

WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

# THE AMERICAN TRAGIC FLAW IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S FICTION

- THESIS SUMMARY -

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## ABSTRACT

Regarded as one of the authors who most authentically captured the social turmoil that marked late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America, David Foster Wallace remains one of the authors whose literary work, whether massively praised or viewed disapprovingly by literary critics, has left a powerful imprint on postmodern American literature. Between the various aesthetic and thematic categories that Wallace's writing presents in his three novels and three story collections, the key word around which all of these works revolve is, as the author himself noted in an interview, authenticity. Positioning himself against postmodern irony and pastiche, Wallace defines his work as a search for and (re)discovery of the human (and humanism), arguing that his writings are attempts to define what it really means to be human.

Analyzing David Foster Wallace's fiction, one can see that one of the most "authentic" attributes that the American author gives to both his characters and to the narrative in general is a constant and compelling exposure of his characters' character "flaws", as well as their mistakes, errors and imperfections, which trigger their tragedy and their inability to overcome their human condition. Wallace's characters remain "trapped" in their own mistakes and condemn themselves to existential failure, condemned to bear the consequences of their own actions. Starting from this premise, the main objective of this PhD thesis is the analysis of David Foster Wallace's prose from the perspective of the concept of *hamartia* - translated as "tragic flaw" - which Aristotle defines as an "error", a mistake, a defining peculiarity that the hero of a literary work commits, thus triggering their own tragedy. The present research is concretized by a qualitative analysis, focusing on David Foster Wallace's three novels - *The Broom of the System*, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* - as well as his three volumes of short stories and novellas - *Girl With Curious Hair*, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*. By using a concept from antiquity on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century American fiction, the aim is to define the ways in which Wallace understands and portrays, in his works, the mirror of a troubled, chaotic and unpredictable American society, in which the American tragic

finds its origins and fulfillment in the "flaw" of being American, one of the defining ideas of David Foster Wallace's fiction.

## JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC AND RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The subject of this PhD thesis is the result of extensive and lengthy research based on the literary works of David Foster Wallace, as well as literary studies and theories that have been proposed by other scholars in their works. Despite the fact that numerous American and European scholars alike have examined Wallace's fiction from a variety of perspectives, there is currently no comprehensive study that reflects and discusses, in its entirety, the characteristics and manifestations of one of the most remarkable and visible themes that can be observed in Wallace's fiction, namely the idea of guilt, the sense of guilt that is present in most of the characters in Wallace's fiction, and in the overall picture that the American author shapes in relation to the ideas he portrays in his work. The lack of such a study allowed me to configure a research plan that includes this project, which would not only put David Foster Wallace's works in a new, unprecedented perspective, but would also create a "bridge" between the writings of Antiquity and the basic principles of postmodern American literature and literature, between two visions and perspectives that initially seem very different and without a visible connection, but which, in a thorough research, seem to be closer and more similar to the initial prejudices.

Given the justification of the topic, the relevance of this study is closely related to it. With this PhD thesis I have developed a study that innovates and brings a novel perspective to the whole spectrum of studies devoted to the American author and, at the same time, I intend to be the author of the first PhD thesis that treats, from this new perspective, the literary work of one of the representative American authors of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The thesis that I have developed was based on several research questions which I have addressed in the research. Some of the questions that I intended to answer and represent the main ideas based on which I developed this PhD thesis were the following:

- If this concept of tragic flaw is one of the defining elements of 'what it means to be human', what is the way in which Wallace integrates and defines the concept of *hamartia* in his fiction?
- How exactly do Wallace's characters manage to cope with the tragedy of their existence, and how do they manage the "flaws" to which they are subjected?
- Can the concept of tragic flaw be applied and analyzed within literary works belonging to an author considered postmodern? If so, is this concept relevant to the literary work of a postmodern author?
- What are the ways in which tragic flaw is reconfigured in David Foster Wallace's literary works?
- What are the manifestations and consequences of the concept of tragic guilt that Wallace's characters experience?
- How do Wallace's characters come to terms with and "manage" this tragic flaw and, more importantly, what are the consequences that result from the manifestation of their *hybris*?
- Can we discuss Wallace's characters as heroes? What about as anti-heroes? Is there anything "heroic" or noble in their actions, principles, manifestations, and motivations?
- Is there a sense of inevitability when it comes to the tragic flaw of the characters? And if there is, can we speak of a "damnation" of the characters? Are Wallace's characters "doomed" to live out their failures, without the possibility of reconfiguring their destinies or "escaping" their tragic flaws?
- Can tragic flaw be discussed as a concept through which Wallace expresses and illustrates late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century American society? And if so, what is, in fact, the "tragic flaw" of America that Wallace identifies and explores in his literary works, both socially and philosophically?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY. THE CORPUS OF ANALYSIS

