overloaded events in the novel, such as Lane Dean's job-tasks or the overload of information that the reader experience while reading when the text is littered with abbreviations, taxation theory or bureaucratic language. Information overload is not just a risk for the characters at their jobs, which places them on the brink of humans versus machines, but it is also a technique the novel uses to create boredom.

Another article that follows the same theme of people at risk of becoming less human and more like machines is Simon de Bourcier's article where he argues for the technology used in the bureaucratic world of the novel adhering to a theme present in John Barth's novel *LETTERS* and in the films *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator*. In *The Pale King*, de Bourcier states, the stylistic use of bureaucratic techniques such as "cross-referencing, footnotes and the section symbol (§), means that its self-references constitutes an unexpected kind of mimetic realism" which is used to "explore the analogy between reflexivity in fiction and the Science Fiction trope of consciousness arising in artificial technologies" (41). Again, this article looks at similar themes, but through a different lens. De Bourcier's thesis concerns the idea that "there is a parallel between self-consciousness in fiction and the emergence of artificial consciousness in machines" (51) and that it represents ambivalence towards subjectivity and the self. This implies that *The Pale King's* way of being self-conscious, the "mimetic realism" (41) it creates, is through bureaucratic writing techniques. The book, therefore, is about a bureaucracy but is also presenting bureaucratic language, just as it is about boredom and often creates boredom. This parallel is going to be further developed in the analysis of this essay.

An additional theme found in the previous criticism is the subject of politics. In Marshall Boswell's article "Trickle Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" he takes a socio-historic look at the similarities between the Reagan-era political climate of the 1980's and the fictional parallels in the novel. This is similar to the method used by Clare, although Clare focuses more on cultural events, Boswell's focus is predominately on the political events. More explicitly, Boswell states that the novel "zeroes in specifically and relentlessly on the Reagan tax cuts of 1981 and the subsequent ascendancy in American political discourse of so-called 'supply side economics' as a pivotal damaging moment" (465). Through Chris Fogle and David Wallace's narratives, Boswell explains the cultural development of American politics and civics in relation to the

IRS during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another addition to the theme of politics is Emily J. Hogg's article "Subjective Politics in *The Pale King*" which investigates characters' narratives and their expressed political views in order to find a correlation between subjective life and political stance. *The Pale King* is quite the political text and although this is not the primary focus of my discussion, it will regardless seep into my analysis due to the fact that the novel is set at the IRS. Additionally, the cultural period of the setting, as Boswell has established, is quite abundant in politically loaded events we can recognise from our point of view of today.

To touch upon a final theme, Stephen J. Burn has written two articles which focus on the literary works of David Foster Wallace and he investigates the position that *The Pale King* occupies in relation to the author's other works. In one article, "A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness: Closing Time in *The Pale King*", he aims to "argue that one of the unifying mechanisms in [*The Pale King*] is Wallace's career-long fascination with consciousness" (372-373). In particular, he aims to prove that Wallace's intention with "*The Pale King* was to make [...] a concrete model in which numerous analogies might dramatize different aspects of cognition" (383). In the second article, "Toward a General Theory of Vision in Wallace's Fiction", Burn investigates the theme of sight in Wallace's novels, and he argues that special attention is given to "the physiological (and particularly neurophysiological) structures that underwrite vision" (87). As an example, Burn states that *The Pale King's* status as an unfinished novel becomes "a feature rather than just a bug" considering how David Wallace, in the novel, mentions the way the brain can fill in gaps in memories, much like how "the brain automatically works to fill in the visual gap caused by the optical cord's exit through the back of the retina" (91). Therefore, "[j]ust as the brain fills in gaps in vision by 'constructing what 'ought' to be there on the evidence of the surrounding colour and pattern', so the reader must act as the brain operating on the fragmented stimuli provided by the book's eye" (91). The latter theme of sight becomes a poignant metaphor for the unfinished nature of the novel, but the theme of consciousness in *The Pale King* can be seen in some scenes to be related to boredom. Attention is presented as the opposite of, or as a cure to boredom and attention and boredom sometimes seem like the two ends of a spectrum. Additionally, it can be considered as the hardest thing to do when one is bored, as boredom is usually something that diverts our attention from the situation at hand.

Both the themes of attention and the literary works of Wallace feature in Tore Rye Andersen's "Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies". This article looks at the literary works of Wallace's and places them in the context of postmodernist authors, the generation preceding Wallace. Andersen states that "we should perhaps focus just as much on

the affinities between Wallace and the postmodern patriarchs as the discontinuities” (22). In order to do this Andersen expands on the theme of paying attention that runs through Wallace’s works. Regarding this theme, Andersen states that in *The Pale King*, “boredom certainly plays an important role” but he believes that the novel “devotes at least as much energy to the question of how to *transcend* boredom by paying attention” (12). An example Andersen uses is how “Chris Fogle transcended his solipsistic default setting and learned to notice the world around him” and his narrative is about how he “gradually learned to pay attention” (12). In Andersen's article, the theme of paying attention is predominately a way of providing new information to the academic knowledge gathered on Wallace and Andersen believes this changes the general direction that David Foster Wallace criticism has taken since the 1990s. The article’s focus is on post modernism rather than offering any attempts to look at the possible link paying attention has to the feeling of boredom which I proposed previously.

The field of criticism on *The Pale King* is quite small as of the time of writing. The preceding chapter has hoped to provide an overview of what the field looks like in general and where similar research has been done. Ralph Clare's article is the most relevant, and it is from where I hope to continue the exploration of boredom in *The Pale King*. It is my contention that the theme of boredom runs so extensively throughout the novel that it will yield a greater understanding of the text as a whole when explored. Furthermore, as it is such a new publication, with only one critic taking on the same theme, there is a need for an expanded study in this area.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework aims to provide an explanation of how I will use the word boredom in this essay. This will be done by providing a structured analysis of the literature on boredom beginning with how it is an adaptive emotion, which has a history of cultural development and discourse. Subsequently, the focus turns to how our current cultural discourse expresses it as a lack of personal meaning. The field of literature on boredom is, at times, difficult to navigate. There are books written on the history of boredom, the philosophy of boredom, and the literature of boredom. Psychology, Neuroscience, Social Science and Educational Science are all fields where studies are conducted incorporating the feeling of boredom in various representations. It is an emotion related to anger, depression, attention-deficits and novelty-seeking. Broadly seen, it is a normal feeling present in different forms, just like one could say about anger, excitement, disappointment or any other emotion.

There are many expressions of boredom just as there are many causes. In the majority of the literature on boredom there is a division between simple boredom and complex boredom, which is sometimes referred to as existential boredom. Simple boredom or situational boredom is the term used to describe situations such as waiting for a bus that is running late, a long meeting or a night in front of the TV when nothing interesting is on. The simple type of boredom is generally relived once the bus comes, the meeting ends, or a new interesting programme starts. The second kind, the existential boredom, is not as easily resolved. Angst, ennui and melancholia are words that are more similar to this type of boredom than to the first. When it seems like the boredom is chronic, or comes from within rather than from the situation, the term existential boredom is used. While the two kinds might be easily recognised in everyday life, they are difficult to precisely define.

An investigation has been performed into whether the person or the situation is the cause for boredom, and its results illuminates the question of what a definition of simple and existential boredom might yield. The study was published named “Causes of Boredom: The person, the situation, or both?” where they state that “that there are two distinct types of boredom distinguished by cause: person-based state boredom and situation-based state boredom” (K.B Mercer-Lynn et.al. 124). These two types correlate with the same division I have explained above, the only difference is that in this article, they identify the difference as the causes for boredom. They do not claim that there are two different boredoms, something which I believe is important to state and is part of the reason why using the distinction between simple and existential boredom causes difficulties. Indeed, they argue for the

experience of boredom being indistinguishable from the cause, whether that is the situation or the person. They say of state-boredom, when the person is put in a situation that is boring, that “it is plausible that state boredom, whether a result of the situation or characteristics of the person, is experienced the same way” (124).

The causes of boredom become an endless category and to roughly separate them in two groups is reasonable, however, it can never provide any definite lines where one state is per definition different from the other. Additionally, it does not explain what boredom is as much as it explains how and when it can affect us. Therefore, as the literature on boredom often separates the boredom into two kinds, these groups must be seen as causes of boredom rather than separate causes of two kinds of emotions.

To investigate what boredom is, the following section will work to establish boredom as an adaptive emotion and uses Peter Toohey's book *Boredom: A Lively History* in order to do so. Following this section, the cultural development and discursive changes in the history of boredom will be examined.

Firstly, it must be noted that Toohey distinguishes between simple boredom and existential boredom. According to him, “[t]he *first* form of boredom is the result of predictable circumstances that are very hard to escape” (4), that is boredom that arises from the situation. He says that he has “often wondered if this stigma of childishness has given rise to the *second* form of boredom, occasionally termed 'complex' or 'existential' [...] This form of boredom is said to be able to infect a person's very existence and it may even be thought of as a philosophical sickness” (5). Toohey's book gives its attention to the simple boredom which is less frequently written about. He states that the other kind, the existential boredom is rather a “hotchpotch of a category” and that “it is a condition which seems to [him] to be more read about and discussed than actually experienced” (6). I will contend that these categories are two causes of boredom, rather than two boredoms, and that it is a hotchpotch of a category of causes, as there are probably more possible causes of existential boredom than there are lived experiences. However, this is true for the simple boredom as well. There are a vast number of situation-based experiences of boredom. Perhaps the complexity of the term existential boredom makes it seem like a hotchpotch, while simple boredom is dubbed so due to the straightforwardness of finding the cause.

Toohey aims to prove “that boredom is, in the Darwinian sense, an adaptive emotion” (7) and ties it together with the adaptive emotion of disgust. He supports his claim with statements like that of “William Ian Miller, [who] in his evocatively titled book, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, notes with hesitation that 'boredom ... is the name we give to a less intense form



of disgust ... Boredom stands in relation to disgust as annoyance does to anger” (15).

Furthermore, Toohey quotes

[t]he psychologist Robert Plutchik [who] offers a scientific psychological base for the bond between boredom and disgust. [Plutchik] maintains that emotions serve an adaptive role by helping creatures to cope with survival issues posed by their environment: disgust, for example, might keep animals and humans clear of noxious substances (16).