In terms of methodology, the present research is based on a qualitative analysis of the corpus. The novels and story collections have been analyzed from the perspective of the concept of tragic flaw proposed by Aristotle, but the theoretical corpus includes numerous studies of literary theory and criticism, as well as philosophy, while keeping in mind the fact that Wallace

has included in his fictions a wide range of philosophical views and concepts, from the Greek classics to Wittgenstein. However, the most important aspect remains the identification and analysis of the ways in which tragic flaw can be identified and applied in David Foster Wallace's fiction, which is why the concept of *hamartia* has been essential in regards to the theoretical aspects of the PhD thesis. In addition to the idea of tragic flaw, I considered it necessary to define and analyze the concepts of *hybris*, the tragic vision and the tragic hero, which contribute to the configuration and detailed description of the concept of tragic flaw. While the first chapter is more theory-driven, the following two chapters are dedicated to textual analysis, including a close reading and an analysis of the text based on both content and thematic analysis.

In terms of the corpus of analysis, the current research will include the entire fictional works of David Foster Wallace. This includes three novels and three story collections, which will be analyzed in two different chapters.

As for the novels, they are approached chronologically, starting with *The Broom of the System*, continuing with the novel widely regarded as Wallace's *magnum opus*, which propelled him to the top of the list when it comes to the American authors of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - and which I dare say, in years to come, will be included in the category of The Great American Novel - named *Infinite Jest*. The last novel, unfinished and published posthumously, *The Pale King*, concludes the chapter on Wallace's novels.

In the chapter based on the story collections, the analysis begins with *Girl With Curious Hair*, published in the late 1980s, continues with *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, published in the 1990s, and concludes with the author's last published work of literature during his lifetime, the collection of short stories known as *Oblivion*.

## CHAPTER I

In the first chapter of my thesis, I found it necessary to define and contextualize the term 'tragic flaw' in order to observe the evolution of this term in the field of literary studies. Although there is no clear consensus on the matter, the theories concerning this concept sum up a number of elements that converge around the idea of "error", of mistake or the inability to understand something or someone adequately. Whether it is a moral or intellectual error, a mistake made by a character (or a series of characters) or an error of judgement, *hamartia* (tragic flaw) manages to

encompass all these meanings; moreover, it manifests itself in a variety of ways, depending on the character or the context. Thus, the necessary question that arises here is not whether *hamartia* encompasses all three notions that, in English, denote three different components of the concept of flaw (tragic flaw, tragic error, respectively tragic guilt), but in what way they succeed in capturing the "downfall" of the protagonists in David Foster Wallace's prose, i.e. in the ways in which these 'flaws' (whether in character, in thinking or in certain actions) contribute to the ways in which the protagonists either 'miss' their destinies or fall prey to their own 'shortcomings' or mistakes.

Another essential component in the process of understanding the evolution of the concept of tragic flaw is trying to figure out the ways in which the concept of the tragic hero has evolved over time, both in terms of the plot and in terms of the perception of the attributes and characteristics that define a tragic hero. Thus, what was once defined as a character with exemplary attributes, extraordinary character traits and a tragic destiny in most cases due to the intervention of the gods has undergone a series of changes throughout the evolution of literature. Thus, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of modernism, the figure of the tragic hero no longer functions in the same way. According to new perspectives - including an essential one that comes from Terry Eagleton), any character, no matter how 'unremarkable', can become a tragic hero. The tragic figure is therefore no longer dependent on a certain status or certain extraordinary traits, since human suffering is therefore universal. From this perspective, the analysis of the protagonists in David Foster Wallace's fiction, from the perspective of tragic figures, remains valid, as long as the elements underlying the concept of tragic flaw can be identified and understood in the context of these works.

Also, in relation to the concept of tragedy, a theoretical subchapter discusses the relationship between tragedy and two essential concepts: shame and guilt. Both are essential for understanding the concept of tragic guilt as they represent two key elements in the way tragedy is 'configured'; in other words, each of the tragic figures at some point experience these feelings, which subsequently 'triggers' the tragic feeling and, implicitly, the tragic 'mistake' leads them to a tragic outcome. Last but not least, this sub-chapter also deals with the concept of *hybris*, the often-unjustified pride that leads to an attitude of anger, rebellion or self-sufficiency among the protagonists and which is often one of the determining factors that triggers the protagonists' tragic destiny.