Boredom, therefore, can be seen as an emotion helping us to stay away from noxious situations. Repetitive and predictable scenarios where it would seem we would do more good if we were indeed doing something else. A significant part of Toohey's book looks at art, where he finds examples that proves that “[t]here is a series of codes – probably involuntary ones at that – for depicting boredom visually” (18), which includes hands on hips, resting elbows, resting one's head in one's hands and yawning. Nothing links the series of codes, or physical expressions of boredom to any particular cause of boredom, simple or existential in Toohey's argument. Therefore, the expressions and the development of boredom as an adaptive emotion both seem independent of the division between simple and existential boredom. This is especially true considering Mercer-Lynn et al.'s assertion that the chronically bored might experience the same thing in a boring situation as the person who is not. Therefore, the series of codes Toohey finds tells us of the situation a person is in, not whether a person yawns and reflects upon existential boredom on a rainy day, or just yawns and reflects upon the boring rain. So what then, is the division useful for? Toohey offers a definition of simple and existential boredom which may answer this question.

it is an emotion which produces feelings of being constrained or confined by some unavoidable and distastefully predictable circumstance and, as a result, a feeling of being distanced from one's surroundings and the normal flow of time. [...] Boredom is a social emotion of mild disgust produced by a temporarily unavoidable and predictable circumstance (45)

This quote points to the difficulty of defining boredom, especially when the causes are included in the definition as they are here. Moreover, the definition of existential boredom reads

existential boredom entails a powerful and unrelieved sense of emptiness, isolation and disgust in which the individual feels a persistent lack of interest in and difficulty with concentration on his current circumstances [...] It is a concept that is constructed from a union of boredom, chronic boredom, depression, a sense of superfluity, frustration, disgust (142)

Toohey continues with more examples of what this intellectually based concept is constructed from. He does not call it an emotion or a feeling which, by definition, places it outside of Toohey's argument for boredom being an adaptive emotion. This is why he uses the division of simple and existential boredom. However, it seems, rather, that existential boredom is a term which includes aspects of simple boredom, as well as others such as depression or

frustration. Perhaps existential boredom could be better described as a boredom-combination, where the quality that separates simple boredom from existential boredom is that the existential boredom is actually not just boredom any longer.

A good analogy of explaining this boredom-combination is the relationship between fear, where we get frightened when a car comes towards us and we automatically jump away, and phobias, where the fear is irrational per definition and we obsessively avoid something that can not harm us. However, imagine instead that they two were called simple fear and existential fear. Phobias, or existential fear, are harder to get to the root of, they are not easily relieved, and they come in combination with other feelings such as anxiety or panic. It is easier to see that phobias are different than the fear one feels if a car is fast approaching towards us, but fear still features in a phobia – just not solely. This is how I see the relationship between simple and existential boredom and I will be investigation boredom however it is presented, whether in simple or existential circumstances.

This argument is based on Toohy's definitions; other scholars may provide different ones but still use the same terminology which also adds to the difficulty of navigating the literature on boredom. However, it strengthens the importance of providing an explanation of what one means, and how one will use the term boredom when applying it to literature. As I have said before, I want to state that I am not trying to categorise the different expressions, experiences or causes of boredom found in *The Pale King* as being either simple or existential, but rather look towards what unifies the boredom represented by the novel. Boredom being an adaptive emotion is part of this, as it establishes it as being part of our human make up. It is not something we need to learn, or for that matter, can 'un-learn'. The people with the capacity of being angry are surely of comparable number to the people able to be bored. However, just as some people seem to be angry more often than others, some people might be bored more often. The second important aspect, which the following section will deal with, is that this emotion has been expressed differently throughout history. The following section will look at the historical development of boredom leading up to what it has come to mean today.

The discursive investigation begins with Ancient Greek thought, wherein a concept which can satisfactorily be translated as boredom does not fully exist. Reinhard Kuhn writes in *The Demon of Noontide*, his book on the history of ennui that "if the Ancients were aware of ennui, they did not consider it a fit subject for literature" (Kuhn 35). They may have known about it, but no textual evidence can be found. The concept of idleness existed and was written about, but being idle can only be seen to be correlated to boredom, as simply the state of being idle cannot automatically be considered a cause of boredom. Lars Svendsen writes in his book

Work that “Aristotle argued that just as the purpose of war is peace, the goal of work is leisure” (2008 Svendsen 17), suggesting that idleness was perhaps more related to pleasure than the negative feelings of boredom. Svendsen also writes, in *A Philosophy of Boredom*, that “the closest [word to boredom] is probably *akedia*, which is made up of *kedos*, which means to care about, and a negative prefix” (1999 Svendsen 50). This concept is described as “a state of disintegration that could manifest itself as stupor and lack of participation” (50). This Greek word comes close to the concept of boredom, but it would not be until the Roman Empire when a more suitable word is found.

Similar in spelling to this Greek word which Svendsen described above, is the Latin *acedia*, which, at the advent of Christianity, becomes the oldest concept of boredom in western thought. Acedia was conceived in parallel with the development of monasticism, where Christian hermits sought the deserts of Egypt to establish a solitary life devoted to God. Kuhn states that in the middle of the third century, Saint Anthony's “exemplary life stimulated such interest that soon literally thousands of huts sprang up in the wastelands of the Near East” (Kuhn 40). Among these monks, who attempted to live a sparing and self-sufficient life free of temptation and sin, one monk, Evargius

referred to *acedia* as the 'daemon qui etiam meridianus vocatur', that is, as the “noontide demon” of the Psalms, which attacked the cenobites most frequently between the hours of ten and two. There is a naturalistic explanation for this correlation: midday is the time when the hermit is weakest from fasting and thus reaches a physical low point (43)

Acedia was to Evargius an attack from a demon that makes the monk “detest the place where he finds himself – and even life itself. It causes the monk to remember the life he lived before becoming a monk, with all its attractions” (Svendsen 50). Acedia was one of most severe sins to commit, but “[o]nce this eighth sin is vanquished the monk is immune, or practically so, to all the others. The reason for this can be found in the nature of the virtue that replaces *acedia*” (Kuhn 44). Evargius and the desert monks believed that each sin had its counterpart in virtue, and as one sin was eliminated its opposing virtue would take its place, greed being replaced with generosity, for example. Therefore, “when the monk succeeds in expelling *acedia*” it “is automatically replaced by the highest of virtues, namely, joy” (44).

The concept of *acedia* changed over time to eventually become superseded by the concept of melancholy during the Renaissance “due to the more naturalistic perspective then being placed on the world” (51). Instead of *acedia*, which was something that was either a sin one committed or a demon that tempted one's faith, melancholia became described as a more natural state of being. It could be cured by the individuals themselves, while “the cure for *acedia* always lies outside the state itself – for example in God or in work” (51). Further

investigations into the self in connection to concepts of boredom, can be found Isis I. Leslie's article "From Idleness to Boredom" where Leslie looks at the historical development of boredom in relation to political participation and how individuals viewed the self. She states that "[t]he rise of the Christian church marks the beginning of an unprecedented relocation of responsibility for self-management from the individual person to 'pastoral power', or the priesthood" (Leslie 36). With the Roman Empire as a precursor, where individuals were subjects under the state, Christianity placed individuals as subjects under God and acedia was understood in parallel with this. The cure and the cause lay outside the self. With the Renaissance came knowledge of the body and the belief in the four humours, where melancholia became known as an excess of black bile. Additionally, it also meant that the pastoral power and priesthood lost some of its authority with the reformation of the Christian church. The discourse of acedia became less popular as it began to gradually integrate less with the rest of the world. What boredom is explained as being, whether it is the expression of it, or the cause, has historically always resonated with the current culture and has developed with it.

As the ideas of the self developed further, and alongside those the ideas of what boredom is, a book which takes this argument further is Elizabeth Goodstein's book *Experiences Without Qualities*. In this she traces the rhetoric of reflection of subjective boredom and she states that

[f]aith in a coming redemption and in a divinely ordered eternity was increasingly being replaced by enlightened belief in human progress toward an earthly paradise; religious vocabularies of reflection on subjective existence were being eclipsed by a radically different vocabulary grounded in bodily materiality. (Goodstein 3)

Goodstein's study posits that "[t]he experience of malaise cannot simply be abstracted from the language in which it is expressed" (4) and therefore, when it comes to concepts like acedia, melancholy, taedium vitae and other words related to the concept of boredom, "[e]ach of these forms of discontent is embedded in an historically and culturally specific way of understanding and interpreting human experience" (4). Goodstein calls this a rhetoric of reflection which is the basis for her investigation into how boredom is a "specifically modern way of thinking about human existence" (4). As such, she also states that "the language of melancholy implies a deviance from the ideal of a homeostatic balance of humors in the body" and "acedia a loss of spiritual connection to the divine" (4). While Goodstein's book predominantly aims to contribute to the understanding of modernity rather than to the understanding of boredom, her conclusions on the possibility to investigate boredom and a

rhetoric of reflection in order to make deductions of the world they were expressed in are relevant to my argument.

Goodstein states that “[t]he experience of boredom as we know it came into being in the aftermath of Enlightenment, as a product of the struggle to express how modern subjects lived problems of meaning in a world without God” (408). Lars Svendsen attributes the origin of boredom as we know it today to Romanticism. He states that “[i]t is not until the advent of Romanticism towards the end of the eighteenth century that the demand arises for life to be interesting, with the general claim that the self must realize itself” (28) and additionally he states that the “meaning that [he] refer to as personal meaning [...] [he] could also call Romantic meaning” (30). Svendsen states that human beings are dependent on our lives having content that we can call meaningful, because “[b]oredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied” (30). Therefore, he states, “boredom is the result of a lack of personal meaning” (31). Additionally, Svendsen writes that “[t]here is no *one* collective meaning in life anymore” (32), hence we must find and choose our own definition of what gives our lives meaning. When things seem pointless or meaningless they become boring, and the point and meaning which are lacking is a meaning that is personally relevant to us. Goodstein explains the same process of which boredom become linked to a lack of personal meaning by stating that “the language of boredom that emerges in the West after the Enlightenment represents the dilemma of the modern subject whose existence is no longer meaningfully embedded in traditional religious and social narratives” (Goodstein 414). The modern subject must look to themselves to discern if something is meaningful or not, not towards religion, for example. Boredom is the emotion of a situation being personally meaningless, or irrelevant. Even the simple boredom of waiting for the bus is irrelevant in the process of going to work; waiting a while is not required in order to go to work but it is what has to be done if the bus is late.

As our culture no longer places us as subjects under God and as individualism suggests that no one collective meaning of life exists, or is believed in, each individual must find their own. This does not suggest that a meaningful life is harder to come by or that boredom can be said to be more common these days. What it implies is that the concept of what boredom is and our cultural understanding of where meaning to life comes from can be linked historically, and has changed in accordance with each other. In today's culture, the individual must find his or her own meaning in life, and therefore we can see how the common denominator in many expressions of boredom is a lack of personal meaning, or relevance. Whether that is a feature of the complex, existential boredom of something like feeling stuck in a career or at a job we

do not enjoy, or a simple, situational-based boredom of a staff meeting we must attend, one feature that remains is that we can define it as personally meaningless.

## 4. Analysis of three characters

The first section of the analysis contains three parts focusing on three characters. Together they show that the concept of boredom as it is defined in the theoretical framework is compatible with the boredom in *The Pale King*. This section takes a thematic approach to boredom, and investigates the experience of boredom the characters have. The contexts of these experiences are placed in expanding order, and advances from a simple context to a more complex one, similar to the analogy of fear and phobias mentioned in the theoretical framework. The common denominator for all three of these aforementioned contexts is a lack of personal relevance. In this section, the theme of bureaucracy in connection to the theme of boredom will begin to emerge, only to be fully expanded upon in the second half.

The second half will take a stylistic approach to boredom and investigate the ways boredom is created, rather than experienced, in the novel. The theme of boredom is expressed stylistically through the way the novel is written. Within this context, the character David Wallace, who is the novel's self-proclaimed author of the text, is in focus. Here too, the theme of boredom connects with the theme of bureaucracy as the character of David Wallace actively reflects on both themes and their interaction. This latter half explores bureaucracies further. Together with the previous analysis on boredom in the novel, the bureaucracy's integration of the concept of boredom as lack of personal relevance reaches its culmination.

### 4.1 Claude Sylvanshine

The following half of this section looks at the character Claude Sylvanshine, who works at the IRS Regional Examinations office, in Peoria, IL, where the novel is set. He experiences a very simple form of boredom, which for the purpose of my analysis works as an introduction to the experienced boredom in the novel. What makes Claude Sylvanshine unique, is that he suffers from a condition known in *The Pale King* as being a fact psychic, which is “[a]n obscure but true piece of paranormal trivia” (Wallace 120). The difference between Sylvanshine’s kind of psychic ability and the more common type is that the subject matter for the fact psychic is “usually far more tedious and quotidian than the dramatically relevant foreknowledge we normally conceive as ESP or precognition” (120). Instead of the dramatically relevant, Sylvanshine’s facts are “ephemeral, useless, undramatic, [and] distracting” (120). An example of a fact that can suddenly intrude upon Sylvanshine is “[t]he exact (not estimated) height of Mount Erebus, though not what or where Mount Erebus is” (121). The facts are utterly without context, and Sylvanshine has learned that “you don’t

chase these facts down; they're like lures that lead you nowhere" (121). Thus, to find an Atlas and discover that Mound Erebus is located along the southern coast line of Antarctica, or that Erebus is the primordial Greek god of darkness, still does not provide a context in which this fact becomes relevant. Instead, "[t]he fact psychic lives part-time in the world of fractious, boiling minutiae that no one knows or could be bothered to know even if they had the chance to know" (122). In short, the facts are boring.

In chapter 30, Sylvanshine and his colleague Reynolds are trying to induce Sylvanshine's abilities in order to gather information about employees at the IRS office. Sylvanshine becomes a conduit for information as he listens in on phone conversations in the hope to acquire information about the speakers. Reynolds writes down what Sylvanshine tells him and he is tasked with passing the information on to their boss, Mel. At one point the two get in to a small argument about who is supposed to do what in this operation.

'Hey Claude, seriously, is there some process by which you decide I want to hear aesthetic appraisals? Is there reasoning by which somewhere inside you decide this is useful data to have in Mel's head when he starts working with these people? Don't strain now, but think about it and sometime tell me the process by which you decide I have to wait through incidentals of dress and carriage before I hear material that's going to help me do my job here'  
'Your job, is the point. Boil it down. Reduce to fact-pattern, relevance. My job's the raw data'  
(362)

The conversation identifies their two roles, Sylvanshine is supposed to channel the information to Reynolds, who in turn should filter it and organise it in a relevant order. When Reynolds wonders why Sylvanshine considered information about aesthetic appearances to be relevant to Mel, he is frustrated that Sylvanshine had not already sorted the facts. Despite Sylvanshine reminding him that they began with set roles, hearing an irrelevant fact caused Reynolds to wonder why Sylvanshine decided to tell him this, pointing to what reasoning or process was behind it. Sylvanshine quite deliberately did not perform any fact sorting processes, as he tells Reynolds that is his job, yet Reynolds expected him to. The two jobs, handling the raw data and determining the pertinent point and meaning of it, can be difficult to separate.

Sylvanshine believes this is more easily done than Reynolds, perhaps due to his condition of being a fact psychic, where one of the essential components of the condition seems to be the lack of relevance attached to the facts that intrude upon his consciousness. Therefore, what he tells Reynolds is his job in the operation, to reduce it down, is what Sylvanshine must do all the time, since relevant facts are blended in his consciousness with his fact psychic thoughts. To live with this condition has trained Sylvanshine to abandon hope for relevance per se, and he is more adept at stifling his desire for all facts he is made conscious of to be



relevant. Reynolds' frustration is a reaction to the desire of relevance being left unmet as he, by way of Sylvanshine, has his consciousness intruded upon by irrelevant information about the employees. Andrew Warren, in the essay "Narrative Modeling and Community Organizing in *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest*," describes Sylvanshine's Fact Psychic ability as part of a narrative model he calls Spontaneous Data Intrusion. This condition becomes an example of how "[t]he SDIs signal a certain horror implicit in something like third-person omniscient narration" (Warren 402). This means that Sylvanshine's consciousness lacks what readers usually assume of a text, namely "something like an organizing, negotiating principle at work behind the text" (402). This principle behind a text is what saves a reader from the minute details which can be very boring. Without a context, or a salient point to it all, details can become boring facts.

The following chapters take the need for context in a conversation further. Previously the context needed to surround a conversation between two people, or to give meaning and reason to what one person is trying to convey to another. The following chapter explores what happens if the context needs to explain something larger, for instance why we go to work.

## **4.2 Lane Dean Jr.**

While the previous section worked to introduce the concept of relevant information and the confusion, and even frustration, that occurs when our need for relevance is not being met, this section investigates the boredom which is a consequence of our job seeming irrelevant to us. The context of boredom and work is explored, and particularly work in a bureaucracy.

This section follows Lane Dean Jr., who is a new examiner at the IRS office. His days are spent examining tax returns and checking for errors, a monotonous task which lacks novelty. On one of the few fifteen minute breaks he gets during the day "Lane [...] feels like running out into the fields in the heat and running in circles and flapping his arms" (125), as the boredom he feels at work is close to driving him crazy. These few, short breaks become his only opportunity for relief from the boredom, but rarely do they seem to help at all. Rather, they make "Lane Dean [...] feel desperate about the fact that the break's fifteen minutes are ticking inexorably away" (125). One particular day, Dean's boredom reaches new heights. The unknown narrator of the chapter states that "[t]he truth is that there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room" where Dean works, and these "ghost's names are Garrity and Blumquist [...] Blumquist is a very bland, dull, efficient rote examiner who died at his desk unnoticed in 1980" and "Garrity had evidently been a line inspector for

Mid-West Mirror Works in the mid-twentieth century” (317) who hanged himself in the building which is now part of the Regional Examinations Center. The narrator says that at his job, “Garrity sat on a stool next to a slow moving belt and moved his upper body in a complex system of squares and butterflies shapes” in order to inspect the mirrors for manufacture flaws. Both ghosts speak to a deep sense of boredom in their work life. Blumquist’s death could only go unnoticed for days because it was common for his co-workers to only see him sat at his desk, examining files with minimal need for movement. The boredom and lifelessness of the job as a rote examiner, which is what Lane Dean is, is so extreme that one can barely differentiate a working employee from a dead body. The extreme boredom Lane Dean experiences is what leads up to the visit from the ghost.

On this day at work Dean is struggling to retain his concentration as his mind drifts to and from the files he needs to examine, and “[t]his was boredom beyond any boredom he’d ever felt” (379). At one point his mind drifts off and “then unbidden came the thought that *boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole” (380). This realisation of wordplay becomes the metaphor for his feelings of dread as “[h]e had the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor. Never before in his life up to now had he once thought of suicide” (380). Again, he counts the minutes left until his next break and he “imagined himself running around on the break waving his arms and shouting gibberish and holding ten cigarettes at once in his mouth like a panpipe” (381). As the feelings of boredom intensify, so do his fantasies of what he wants to do on the next break. The boredom he feels makes Dean feel hollow, but more specifically, he feels like a hole is falling through him and not the other way around. When he contemplates suicide there is a likeness to the two ghosts, Blumquist who looked the same while working as when he was dead, and Garrity who actually did commit suicide at work. The boredom and the lack of meaningfulness Dean experiences at work makes him feel less of a person, and more like a hollow ghost. He imagines a hell, where death is characterised by a state of constant boredom and the complete absence of any personal meaning or relevance, and he states that

[h]e felt in a position to say that he knew that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops. Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he’d ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he could see it, and just leave the man to his mind’s own devices. (381)

The other side of the crushing boredom is revealed when Dean finds a moment of concentration when he takes a look at the picture of his wife and baby that he keeps by his

desk, and “for half a file it helped to have them in mind because they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing to do and he had to remember it but it kept slipping away down the hole that fell through him” (382). The remedy to the boredom is the thought of his family, as they are the reason for why he goes to work. The relevance of this job is his family, not the numbers on the files that connect to nothing he cares about.

When the ghost appears to Dean in his daze of boredom, he notices that the ghost “kept moving his upper body around in a slight kind of shape or circle, and the movement left a bit of a visual trail” (384), which indicates that it is Garrity, the line inspector who moved his body like this at work, who is visiting him. However, the ghost itself never announces his name. When Garrity first speaks he refers back to when the word 'boring' came to Dean's drifting mind, and he says “[y]es but now you're getting a little taste, consider it, the word. You know the one” (384). In what seems more of a monologue than a conversation, Garrity presents the history of the word boredom and Dean thinks to himself that “[h]e had no earthly idea what this man was talking about but at the same time it unnerved him that he'd been thinking about *bore* as a word as well” (386). It seems like Garrity is summoned to give this speech, or lecture perhaps, by the extreme feelings of boredom Dean felt, and his speech starts off with him stating that

[w]ord appears suddenly in 1766. No known etymology [...] In fact, the first three appearances of *bore* in English conjoin with the adjective *French*, that French bore, that boring Frenchman, yes? The French of course had *malaise*, *ennui* [...] This means a good five hundred years of no word for it [...] No word for the Latin *acedia* made so much of by the monks under Benedict [...] Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so called *daemon meridianus*, where their prayers were sultrified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for violent death [...] Donne of course called it *lethargie*, and for a time it seems conjoined somewhat with melancholy, saturninia, *otiositas*, *tristitia* – that is, to be confused with sloth and torpor and lassitude and eremia and vexation and distemper and attributed to spleen (385)

In this quote from Garrity's monologue, *The Pale King* shows an awareness of the cultural changes in how boredom was explained and recognised. Several parts of this quote will sound familiar to anyone having read a book on the subject of the history of boredom.