Finally, the last two subchapters are devoted to the evolution of the concept of tragedy in modernity and post-modernity. Considering the fact that David Foster Wallace has been categorized as both a modern and postmodern author, I found necessary to discuss the ways in which the characteristics of tragedy, as an expression of literature, has evolved up to the present. At the same time, an important component of contextualizing the concept of tragedy in recent times is an understanding of the concept of the hero and how it has evolved in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature, where we find concepts such as the "anti-hero" and the "absurd hero", concepts that define how American literature in the last century (with an extension into the present century) has been dealing with a series of essential literary features that define the concept of the hero. Therefore, it is arguable that both tragedy and hero have evolved conceptually, but essentially operate on the same thematic and identity coordinates.

Last but not least, the chapter concludes with an attempt to encompass all of these aforementioned concepts under the specter of "American tragic flaw", a term that envisions an understanding of tragedy based on the specific elements of American society, the essential features that define, from Wallace's perspective, what it means to be truly American at the turn of the millenium, and the general characteristics that define the United States of America in this specific time and place. In other words, the American tragic flaw encompasses not only the main characters in Wallace's prose, but also the space in which they live and in which they manifest their tragedies, with the aim of demonstrating that the American tragic flaw is not only a characteristic of the protagonists, but also a consequence of the fact that the United States of America, both as a space in which the action takes place and as an identity paradigm, actively contributes to the collapse of the tragic figures in David Foster Wallace's fiction, which will be observed, analyzed and demonstrated in the following chapters of analysis, based on the novels and story collections written by the American author.

## CHAPTER II

The second chapter of the PhD thesis is based on the three novels written by David Foster Wallace, with the aim of observing the ways in which the concept of tragic flaw is reflected in the development of the protagonists from the perspective of their tragic destinies. The novels are analyzed in chronological order, and the analysis will include not only the fates of the protagonists,

i.e. the various ways in which tragedy influences their fates, but also an overview of how Wallace conceptualizes and portrays, as a whole, the essential defining characteristics of the United States of America as they can be found and observed in the three novels.

In the case of the first novel, *The Broom of the System*, the analysis will focus on the fates of the novel's two protagonists, Rick Vigorous and Lenore Stonecipher Beadsman Jr. respectively, as well as the elements that contribute to their tragic destinies. Among the fundamental elements that define the tragic destiny that marks the relationship between the two characters is their inability to express their feelings, feelings and emotions adequately, as well as a difficulty to empathize and relate to each other's emotions in a world where language is never eloquent enough to effectively articulate these feelings. Both Rick and Lenore face both personal trauma and a major difficulty in relating to each other, which inevitably leads to a "rupture" that determines the tragic fate of their relationship. The analysis of the two characters takes into account both the interactions between the two protagonists and an overview of the essential features that characterize the two, in order to identify the character traits and their actions that can be interpreted and categorized as exponents of the concept of tragic flaw.

For the other two novels proposed for analysis (*Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*), the analysis considers a significant number of protagonists, as the novel's dimensions allow for the analysis of numerous characters that can be categorized as essential to both the novel and the tragic dimension of the novel. The characters are, once again, analyzed both in terms of the essential characteristics that define them, and through the setting they are part of, their motivations and, not least, the elements that determine their tragic destiny.

The first character proposed for analysis is Hal Incandenza, son of avant-garde director James Incandenza and one of the most prolific young talents at Enfield Tennis Academy, one of the main locations where the novel is set. His destiny revolves around a dimension of loneliness - from a dysfunctional relationship with his parents to the gradual degradation he experiences over the course of the novel, to his inability to adequately express his feelings and emotions, to the fatal "mistake" of using banned substances (which would mean the end of his career as a competitive athlete and, by implication, his "downfall"). Therefore, the elements that shape the protagonist's tragic flaw are not just about a character trait, a single act or "mistake" that he finds himself guilty of. In fact, in Hal's case (as is the case with most of David Foster Wallace's protagonists) revolves around a series of elements that converge around the same element, namely his attempt to "feel"



certain feelings and emotions at a certain intensity. His attempts to feel some degree of affection and to seek all the attention and escapism he feels he lacks in his interpersonal relationships brings him to the point where, in the last scene that he appears (from a chronological standpoint, yet, in pure postmodern style, the first scene of the novel), we discover Hal losing consciousness and being transported to the emergency room of a hospital. Consequently, Hal represents a tragic figure in the novel because of his insistence to “feel”, to manifest feelings he cannot have, which triggers his tragic destiny in the novel.