Garrity and Lane Dean never engage in dialogue and Dean's response in this chapter is only the thoughts he has, and he feels like “the fellow wasn't strictly speaking *to* him” (384). However, it does seem like Garrity is addressing someone in the beginning. The first words he says are “[y]es but now you're getting a little taste” (384), however, the lack of actual dialogue between the two makes it seem like Garrity is merely repeating a speech given to other people before Dean, and perhaps to others after him. Garrity's background as a factory worker and a line inspector is of importance, as his job was unfathomably monotonous and boring, just like Lane Dean's. Garrity “had apparently hanged himself from a steam pipe in

what is now the north hallway off the REC Annex's wiggle room" (318), after having worked at the mirror factory where he inspected a mirror "three times a minute, 1,440 times per day, 356 days a year, for eighteen years" (317-318). Garrity is from the generation before Lane Dean's; from the time of factories and conveyor belts, and Dean is of the next generation where bureaucracy and office work has replaced the factories as a common place of employment. A replacement in a quite literal manner too, considering that the building used to be a mirror factory and is now converted into an IRS centre. Garrity's appearance seems to be triggered by the extreme boredom Dean feels, and the thoughts of suicide Dean has. Garrity's extremely boring job might have been the cause for his suicide, as he hanged himself at work. He becomes like the ghost of boredom, teaching others about the very thing that took his life.

When Garrity, in an almost mystical way, says of the word boredom that "[p]hilologists say it was a neologism – and just at the time of industry's rise, too, yes?" (386) it is as if he thinks that the invention of factories and the jobs they created also created the boredom that eventually killed him. In the longer quotation above, Garrity points out that there were "five hundred years of no word for it" (385) and continues with a list of words that are similar, but still not *it*. Lane Dean, on "[t]he night after his first day" at work had "[dreamt] of a stick that kept breaking over and over but never got any smaller. That Frenchman pushing that uphill stone through eternity" (386), which of course is a reference to Albert Camus. Dean's dream references Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the feeling of performing the same task over and over without change or result. Both Camus, who died in 1960, and Garrity who died in "1964 or 1965" (318) come from the generation preceding Lane Dean, where the word for boredom was, according to Garrity, dependent on industry's rise. In another statement, Garrity refers to someone called "L.P Smith" who "[p]osits certain neologisms as *arising from their own cultural necessity*" (386). Furthermore, he states that "Smith puts it that when anything assumes sufficient relevance it finds a name" (387). In doing this, although presented by Garrity in a slightly more mystical manner, he points to Leslie and Goodstein's assertions of culture having a direct influence on how boredom is understood and experienced. In Lane Dean's 1980s America, a new type of line worker has been invented, the one who sits by a stack of files that is never ending instead of an eternally operating conveyor belt. Dean's bureaucratic version of hell speaks to the immediate culture he is living in and his understanding of boredom is derived from it.

While Garrity, in the mid-twentieth century, stood at the brink of machines replacing people, Lane Dean has a job where he is asked to perform the tasks of a different machine, namely the computer. The tension between people and machines is one of David Foster

Wallace's "[e]mbryotic outlines" (547) mentioned in the "Notes and Asides" published with the novel. The idea of "[m]achines vs. people at performing mindless jobs" along with "boredom, paying attention, ADD" (547) forms what Wallace himself called one of two broad arcs of the novel. The boredom in the workplace and the expression thereof is what Garrity and Lane Dean both represent two versions of. One is the factory worker and the other the bureaucrat. They have things in common, but they are separated by a generational gap which points to the evolving context in which boredom emerges.

Here begins the parallel of boredom and bureaucracy which is expanded upon further in the second chapter of the analysis. The development of the context of boredom in the workplace from the alienated factory worker to the bored bureaucrat connects to the following section of this chapter where Chris Fogle shows the specific context of being young in the late 70's, the same generation as Lane Dean Jr.

### **4.3 Chris Fogle**

This section elaborates the context of boredom further. If the boredom of irrelevant facts is seen as being like the simple fear of a fast approaching car, the boredom Chris Fogle displays is more complex, like a phobia. While many different feelings overlap in Fogle's story of his youth, boredom features within them, especially a persistent lack of a personal relevance in the context of the cultural climate Fogle finds himself in.

Chris Fogle's long monologue of a chapter begins with him sitting in an interview room beginning to answer the question of how he found himself working at the IRS. His story, which is almost a novella inside a novel, tells of his personal development in college and "how [he] arrived at this career. Where [he] came from so to speak, and what the Service means to [him]" (156). As he remembers back to his late teens, Fogle's story begins as he thinks of the stereotypical 70's outfits he wore back then. He had "fairly long hair" and wore "a lot of burnt oranges and brown, red-intensive paisley, bell-bottom cords, acetate and nylon, flared collars, dungaree vests" (159). He even had a "metal peace-sign pendant that weighed half a pound" and all of this "commercial psychedelia was at the time part of the "standard getup" (159).

Through the extensive use of this 70's cliché, young Chris Fogle becomes the average, typical American teenager of the times. He and many other people during this era are all dressed in the standard getup. The incongruity of his stereotypical outward appearances comes forth when he tells of the huge importance individualism and nonconformism had to

him at the time. Fogle describes his years right after high school turning him to “[t]he worst kind of nihilist – the one that isn’t even aware he’s a nihilist” (156). He saw himself “like a piece of paper on the street in the wind, thinking ‘Now I’ll blow this way, now I think I’ll blow that way’” (156) as if the paper, not the wind, made it change direction. Although Fogle’s teenage nihilism is not so much an academic school of thought, it is another way of explaining the lack of meaning he feels in life which he shares with his peers. As Fogle explains it, “the common word for this type of nihilist at the time was *wastoid*” (164) and “being a ‘wastoid’ was just something that so many of [them] in that era pretended to have raised to a nihilistic art form” (225). Fogle never says that he was bored in his younger years, or remembers his younger self saying that he was bored. However, the loss of direction and feelings of being lost are expressed in his narrative, and they are connected with boredom. The expressions of boredom are in focus, and their relation to the concept as it is defined in the theoretical framework will be shown.

The young Chris Fogle perhaps never saw himself with a self-critical frame of mind. He lacks certain self-awareness in his teenage years, evident in the comparison between Fogle and his roommate at college. Fogle describes his roommate as “a nonconformist, and also very unfocused and nihilistic, and deeply in to the school’s wastoid drug scene” (165). The roommate “blatantly rationalized his selling of drugs as a form of social rebellion rather than just pure capitalism, and even at the time [Fogle] knew [the roommate] was a total conformist to the late-seventies standards of so-called nonconformity, and sometimes [Fogle] felt contemptuous of him” (166). Remembering the clichéd outfit that Fogle himself wore, with his denim vest and bellbottom corduroy trousers, Fogle is equally as much part of the “late-seventies standards of so-called nonconformity” (166) as the roommate he felt contemptuous of. Only in retrospect does Fogle realise that it is not “[a]s if [he] was exempt, of course – but this blatant projection and displacement was part of the nihilist hypocrisy of the whole period” (166).

The hypocrisy Fogle describes relates not only to a lack of self-awareness, but it also points to the dichotomy of being like everybody else and wanting to express your own individuality. Fogle seems ignorant of what individual features he wants to express, he just knows that something does not feel right. He says that he “worried about [his] directionlessness and lack of initiative, how abstract and open to different interpretations everything had seemed at the time” (167). This feeling of everything being abstract fuels Fogle’s sense of lack of individuality and personal relevance to his life and he needs to find a context in which his college life fits him. He thinks of his years when he was dropping out

and starting over at different colleges and with different majors that “the whole thing was just going through the motions; it didn’t mean anything – even the whole point of classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable” (157). One of the classes he took is called “Literature of Alienation” where he never got through “Camus’s *The Fall*” and had to “totally bullshit [his] way through [...] the midterm” (189). He remembers getting a grade B with the teacher’s comment “Interesting in places!” and feeling like that it was a “meaningless bullshit response to meaningless bullshit” (189). Whereas the purpose of Lane Dean Jr.’s going to work is the thought of his family, Folge on the other hand lacks a good reason, in his mind, for going to college.

It is interesting that it is a class on alienation that Fogle finds so uninteresting. With his nihilistic, wastoid outlook on life he could possibly find kindred spirits in the literature he reads in class. However, the class clearly provides no sense of recognition for him. One interpretation could be that this is just another example of the lack of self-awareness young Chris Fogle had at the time, just like his hypocritical opinions of his roommate being a nonconformist while he was not. However, it can be seen as an ironic twist based on Fogle’s own dubbing of himself as a nihilist. Ralph Clare writes that “Fogle’s failure to get through Camus’s *The Fall* is partly ironic in and of itself” but the fact that Fogle got a B in a course he did not study for “suggests that there is something outdated or clichéd about ‘alienation’ and existential thought in the postmodern era” (Clare 435). Furthermore, “[i]nstead of finding something of value in existentialist literature [...] the younger Fogle finds it a waste of time and can easily mimic its familiar discourse” (436). In Clare’s article, this becomes the example he uses to prove that “the more personal existential angst of *Infinite Jest* is subtly critiqued, re-contextualized and broadened in *The Pale King*” (436). However the concept of alienation in Fogle’s postmodern era can be developed further. According to Lars Svendsen, before Marx “[t]he Latin term alienation had previously been used to describe the phenomenon of becoming a stranger to people, one’s country or God, and to refer to insanity and being deprived of one’s property” (Svendsen 2008, 32). The core of Fogle’s story is about him going from being a lost college student to becoming part of the IRS; part of “one’s country” (32), as it not only is a branch of the government but also directly deals with taxpaying citizens. This would indicate that his transition from being bored and directionless to having direction and initiative also was a transition from being alienated to a state of not being alienated. However, other aspects, which follow below, suggest that alienation is no longer sufficient as a theory applied to the reality in his cultural context.

Moreover, Lane Dean Jr thought of Camus too, and the myth of Sisyphus. The day he

sits at his work desk and an excruciating feeling of boredom strikes him, is when the ghost of Garrity, a factory worker who committed suicide in the same building pays him a visit. The two of them represent two sides of a generational gap which both experience boredom at work but the context of their work is wholly different. The older generation with factories and literature of alienation seems out-dated to both Dean and Fogle. What Svendsen writes is that while it is difficult to “address all aspects of Marx’s theory of alienation [...] one feature [Marx] took to be essential [is] the division of labour. His general idea is that the division of labour leads to a fragmentation of the creative process, with endless repetitions of minute operations, which in turn makes work meaningless” (Svendsen 2008, 32). Lane Dean’s imaginary version of hell consisted of such endless repetitions of minute operations, “tasks just tricky enough to [...] have to think [...] tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he’d ever see or care about” (381). However, Lane Dean’s chapter gives the reader the background of the word boredom, not alienation. In Dean and Fogle’s world the factory work is not relevant, and the discourse surrounding the concept of alienation offers no recognition or insight to young Fogle. Something else must be used to describe Fogle’s generation where he and his friends become nihilist wastoids, and not alienated factory workers. *The Pale King* suggests that a new explanation is needed in this postmodern, bureaucratic world, and it offers up boredom as potential answer.