The second protagonist is Don Gately, a patient in the Ennet House recovery clinic, a recovery clinic, which is the second main location in the novel. Gately is, in terms of the concept of the tragic hero, the character most "close" to the classic hero type; though in great pain himself, struggling with a strong addiction, he becomes increasingly involved in the recovery process, helping the other residents fight their addictions. However, his struggle against his addictions becomes impossible to overcome precisely because of a paradoxical character trait; as a result, his desire to be a support to those around him and to help those in pain also brings him to the hospital bed, in need of the very substance he was trying to get rid of. Although the novel doesn't offer a clear conclusion in Gately's case, his journey resembles the closest the "journey" of a tragic hero, whose most essential character trait becomes the weakness that triggers his tragic destiny and becoming, from the addict who struggled for survival and overcame his condition (though he didn't understand exactly why the methods worked), an exponent of suffering and tragedy in David Foster Wallace's fiction, in a world where the hope and possibility of the characters "correcting" or "redeeming" their destiny is greatly reduced or even, at times, non-existent.

The following analysis concerns Chris Fogle, one of the key-characters of *The Pale King*, an unfinished novel published posthumously. Of the three novels, this one enjoys a special status, as we are talking about a novel "assembled" by the editor from various fragments Wallace had in mind (and in his computer) for the novel. Chris Fogle is one of the few characters to benefit from a more “extended” description, as well as a story that allows him to be analyzed from the perspective of a tragic figure in Wallace's universe. Similar to Hal, the protagonist of *Infinite Jest*, in terms of his motivations, Fogle's story presents a young man who feels that he doesn't belong anywhere in the world around him, and who also feels that he does not belong anywhere. Rebellious by nature and exhibiting a dysfunctional relationship with his father, whom he does not understand and whom he despises for abandoning his ideals at the expense of family life, Fogle

begins to understand this world better when his search, and his entire quest to make sense of his life, comes to a halt when he takes a job with the IRS - the tax department of the United States - thus becoming known among his peers as "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, one of the many characters who lack personality, one of the public servants who inevitably become plagued by the tedious to the point of exhaustion and disarmingly bureaucratic American tax system.

Last but not least, a subchapter of analysis is dedicated to some of the female characters in these two novels: Joelle van Dyne for *Infinite Jest* and Meredith Rand for *The Pale King*. Both characters can be discussed from the perspective of tragic figures, as the destiny of both is marked by a series of 'mistakes', of errors that contribute to triggering the tragic destinies they face – the first from the perspective of the addiction they are trying to overcome, and the second from the posture of a past heavily tested by a series of traumatic and traumatizing experiences. However, in David Foster Wallace's fiction, these two characters occupy a special role, as they represent two of the very few characters in Wallace's literary universe for whom the possibility of overcoming their tragic destinies, or tragic flaw, is somewhat real and possible. Through both introspection and interaction with the other characters, the two protagonists define their journey through an attempt defined by hope through (re)finding themselves, as well as trying to overcome one's tragic destiny. Therefore, the two female protagonists, despite the fact that they can be described as tragic figures, represent a particular approach to the concept and demonstrate, once again, the complex character and the diversity of the particularities that define the concepts of tragic flaw and tragic destiny.

Last, but not least, another essential subchapter remains the analysis of the United States of America as it is portrayed in Wallace's fiction (particularly in the novels, where the features of the United States can be better observed and analyzed). David Foster Wallace's criticism of the American society may be best observed in the ways in which he defines the time and space in which the action takes place. From the union of the United States, Mexico and Canada in *Infinite Jest* into an organization with a visibly cynical and ironic acronym (O.N.A.N.) to the total domination of corporate brands and clichés to the point where they can bid for the right to name a calendar year (Year of the Trial-Sized Dove Bar) and, last but not least, to Americans' obsession with entertainment, television and escapism of questionable quality (the essential reason the novel is built around a movie said to offer severe addiction, as well as a catatonic state for those who watch it), Wallace satirizes what he sees as the flaws of American society by highlighting, in coarse nuances, the aspects that contribute, in equal measure with the protagonists, to the tragic feeling

that contains the entire fiction. In similar fashion, *The Pale King* presents the fear of technology and the information age that will bring a new perspective on the society, individualism at the expense of the collective and, last but not least, the state of boredom, of dull monotony that seems to be taking over and consuming American society from within, thus turning it into its own most feared adversary.

### CHAPTER III

The third chapter of the PhD thesis is concerned with the analysis of the stories that are part of the three volumes devoted to these types of prose, as well as a story that later became part of the novel *The Pale King*. The three story collections - *Girl With Curious Hair*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion* - are mostly similar (at least from a stylistic and thematic standpoint) to the novels, but also have a slightly more experimental side, providing a literary space in which David Foster Wallace tests various (largely postmodern and post-postmodern) literary approaches, varies narrative perspectives, and offers new dimensions and formulas, most of which find their correspondence (with adjustments and completion of forms) in the three aforementioned novels.

In terms of the tragic perspective of these stories, it might be argued that there is a common theme that runs through most of these stories, and that is failure – more specifically, the fear of failure. The idea of personal failure, of the individual who appears to be unable to manage their own life trajectory, or professional failure or, most commonly, failure in interpersonal relationships, failure to feel the right feelings for people close to them, or failure to act or make key decisions at key points in life, all these things are rendered by Wallace through this spectrum of tragedy, as all these elements converge at points, situations, thoughts or decisions that contribute to the triggering of tragic feeling and, by implication, the emergence of the mechanisms we have previously identified in the novels as elements that can be interpreted as causes that lead to the tragic flaw of the protagonists.

In addition to the fear of failure, Wallace brings forward a series of characters who are not only unable (or unwilling) to overcome their condition and the tragedy of their destinies, but, at the same time, they do not want to (or simply do not) see any way out of their own imperfections, anxieties, anxieties, fears and obsessions. Whether the end result is a consequence of past traumas,

impulsive decisions, or well-thought out and clear mindsets, opinions, or actions (all of which lead to the same point of tragedy), the characters in David Foster Wallace's stories manifest, for the most part, the same flaws or "errors" that are found in the protagonists of the novels. In the stories, perhaps even more than in the novels, Wallace insists on one of the fundamental ideas that characterizes tragedy in modernity and postmodernity - one that focuses on the idea that the only ones responsible for the decline, decay, and triggering of the tragic destiny of the tragic figures (specifically, the protagonists in Wallace's stories) are the protagonists themselves.

Another fundamental element of these stories is that, for the most part, they have an open ending. It can be argued that the open ending does not give us a clear insight into the outcome for the protagonists – in other words, we do not know exactly how or to what extent they come to face their tragic fate and what the consequences are for each of these tragic figures. At the same time, however, we can say that Wallace does not have a clear conclusion in mind precisely because it is less important; rather, the American author shows precisely the ways in which the protagonists reach their tragic destiny, which is the most important detail in each story. The ambiguity of the endings is, therefore, overcome by the impact, intensity and contemplation of the mistakes, 'errors' and shortcomings that end up determining the tragic destiny of the main characters, as well as the ways in which they come to bear the consequences that flow from the tragic flaw that each of them finds themselves guilty within the stories.

## CONCLUSIONS

In order to be able to organize the conclusions section of this PhD thesis efficiently, and also in view of the complexity of the concept of tragic flaw as it appears in David Foster Wallace's fiction, I found it useful and necessary to divide it into a series of seven parts, with each of them presenting a particular feature of the concept of tragic flaw. Together, they form and describe this concept in David Foster Wallace's fiction, while presenting the essential characteristics, the features that can be found in both novels and story collections and, last but not least, the reasons why we can speak of a concrete and constant presence of the concept of tragic flaw, in its (post)modern form, in the work of the American author.

The first part considers a paradigm of control, as well as loss of control. One of the main causes for the development of a sense of the tragic in Wallace's fiction occurs when the

protagonists feel that they are losing control of their own lives, without being able to do anything about it. Whether it is about things happening around them that are out of their control, a relationship that is spiraling out of control, or simply making themselves unseen, unheard, and becoming ignored, isolated, or alienated from themselves or those around them, most of Wallace's protagonists become desperate and even, in some cases, tempted by a real obsession to be in control of both themselves and the people around them. This leads, not infrequently, to extreme decisions and a sense of dehumanization, to the point where they no longer find themselves. From this point on, the lack of control (and, implicitly, the loss of control) triggers a series of actions and decisions that can be discussed and analyzed under the spectrum of the concept of tragic guilt, in some cases even having fatal consequences for some of the protagonists.