It is not only Fogle’s own story of going from a lost teenager to having found direction in life that is presented in this chapter. Fogle had a roommate whose girlfriend tells him the story of how she became a Born-Again Christian. The two stories, Fogle and the roommate’s girlfriend’s, are often similar, but the point of interest is the lack of recognition Fogle presents towards her story, which speaks to the essential personal nature of the event that changed both their outlooks on life. As such, the lost and directionless state that *The Pale King* presents finds its cure in personally relevant events where the characters report to have found a sense of meaning in life. The missing component has to do with the characters themselves finding a sense of purpose. While it may be generally understood that an education at college or university has a purpose, Chris Fogle himself did not find it during his first couple of years at college. The boredom featuring in Fogle’s wastoid outlook on life and his college classes stems from a lack of personal meaning, which correlates with the theoretical framework’s definition of the concept.

The Christian girlfriend, whose name is unknown, annoys Fogle and there is an air of sarcasm in all his descriptions of her. Fogle describes her denomination of the church by stating that “[t]he fact that members of this evangelical branch of Protestantism refer to



themselves as just ‘Christians’, as though there were only one real kind, is usually enough to characterize them, at least as far as [Fogle] was concerned” (212). The girlfriend’s story is told from the perspective of a young sarcastic Fogle, who says that

the girlfriend was seeing fit to tell me the story of how she was ‘saved’ or ‘born again’ and became a Christian [...] Her testimony, as best as I can recall it now, was set on a certain day an unspecified amount of time before, a day when she was feeling totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope, sort of wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert of our younger generation’s decadence and materialism and so on and so forth. (213)

Fogle’s attitude comes through in his narration, and he continues to say that the Christian girlfriend found herself aimlessly driving one day and without specific reason stopped by an evangelical church where a sermon was taking place. Inside, the pastor had said “[t]here is someone [...] that is feeling lost and hopeless and at the end of their rope” (214). When hearing these words the girlfriend had told Fogle that “she had instantly felt a huge, dramatic spiritual change deep inside of her [...] as though now suddenly her life had meaning and direction to it after all, and so on and so forth” (214). Fogle appears to distance himself from the actual realisation the girlfriend had that made her become a Christian. He seems to not understand how she found her way out of feeling “totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope” (213) and he remembers

asking her just what exactly had made her think the evangelical pastor was talking to her directly, meaning her in particular, as probably everyone else sitting there in the church audience probably felt the same way she did, as pretty much every red-blooded American in today’s (then) late-Vietnam and Watergate era felt desolate and disillusioned and unmotivated and directionless and lost. (214-215)

It is naturally a coincidence, but Fogle seems to wonder how she could feel like the message was directed to her in particular, which points to Fogle’s difficulty with finding anything that is particularly meaningful to him. The class on the Literature of Alienation offered no recognition, and neither does the girlfriend’s story despite them having many things in common. To Fogle, “pretty much every red-blooded American [...] felt desolate and disillusioned” (215), and his reaction to someone having cured herself of this feeling displays a lack of understanding from Fogle’s part. Additionally, *The Pale King* shows that the development from the factory worker’s alienation to the postmodern boredom is not only a development between Garrity the ghost and Lane Dean Jr.’s individual perspective on the world. It is a sense of boredom which affects Chris Fogle and his wastoid friends, the Christian girlfriend, and every “American in today’s (then) late-Vietnam and Watergate era” (214-215). The cultural climate of the times has changed, and the expression of a lack of meaning will change accordingly. To Fogle, this lack of meaning is expressed with words like wastoid and nihilism.

The Christian girlfriend found religion as the meaning she needed in life to lift her out of the desolate state she was in, and Fogle's story of how he found his way out of being a wastoid has many religious aspects embedded within it. His story begins with him walking into the wrong classroom one day at the end of the semester at college. He sits in on the final class of an Advanced Tax course, where the teacher gives a speech to his students about the career in accounting they are about to pursue. The teacher speaks of the heroism he believes accounting entails, he "[wishes] to inform [the class] that the accounting profession to which [they] aspire is, in fact, heroic" (230). This is where Fogle's own moment of feeling spoken directly to begins, and he says

perhaps all the hushed and solemn older other students (you could hear a pin) felt picked out and specifically addressed as well – though, of course, that would make no difference as to its special effect on me, which was the real issue, just as the Christian girlfriend's story would have already demonstrated if I'd been aware and attentive enough to hear what the actual point she was trying to make was. (230)

Fogle realises that his changing moment, just like the Christian girlfriend's, is a moment which has a wholly personal meaning for him and because of the personal nature of it, it would not actually appear relevant to anyone else. The "actual point" (230) is the personally significant effect the events had, whether that result is Christianity or a career in accounting, events with a personal relevance which fills the void a lack of personal meaning created in them. While Lane Dean's boredom might be cured by going home from work, Fogle and the Christian girlfriend need something on a larger scale because to them, the problem is greater. To once again use the metaphor of fears and phobias, one can imagine Lane Dean working at a dangerous job, where there is a chance of physical injury perhaps, but Chris Fogle is afraid of things he cannot escape from by simply leaving the building. However, this is only an analogy, since it merely points to a difference in cause and context of Lane Dean's and Chris Fogle's experienced boredom.

Fogle's and the Christian girlfriend's stories are not only similar in content, but Fogle believes the teacher giving the speech to be a Jesuit father since his college is a Jesuit college. The speech has elements reminiscent of early Christian writings on boredom and ennui. The desert fathers of ancient Egypt, the precursor to monasticism, become a clear parallel as the teacher says "here is a truth: Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is" (231). Additionally, he states that "[t]rue heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space" (232). To the monk, the work was praying alone in a designated space, but work develops and Christianity with it. Christianity and the concept of work have a long and conjoined history, and in his book *Work*, Lars Svendsen writes of the meaning of work. This

provides a background to the substitute teacher's speech on heroism and accounting.

Svendsen states that “[i]n Christian thought, work as we know it is a result of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden” and “[f]rom that point on, humans were subjected to the burden of work” (18-19 Svendsen 2008). More specifically, this turned into work becoming “regarded as a curse in the Middle Ages, but it was also a *duty*” (19). This idea of duty seems to be what Fogle's teacher talks about resulting in heroism. Svendsen states that “[t]he sixth-century founder of monasticism Benedict's view of labour is that is functions as penance: it is a punishment for the flesh. It also keeps us from being idle, and idleness is regarded as being harmful” (19). Working was something humans did because of our subordination to God; however, “the Reformation [...] developed a view of work as something positive for all people” and “the idea of a *vocation*” (19) emerged. What this means is that “the best way to serve God was to devote oneself to one's profession” and during this time “Luther took the monastic ideal of a life devoted as a whole to God and moved it outside the walls of the monastery and transformed it into a universal work ethic” (19-20).

Our knowledge of the desert fathers in combination with the way the ideas of monasticism have developed culturally outside of the walls of the actual monasteries illuminates the substitute teacher's speech. Monks wanted to become better subjects under God and strict ideas of work, penance and idleness featured heavily in this. The heroes the teacher speaks of, who “[endure] tedium over real time in a confined space” (231) become a modern day version of monks who strive for something greater. In this instance, the context of the speech is not religion, but accounting – bureaucracy. The teacher tells his students that

[y]esterday's society's heroes generated facts [...] In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated. Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation [...] Gentlemen, you are called to account (234-235)

The teacher compares the accountant to a modern day cowboy, fighting on the frontier of fact organisation. All the romanticised imagery he uses in his speech “deeply affected and changed” (234) Fogle, and “[i]n retrospect, this seems like further evidence that [he] was even more ‘lost’ and unaware than [he] knew” (234). Additionally, according to the teacher, heroism involves fighting against things that would make one bored and idle, “[r]outine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui – these are a true hero's real enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real” (233). The enemies of a true hero are similar to the enemies of the monk, the demon of noontide and the sin of acedia, both pointing to the repetitive aspects and

lack of novelty of praying all day as well as working in accounting at the IRS.

This speech is aimed at students in their final class of the year, preparing for the test that qualifies them to become accountants. One can assume, based on the warning, that accounting is boring at times. However, it also points to Fogle's outlook on life, his directionless and nihilism towards everything in a world which seems to lack meaning. The skills the teacher believes one should have in order to excel in a career in accounting are the same skills he would need in order to not be a wastoid, according to Fogle. The substitute teacher, just as the evangelical pastor in the Christian girlfriend's story, had no intent of addressing anyone in particular, but they formulated a solution to a problem. Even Fogle understands that "[t]he literal reality was that [the teacher] was addressing [him] the least of all, since obviously [he] wasn't even enrolled in Advanced Tax or getting ready to take the final" (232). Not soon after, however, enrolling in this class is what Chris Fogle decided to do. The religious imagery continues on the day Fogle decides to aim for a career at the IRS.

As he sits one day in the food court of the local mall, he sees a discarded newspaper on the floor, and "a beam of light from the food court's overhead lightning far above fell through one of the star shaped perforations in the table top and illuminated – as if by a symbolically star-shaped spotlight or ray of light – one particular advertisement" (241) This ad turns out to be "a notice about the IRS's new recruitment-incentive program" (241). Fogle's illuminating star guides him on his journey to the IRS recruitment office's open house, going through the suburbs to the city of Chicago on a day where a severe snowstorm has struck the city. With "four or more feet of snow on the ground [...] it felt almost like a polar expedition" (241-242) getting there, figuratively following the illuminated newspaper star. The offer the IRS recruitment drive advertised states that "[i]n return for a commitment of two or four years, depending on the specific incentive scheme, the Internal Revenue Service [is] offering up to a total of \$14,450 for college or continuing technical school" (246). This offer would allow Fogle, for the fourth time now, to re-enrol at college and aim for a degree.

When Fogle's journey through snow and sleet finally ends and he arrives at the offices of the IRS, he is given an introductory presentation of what the IRS is, how they operate and what a career in the Service, as they call it, will entail. Fogle says that

the whole thing was so complicated, and consisted of so many branches, sub-branches, divisions, and coordinating offices and sub-offices, as well as parallel or bilateral sub-offices and technology support divisions, that it appeared impossible to comprehend even the general sense of well enough to take a real interest in. (247-248)

In short, the whole introduction was extremely boring. The purpose of a recruitment drive is to attract new potential employees, which ought to give them an incentive to make the IRS

sound interesting and not boring. However, there is a reason as to why the introduction was made so complicated and boring. Adult Fogle remembers that while he was there

[a]t that juncture, [he] was obviously unaware that the initial diagnostic screening of possible recruits was already under way, and that the excessive complexity and minutiae of the recruiter's presentation represented part of a psychological 'dispositional assessment' mechanism in use by the IRS's Personnel Division since 1967 (248)

Much like joining the Army would entail one proving their physical ability, the IRS recruitment drive focuses on finding individuals with a low boredom proneness level. They are looking for the virtues the substitute Advanced Tax teacher ascribed to his real heroes who thrive in a bureaucratic world. Individuals' boredom proneness levels are something that has been investigated previously, one example of such being Tanja Sophie Schweizer who has published an article on novelty seeking behaviour, which can be seen as a consequence of being in boring situations. She established that "novelty-seeking behaviour is related to individual differences in specific neurotransmitter activity in the brain" and that "[h]igh novelty-seeking individuals are at a higher risk of falling prey to particular patterns of psychological dysfunctioning, most notably attention deficits and addictive behaviours" (Schweizer 165).

The IRS, then, would be looking for the opposite, people with low novelty-seeking tendencies in order to find individuals with low risk for attention deficit patterns. The diagnostic screening Fogle mentions is "screening recruits for a set of characteristics that boiled down to an ability to maintain concentration under conditions of extreme tedium, complication, confusion and absence of comprehensive info" (Wallace 249). In fact, Fogle remembers an IRS employee saying that "[t]he Service was [...] looking for 'cogs not spark plugs'" (249). Rather than finding creativity or innovation amongst their recruits, the IRS is looking for the opposite, high attention and low novelty-seeking behaviour. Extreme tedium and absence of comprehensive information is a recipe for boredom, and what the IRS needs are employees who can remain concentrated on the work despite of this. What this bureaucracy needs are people who can deal with boredom.

Fogle eventually got his degree with a major in accounting and found work at the IRS. His story tells of the teenager in the 70s growing up in bellbottoms and peace pendants. As he thinks back, and finally adds a real sense of self-reflexivity to his narrative, he summarises his experience as being the experience of a generation. His statement reads

[he had] the dawning realization that all of the directionless drifting and laziness and being a 'wastoid' which so many of [them] in that era pretended to have raised to a nihilistic art form, and believed was cool and funny [he] too had though it was cool, or at least [he] believed [he] thought so – there had been something almost romantic about flagrant waste and drifting, which Jimmy Carter was ridiculed for calling 'malaise' and telling the nation to snap out of it), was in reality not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening, in fact, or sad, or something else – something [he] could not name because it has no name. [He] knew right there that [he] might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't just a hip pose. That [he] drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better. [...] [he] had somehow chosen to have nothing matter (225)

This is a powerful statement, where Fogle realises that the boredom and meaninglessness was so pervasive that, in his opinion, it affected a whole generation. His salvation, much like the Christian girlfriend's, was a personally meaningful event, although the particulars of which could not be a universal cure for his generation. What he realises is that what helped him out of the state of being a wastoid was purely a decision of his, and one which "didn't feel feckless, though it also didn't feel especially romantic or heroic. It was more as if I simply had to make a choice of what was more important" (251). Fogle overcame that "it" which "has no name" (225) by eventually deciding himself to do something with his college career. The deciding force is endogenous, and not from an external source, like so many other of his decisions feeling like the piece of paper on the street deciding which way to blow. The substitute teacher's speech was what he needed in order to make a decision and through this created a personal meaning as to why he wants to complete his college degree.

This chapter has illuminated the same claims that were presented in the chapter on Lane Dean Jr., namely that the world has moved from factories and alienation to bureaucracies and boredom. Chris Fogle's story of finding a career within the IRS has abundant Christian imagery, and it becomes an analogy to the desert monks, fighting the demon of noontide to find God. Their context to a meaningful life was religion; they lived in a Christian society. Chris Fogle however battled against a type of existential boredom and finds the IRS service. The IRS is not like a deity, but it points to how Fogle lives in a bureaucratic society where meaning in life, to him, is found within the IRS.

## 5. David Wallace as character and author

The first chapter of *The Pale King* paints a picture of a pasture in the morning sun. There is a river, some sunflowers swaying in the wind, cows, horses and “shattercane, lamb’s quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint” (5) and several other recitations in a long list of the local fauna present in the picture of the meadow. These names for the many different grasses, weeds and plants may be unfamiliar to us, even though they may be present every time we look at a meadow. The narration is abruptly interrupted by this list of plant names, information about the meadow which on the one hand is true, but it does not alter the mental picture of a meadow which already has been created in the narrative. At the very start of the novel it becomes interesting to discuss the relationship between meaning and information, where the image of the meadow can be seen as a metaphor for the meaning of the narrative section and the list of plants is the information of a meadow. The terms meaning and information are not synonymous, much in the same way a list of grass and weeds are not synonymous to a meadow, despite the fact that a meadow may contain all those plants. This chapter will show how the novel illuminates the discordance between information and meaning, and how an imbalance of such is a cause for boredom and used to create it.

One particular character of interest is the “Author here” persona, the self-proclaimed real author of the novel *The Pale King* named David Wallace, whose narrative is addressed to a reader. This character is the focus of other critic’s essays, notably Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn who compare this persona of David Wallace to the actual David Foster Wallace, and Toon Staes who investigates the implications of an in-text author making truth claims in fiction. The following analysis concerns the aspects of what this author does with his own text to make it boring and the consequences of this character providing information personally relevant to him, but not to his readers.

A prime example of information in the text which is important mostly to David Wallace is found on page 70 and 71. These pages are part of a chapter entitled “Author’s Foreword”, despite it not being at the very beginning of the book. The two pages are composed of more footnote text than text from the story proper. The text in the footnote even has footnotes of its own. Footnotes are commonly used to indicate additional, less important or less relevant text compared to what is being said in the main text. David Wallace shows an awareness of diverging from the subject matter in the primary text and providing his readers with an abundance of information which he is directly telling the reader that he is trying to avoid. The ironic effect of these statements, as the footnotes continues to diverge further, is a trend in the

text written by the David Wallace character. In one section he provides a detailed explanation of the relationship between publishers and authors when it comes to fiction and non-fiction texts. Afterwards he states that he “know[s] that’s a pretty involved and confusing data-dump to inflict on [the reader] in a mere Foreword” (70) Furthermore, David Wallace writes other disclaimers addressed to his readers such as “for now, just so you’re not totally flummoxed and bored, suffice it to say” (71), a sentence which continues into additional developments of the diverging info-dump. This disclaimer implies that the reader might actually be bored at this point. Once more, David Wallace addresses his reader and says “please know that none of this abstract information is all that vital to the mission of this Foreword. So feel free to skip or skim the following if you wish” (71). The disclaimers which apologise for the boring and not “all that vital” (71) information means that it is deliberately written to be boring and unnecessary by the author, so that the character David Wallace has something to apologise for. It is boring not only because of the info-dump, as he refers to it, but also because of the assumption that footnote-text is not inherently the most relevant part of a text. Moreover, the footnotes are also typed in smaller print, which in a way increases the physical work required to read the words on the page.

Despite all of this, the footnote is very long and knowingly challenges the reader with a “confusing data-dump” which may indeed cause the reader to be “flummoxed and bored” due to “this abstract information” which was not “all that vital to the mission of the Foreword” after all (70-71). Nevertheless, the information is there. A possible reason for why that information is there, despite the disclaimers, becomes apparent in chapter 24. With David Wallace narrating, he tells his readers that they should “rest assured that [he] is not Chris Fogle, and that [he has] no intention of inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation [he] happen[s] to recall” (261). Fogle’s nickname at the office is “Irrelevant Chris Fogle” due to his tendency to speak about things that seem irrelevant to others, or to the point of the conversation. Fogle’s own narrative where he communicates his detailed journey from youth to adulthood is placed just before David Wallace’s narrative, separated only by a three page chapter. The two narratives are comparable in the amount of detail and irrelevance of the details. David Wallace's narrative includes information regarding “notable businesses and industries of metropolitan Peoria as of 1985” (268) and a detailed description of the “radial floor plan” of the IRS building, which points to the fact that David Wallace might appear just as irrelevant as “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle.

What Fogle and Wallace both do in their narratives is list information which is relevant to them but not others. From their point of view, things such as why it is important to understand



the radial floor plan of the IRS building are relevant. What the character David Wallace does not realise is the fact that his presumed readers will not be of the same opinion, because his information is inherently only relevant to him. In turn, this means that the reader in relation to David Wallace, just as David Wallace in relation to “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle, is subjected to personally irrelevant information. This creates a sense of boredom in the reader, because much like the argument Reynolds had with Sylvanshine in the beginning of this analysis, the reader now has to wade through information to discern what is important and what is not. This is a job the readers expect the author to have done for them, just as Reynolds expected of Sylvanshine. It also includes what Andrew Warren called “a certain horror implicit in something like a third-person omniscient narration” without “an organizing, negotiating principle at work behind the text” (Warren 402).

While the stylistic techniques of using footnotes can be ascribed to the character David Wallace, there are more stylistic techniques than the use of footnotes to induce feelings of boredom outside of his narratives. Chapter 25 illustrates boredom in two ways, the boredom the characters experience at work and the boring content of the chapter, as expressed through the way the chapter is written. It opens with “‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page.” (312) and it continues in this fashion, with names of employees and pages turned, throughout most of the chapter. These sentences illustrate the job the examiners do at the IRS with pages after pages of forms to examine all day. Additionally, this is almost all that is written down and which constitutes the chapter; very similar sentences, one after the other. In Steven J. Burn’s article “Towards a General Theory of Vision” he states that “§25 monotonously repeats its signal ‘turns-a-page’ sentence structure, the stimuli leaves the reader’s eye restless for something new” (Burn 89). Sometimes a fact about the environment is inserted in the text, “Ambient room temperature 80F” or “The slow squeak of the cart boy’s cart at the back of the room” (313). Two other statements inserted in the text stand out even more as non sequiturs; “Devils are actually angels” and “Every love story is a ghost story” (314). Andrew Warren states in his article “Narrative Modeling and Community” that these sentences are “small readerly compensations” to the book’s “Central Deal: Realism, monotony” which according to Warren “Wallace here equates with a kind of narrative monotony” (Warren 390). This chapter is supposed to be boring, as the repetitive sentences of all the employees turning pages creates a realistic and monotonous scenario. Additionally, reading the sentences which are so similar makes the narrative tread water, and one might skip or skim the text, just as David Wallace encouraged the reader of his footnote to do. Warren’s claim that those two sentences are

“readerly compensations” (390) makes them a sort of reward for not skipping ahead and avoiding the boring, monotonous narration. As Steven Burn says “[t]he point of this § is less the poise and weight of each individual sentence, than the cumulative visual effect the block of text has on the reader’s eye” (Burn 89). The chapter is an example of a stylistic representation of boredom.

This effect on the reader’s eye and the creation of boredom is further supported by the way this chapter is written using two columns per page, which is not common in books of fiction. It does, in a most literal sense, interrupt the linearity of the text by the way the page is read. Instead, it becomes something which may elicit associations to newspapers or forms of technical writing, where the purpose is information over entertainment. This chapter shows the monotony of the work day at the IRS, but also the boredom of reading a realistic text describing the same thing happening repeatedly, and the stylistic technique of a two column page in a work of fiction. These are two ways in which *The Pale King* uses stylistic attributes to create a sense of repetitive boredom.

Another stylistic technique is the mimicking of bureaucratic language found in the short chapter 34. This mimicking has been taken to an utmost extreme, where the one paragraph that constitutes the chapter is almost incomprehensible. A sample reads as follows “IRM §781(d) AMT Formula For Corporations: (1) Taxable income before NOL deduction, plus or minus (2) All AMT adjustments excepting ACE adjustments” (Wallace 388). While one can, without a degree in accounting, learn that NOL is the acronym of Net Operating Losses and AMT stands for Alternative Minimum Tax, the chapter may say more of what complicated tax theory can look like, rather than what this one example of tax theory actually means. The chapter is there to illustrate a point, but the point does not lie in the semantics of the sentences themselves, but with the absence of semantic meaning to most readers. It is an example of the potential complexity of tax theory presented to the readers to experience for themselves. David Wallace states that “the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull” (85), but *The Pale King* does not only tell the reader this, it also allows them experience the dullness themselves. The novel operates on two levels, stylistically and thematically, when it comes to boredom. The character analysis of Sylvanshine, Dean, and Fogle show the thematic experience of boredom, while David Wallace is a character who manages to create boredom in his assumed reader by providing personally relevant information which the reader have to organise themselves.

To add to the ways of creating boredom, the novel itself creates boredom through its stylistic arrangement. However the novel is not a person or an author providing personally

relevant information. Instead, the novel replaces two individuals engaging in a conversation, as an example, with the relationship of individual versus bureaucracy instead. David Wallace and his reader, just as David Wallace and Chris Fogle, display a transfer of information personally relevant to one and thus irrelevant to the other. Thus David Wallace's narrative creates boredom, but the novel creates boredom by mimicking bureaucratic language.

## 5.1 David Wallace as author

In the "Author here" section, where David Wallace explains the reasons for writing the novel he is the self-proclaimed author of, he says that "*The Pale King* is, [...] a kind of vocational memoir. It is also supposed to function as a portrait of a bureaucracy" (72). As has been shown, the portrait of a bureaucracy is painted with a brush mimicking a bureaucratic experience through stylistic choices. While the character analyses of Chris Fogle, Lane Dean Jr. and Claude Sylvanshine show characters' experiences with boredom at work or in life, the character of David Wallace both creates boredom and reflects on the connections between boredom and bureaucracy. This following section is devoted to David Wallace's commentary on boredom and bureaucracies.

Compare the two quotations from David Wallace below. The first is about bureaucracy and the other about the relationship between information and meaning, the unbalance of which can cause boredom.

[David Wallace's] primary association with the word *bureaucracy* was an image of someone expressionless behind a counter, not listening to any of [his] questions or explanations of circumstance or misunderstanding but merely referring to some manual of impersonal regulations as he stamped my form with a number that meant that [he] was in for some further kind of tedious, frustrating hassle or expense. (262)

And the second,

[a] 100 percent accurate comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in [David Wallace's] front lawn is 'true', but it is not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. What renders truth meaningful, worthwhile & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point – otherwise we might as well just be computers downloading raw data to one another. (261)

What David Wallace feels is lacking in his experience with bureaucracies is attention to circumstance. It is an impersonal system, and therefore pays no heed to personally relevant circumstances. When Wallace defines the aspects that create meaningfulness he mentions similar things, namely recognition of, and attention given to context and circumstances in order to understand the overall point that is at the heart of the matter. The opposite of this is computers downloading raw data, which evokes impersonal imagery. Bureaucracies in *The*

*Pale King* become defined as a system that lacks attention to personally meaningful circumstances. Therefore the book asserts that in order to deal with bureaucracies, one must know how to deal with boredom. This is stated explicitly in chapter 44, where an unnamed narrator, which may be David Wallace, states that “the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy” (439). Additionally, the manner the book mimics bureaucratic, technical language in sections which are supposed to be boring forces the reader to adopt a position where they must deal with boredom in relation to the bureaucratic language in the novel. Moreover, *The Pale King* sets up the importance of boredom in connection to bureaucracy by stating that

[t]he underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. [...]The key is the ability [...] [t]o be, in a word, unboreable [sic]. [...] It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish. (440)

Dealing with boredom is the key to the bureaucratic world *The Pale King* creates. Two examples can be found in the analysis on Lane Dean and Chris Fogle. In the section focusing on Lane Dean Jr., the visit by the spectre of Garrity established that they both had the same boring job experience, each on opposite sides of a generational gap. Garrity was a factory worker when he was alive, and Lane Dean is a bureaucrat. The context for the intense monotony of work has changed from Garrity’s generation to Dean’s. In Chris Fogle’s chapter, he finds the Literature of Alienation class to be meaningless and easily mimicked on his exam. While alienation and boredom have many features in common, it is not a source of recognition to Fogle. He considers himself to be in a different context, because he comes from a different generation than authors like Camus, who is part of his literature class. Additionally, Chris Fogle retrospectively reports of the initial screening diagnostic the IRS deploy when finding new recruits, to which he was subjected when he was younger. This test consisted of a presentation which was obtusely-complicated and full of bureaucratic information about “many branches, sub-branches, divisions, and coordinating offices and sub-offices, as well as parallel or bilateral sub-offices and technology support divisions” (247). Its purpose was “screening recruits for a set of characteristics that boiled down to an ability to maintain concentration under conditions of extreme tedium, complication, confusion and absence of comprehensive info” (249). The connection between boredom and bureaucracy becomes obvious when the content of the very test of recruits’ boredom proneness levels consists of information about the organisation itself. To learn about the organisation that is the IRS is so boring that the process of doing so automatically will be testing one’s boredom proneness levels.

In one section of David Wallace's narrative he quotes from one of the bosses at his IRS office. The quote pertains to tax code, the IRS's rules of operation in a sense, and its relation to other aspects of life. After quoting his boss, Wallace adds his own position.

'If you know the position a person takes on taxes, you can determine [his] whole philosophy. The tax code, once you get to know it, embodies all the essence of [human] life; greed, politics, power, goodness, charity'. To these qualities that Mr Glendennig ascribed to the code [he] would like to respectfully add one more: boredom. Opacity. User-unfriendliness (84)

David Wallace adds boredom to the aspects inherent in tax codes, and in a later section he expands on the consequences of this.

David Wallace says that very few people know about the changes that the IRS went through during his time there, "changes that today directly affect the way citizens' tax obligation are determined and enforced" (85). He states that "the reason for this public ignorance is not secrecy. [...] The real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes and stakes is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull" (85). Boredom becomes a much better tool than secrecy for politicians to keep things safe from opposition, perhaps because it is so reliable. Dullness and boredom deters people. According to Peter Toohey, it is due to mechanisms similar to the disgust and nausea we experience when we come in to contact with bad smells or rotten food. David Wallace says that "[i]t is impossible to overstate the importance of this feature" and that [t]he IRS was one of the very first government agencies to learn that such qualities help insulate them against public protest and political opposition" (85). Compared to secrets, which inherently appear more interesting than something boring, it becomes an effective tool. Especially since, as David Wallace points out, "the period we're talking about was only a decade after Watergate" (85). Uncovering a secret would have attracted journalists, but this was not kept secret, in fact all these files documenting the conflicts within the IRS were "available for public perusal" (86). Yet, David Wallace states "not one journalist seems to ever have checked them out, and with good reason. This stuff is solid rock. The eyes roll up white by the third or fourth ¶. You just have no idea" (86).

The IRS is an organisation which deals with taxes and operates like a bureaucracy. Tax code, as has been stated, is enormously dull. A bureaucracy is defined as a system that lacks attention to personally relevant details. The boredom finds a place on two levels within the IRS, the subject of their business and the execution of their business. This becomes a parallel to *The Pale King* itself, as it displays boredom thematically and structurally too.

## 5.2 David Wallace, lost in a bureaucracy

This final section of the analysis discusses David Wallace's first day at the IRS offices in Lake James, IL, in May 1985 and the case of mistaken identity that leads him to be confused with another David Wallace.

Chapter 24 is a detailed first person narrative from the novel's "living author [...] actively narrating" (258) his memories from his first day at the IRS. Twenty year old David Wallace, wearing a three piece corduroy suit, arrives after a long, warm and cramped journey to the IRS orientation day. The building's façade is "some kind of mosaic representation of a blank IRS 1978 Form 1040, both pages of it, complete in all detail" (283) and "realistically proportioned to scale" (284) Outside, on the "completely full" parking lot that "even had some extra vehicles parked in prohibited corner spaces that would keep other vehicles from being able to back out of their spaces and exit" (284), David Wallace sees a sign held up with his name on it. Wallace recalls the "indescribable thrill about seeing one's own printed name on a sign held up at a crowded place of disembarkation" (238). The problem is, however, that the sign was meant for another David Wallace, of higher ranking who had been recruited from a different IRS office. It was not meant for twenty year old David Wallace, from Philo, Illinois.

The IRS office building is in many ways described as a physical representation of bureaucracy itself. The façade looks like a tax form, and the inside is an intricate series of floor plans, annexes and connecting walkways. David Wallace thinks that bureaucracies are "large, grinding, impersonal machines [...] and just about as dumb [as machines]" (262) and before starting his job at the IRS, he conceived it as "some kind of ur-bureaucratic version of Kafka's castle, an enormous DMV or Judicial Board" (263). It is within this castle that David Wallace's identity is physically and bureaucratically mistaken for someone else's.

As a new employee at the IRS, David F. Wallace, GS-9 (signifying his entry level), is given a personnel file. If he is promoted, the IRS's internal system creates a new file, with the same name but the new ranking, e.g. GS-10, and the old file is automatically absorbed in to the new one. Coincidentally, a David F. Wallace, GS-9 and another David Wallace, GS-13, were scheduled to arrive the same week. The personnel file of the younger Wallace was therefore never recognised by the "Personnel and Training Division's COBOL-based systems" (412) which had structural problems since it had a gone through updates in a "trying-to-maintain-a-freeway-while-still-letting-people-use-it" (415) manner. Not only was David Wallace mistaken for someone else, his existence at the IRS as an employee was

deleted. His full name of David Foster Wallace was reduced in a system that only recognised first name, middle initial and surname, and he became exactly like the David Francis Wallace who transferred from the same postal code area. Bureaucratically they became the same person. Furthermore, Wallace relays that everyone who becomes an employee at the IRS has their social security number “deleted and replaced systemwide [sic] by the new, IRS-issued SSs that serve also as Service IDs” (415). The IRS has the ability to completely change and replace people’s bureaucratic identity. The original Social Security number is “‘stored’ only on his original employment application” which is put in to microfiber archives and “dispersed throughout a dozen different regional annexes and warehouse complexes” (415). These archives are, additionally, “notoriously ill-managed and disorganized and difficult to extract specific records from in any kind of timely way” (415). In short, the social security numbers, and with that a part of their identity, are lost in the Kafka’s castle of bureaucratic file keeping.

The IRS's bureaucratic machinery has proven able to reduce, confuse and lose parts of David Wallace's identity. This mistake is the result of the reduction of a person to a personnel file, where choices have to be made of what to include in and what to leave out. A bureaucratic system has no room for extraneous details. It is inherently an impersonal system. This is a feature which also appears when David Wallace thinks of his “primary association with the word bureaucracy” namely “someone expressionless behind a counter [...] misunderstanding but clearly referring to some manual of impersonal regulations as [they] stamped [his] form with a number that meant [he] was in for some further kind of tedious, frustrating hassle or expense” (262). The person behind the counter has no expression, a lack of emotion, and David Wallace finds no connection to them. He explains his circumstances, but is misunderstood. Instead the clerk treats him like everyone else, that is, according to the manual. The rules must apply to everyone and in doing so any sense of personal, human quality is lost. Again, there is no room for extraneous detail which would consider circumstance, personal explanations or individual cases. The IRS's bureaucratic system is impersonal. In *The Pale King*, this idea is taken to the utmost extreme where it actually manages to delete a person, albeit only for one afternoon.

The impersonal bureaucratic system of the IRS has the effect of being boring. Boredom, as defined in the theoretical framework, is based on a lack of personal meaning. The two concepts, boredom and bureaucracies, intertwine thematically and stylistically in *The Pale King*. The bureaucracy is the setting for the novel's exploration of boredom in modern life. The bureaucracy is even compared to modern life. In chapter 45, an unknown narrator states that he, whilst working at the IRS, “learned that the world of men as it exists today is a

bureaucracy” (439). He also states that to succeed in this world one needs not “IQ, loyalty, vision, or any of the qualities that the bureaucratic world calls virtues, and tests for” rather, they key to success is something else. It is a capacity “that underlies all these qualities, rather the way that an ability to breath and pump blood underlies all thought and action” (439). It is a basic, fundamental capacity that makes it possible for these qualities of success. The unknown narrator states that “[t]he underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human” (440). It is a powerful conclusion to draw, linking the world of men as it exists today to bureaucracies which in turn precludes everything human. He continues that “[t]he key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable [sic]” (440). *The Pale King* itself is at times displaying these features. Due to this, the reader is perhaps shown that there is more to this short chapter than a dystopian conclusion on life. The reader, having come this far in the book has, at times, had to discover that other side to the repetitive and pointlessly complex sections of the novel. If the reader is bored during certain sections he or she must find a reason why they want to continue to read and not just skip ahead to another more interesting part. The novel has boring chapters, but placed in a context of literature it becomes a book which manages to induce a feeling in almost every reader, a book which stylistically and thematically bores. It is a book about boredom, which avoids the trap of being ironically interesting. It is a book where the lines between authorship and character are blurred, but moreover, so too are the lines between character and reader. The boredom of the characters is expressed in the text itself, thus affecting the reader and placing them both on the same level. The reader must, as Wallace once said in an interview with McCaffery, do her share of the work to glean meaning from the text.



## 6. Conclusion

*The Pale King* is a relatively recent novel, with as of yet sparse academic criticism. This thematic study has aimed to contribute, therefore, to the initial stages of criticism on a recent publication. Boredom and bureaucracy are two major themes of the novel. To understand bureaucracy in *The Pale King*, one must first explore boredom. In this essay I have aimed to show that the theme of boredom in *The Pale King* is expressed thematically and structurally, and that it is integrated into the representations of bureaucracy in the novel. This is possible due to boredom being based on a lack of personal meaning and the representations of bureaucracy present this absence too.

In the previous criticism, one article by Ralph Clare specifically explored the theme of boredom. His article presented a socio-historic investigation into the theme of boredom and its relation to politics of the neo-liberal era. Other critics have taken on subjects such as narrative techniques, themes of humans versus machines, the political aspects in the novel and themes of consciousness and paying attention. Aspects of these articles were shown to tangent the theme of boredom, despite having other focuses.

The theoretical framework began with a historical description of the development of the concept of boredom. From the Ancient Greeks to the enlightened naturalists, continuing up to the etymological conception of the word *boredom* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, boredom, as an adaptive emotion, has always existed, but has gone by a plethora of names with a multitude of definitions and explanations attached. The definition and understanding of boredom was shown to be linked to its cultural context. As human culture develops, so too does our understanding of what constitutes boredom and why it affects us. The current literature on what boredom is often divides simple boredom from existential boredom, where the latter has received more attention. Existential boredom is often linked to modernity and considered a malaise of the modern era. This essay suggested that the two forms are not as different as many other authors may have it seem. Simple boredom, I proposed, can be compared to the fear one might feel if a car is headed straight for us. It is an adaptive emotion, saving us from the harm of an accident, and it is a fear which subsides once the dangerous situation has passed. Simple boredom is described as boredom one might feel at a meeting, train station or while watching uninteresting television, and such boredom is relieved once the situation changes. Existential boredom, then, was likened to a phobia. The fear featuring in a phobia is complex, irrational, and not easily relieved. Other emotions feature too, like anxiety or panic. Existential boredom is also complex, not easily relieved and arises simultaneously with many

other emotions and feelings. What both have in common is that they represent personally meaningless situations. Whether that is the meaningless situation of waiting for a train that is late (the wait is not needed in order to reach a destination) or whether it is the meaningless situation of pursuing a degree in business studies when what one actually wished to study classical history. Regardless, the unifying feature was shown to be a lack of meaning of a personal nature.

Theories explaining either simple fear or existential fear could therefore be applied to one another, and the key to a satisfactory explanation of what boredom is must be applicable to both. In *The Pale King*, different characters display different levels of boredom. Some are situation-based, like Claude Sylvanshine whose *fact-psychic* abilities caused his mind to learn useless facts about people and things. These facts always came without a context and are irrelevant because they have no use or meaning to him. Comparatively, the more complex boredom was also shown to contain a core element of personally irrelevant aspects. Therefore, experiencing simple boredom and existential boredom was concluded to both feature a lack of something personally meaningful. The only difference was that the existential boredom often seemed to feature more than just one emotion.

The chapter about Lane Dean Jr. expanded the context of the experience of boredom to his job. Lane Dean suffered severe boredom at work, where he performed the same task repeatedly throughout the day. At one point he even hallucinated and was visited by a ghost. It was the phantom of an old factory worker named Garrity, who used to work in the same building as Lane Dean, before the space was converted to the IRS offices. Garrity worked at a factory, inspecting mirrors for manufacture faults. He performed the same task daily, just as Lane Dean does, checking the same tax forms every day. They come from different generations, working two different jobs, but they both experienced extreme monotony. Garrity was the alienated factory worker and Lane Dean the bored bureaucrat. Their feelings might have been the same, but different explanations of why and how they felt this way have emerged in our culture. *The Pale King* illustrates that work needs to be meaningful, and history shows that this can happen within varying contexts. To Lane Dean it was his family which was the reason to endure his job, as “they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing to do” (382).

The chapter on Chris Fogle further expanded the analysis on the theme of boredom in the novel. Fogle’s narrative was a recollection of his younger years in college leading up to how he came to work for the IRS. As a teenager he was part of part of the late 70s popular youth culture that based itself on being nonconformist. The younger Fogle searched for a purpose

and meaning in life and an identity that belonged to him. The context of the boredom Fogle experienced was the cultural zeitgeist of the late 70s. His boredom would be most akin to the existential boredom many authors have written about. Fogle illustrated a boredom which was connected to many other feelings, but at the centre lay his understanding that “pretty much every red-blooded American in today’s (then) late-Vietnam and Watergate era felt desolate and disillusioned and unmotivated and directionless and lost” (214-215). Fogle’s boredom was anchored to the culture he lived in. When he found his way to starting a career at the IRS, the story he told was abundant in religious imagery. Reinhardt Kuhn’s book *The Demon of Noontide* explains the early Christian hermits’ quest against acedia – the demon that lured them in to boredom and a sense of lack of meaning to life – and towards the virtue of joy, which is only rewarded after having conquered the sin of acedia. Every sin had its counterpart in virtue, and like the monks who aimed to reach a state of joy, Fogle went from having been a bored wastoid to finding the Service, the IRS. This career, which seemed almost like a vocation to Fogle, was the key to his problems. The hermit who lived in a culture where Christianity was very prominent wanted to find God in order to find meaning to life; Fogle found the IRS.

David Wallace features as a character in *The Pale King*, where he is the self-proclaimed author of the memoirs from his time working at the IRS in his early 20s. The analysis showed that as a narrator he managed to bore his readers by writing about information that was very personal to him, but not meaningful to anyone else. He used footnotes in his writing, signalling to a reader that those sections of the text, which can be longer than the text proper, contained less important information. The novel stylistically bored the reader through bureaucratic mimicry.

The final two chapters continued the analysis of David Wallace as a character and the connection between boredom and bureaucracy. The first half of the chapter explored David Wallace’s own thoughts on bureaucracies being impersonal systems. In chapter 44, an unknown narrator stated that “the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy” and that “the bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom” (439-440) and dealing with boredom was what the characters in *The Pale King* had to do. In the final chapter of this essay, the impersonal system of the IRS’s bureaucracy was explored in its utmost extreme as it tells of how David Wallace was lost in the bureaucratic system as he was mistaken for another new employee called David Francis Wallace. The personnel file-keeping system mistook the two separate individuals for one person, and deleted part of David Wallace’s identity. Again, the quote from chapter 44 which stated that the world is a bureaucracy resonated as the

bureaucratic system used at the IRS replaced David Wallace's social security number for a new number, reduced his full name of David Foster Wallace to David F. Wallace, and mistook him for another man with that name and middle initial. The bureaucratic system overrode reality and David Foster Wallace was, for one afternoon, non-existent.

To conclude, the theoretical framework unified opposing views on what boredom is. Simple boredom is often categorised as different from the more complex, existential boredom. In this essay I aimed to show that there was one aspect that was common for both categories, that they are both based on a lack of personal relevance. This assertion held true when applied to different experiences of boredom in the novel. Three characters experienced different types of boredom, and they all searched for a context in which a personally relevant meaning appeared to them. In addition to the thematic aspects of boredom, the novel has a stylistic approach. The text itself managed to induce boredom in the reader during certain sections. This was shown to be done through bureaucratic mimicry, through the use of footnotes, two column pages and tax theory. Boredom and bureaucracy are intricately connected in *The Pale King*, and the character David Wallace reflected upon this bond. To work for a bureaucracy was presented as being repetitive, comparable to a factory worker performing the same task repeatedly. *The Pale King* asserted that the world today is a bureaucracy and the key to modern life is the ability to deal with boredom. *The Pale King* proved that the clash between our culture's need for personal meaning in life and the impersonal system of the bureaucracy is a defining dilemma of our time.

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