The second part of the conclusions deals with a matter of communication, or rather miscommunication. This idea of the inability of the protagonists to effectively express their thoughts, experiences and feelings to those around them, as well as the ineffectiveness of showing empathy towards those close to them at key moments, amplifies the isolation and anxiety of the protagonists in relation to themselves as well as those around them. Trying to communicate effectively and express their thoughts and feelings becomes a real burden for them and those around them, a feeling that stems both from fear (of being rejected, rejected, misunderstood, abandoned or having to face the guilt that is they must confront at some point) and from the aforementioned sense of loss of control. Therefore, all of these things also contribute to the triggering of tragedy for each protagonist, thus amplifying the sense of tragic flaw that we may find in David Foster Wallace's fiction.

The third part deals with a matter of loneliness, an idea which, in turn, takes several forms, both as a form of loneliness in relation to others and a form of loneliness with oneself for each protagonist. This may also be discussed as a fear, specifically the fear of being left alone, isolated, marginalized or ignored by those around them, and of finding themselves, therefore, in a position of personal 'collapse'. In fact, this is also a conjuncture that amplifies the tragic outcome; more precisely, this loneliness is often a consequence of the fulfilment of the feeling of tragic flaw. The fear of being alone and isolated is precisely what drives Wallace's protagonists to make a series of decisions that bring them to the very point they were trying to avoid, thereby doing nothing more than ending up at the very point they most wanted to run away from – and it is precisely this sense of helplessness that shapes their tragic destiny.

The fourth part revolves around the concepts of shame and guilt, the same ones that have been discussed in the theoretical part of this study. In one form or another, most of the tragic figures in Wallace's prose experience these feelings when they realize the mistakes they have made, and what their outcome will be. The two experiences are closely related to the concept of tragic flaw and are an essential component of it, as they are both related to the moment when the protagonists realize the (tragic) mistakes they have made and the impossibility of avoiding the tragic outcome they will have to face.

The fifth part looks at a matter of fear and failure – and, implicitly, the intersection of the two: fear of failure. Fear is a feeling that, to one degree or another, is present in most of David Foster Wallace's protagonists. Every protagonist is afraid – both for themselves and for those around them, and one of the greatest fears they experience is the fear of failure. This can be anything: personal failure, professional failure, failure in a relationship, failure to be a proper partner, parent or son are just a few defining characteristics of fear in Wallace's prose. As a result, most of the protagonists share some common characteristics that contribute to the tragic denouement: they are fragile in the face of the great problems they have to face, they have a tendency towards their own destruction (physical, mental or psychological), they share a tendency towards failure (or, in other words, we could say that they are doomed, for the most part, to failure, but still because of themselves), and this shared fear of failure demonstrates that, for most of them, collapse seems (and, more often than not, is) imminent. Because of this, for most of them, the tragic destiny does not seem to suggest any way back or any possibility of overcoming their condition.

The last, but definitely not least part deals with a matter of hope and redemption. Throughout the novels and stories, several of Wallace's protagonists retain hope that they can overcome their 'flaws', imperfections and characteristics that hinder their development and, for some of them, their journey as characters focuses precisely on a constant attempt to avoid their tragic destiny. For most of them, however, hope is only a short-term placebo, the effects of which disappear when they realize that all hope is lost (or rather useless). For most of Wallace's protagonists, there is no turning back from facing their tragic destiny; moreover, for most of them, all hope is doomed to failure. However, there are a few characters whose fates suggest the possibility of overcoming their condition, which is why it would be improper to say that all of Wallace's protagonists are doomed to failure; however, these are very few compared to the

protagonists for whom all hope is futile. Thus, their "salvation" is, for most of them, possible, but quite unlikely, and hope becomes just another way for them to coexist with all the "flaws" that lead them, almost inevitably, to the tragic flaw(s).

Finally, in order to establish the overall picture of this thesis, it is essential to mention the fact that the current study considered a single author, which is why the term *American tragic flaw* may be more complex than the limitations of this study have allowed to show. However, this doctoral thesis may provide a starting point for developing the term *American tragic flaw*, as well as expanding the concept to encompass other American authors and other historical periods beyond the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, we can establish some essential coordinates regarding the concept of *American tragic flaw* and how it manifests itself in David Foster Wallace's fiction. Thus, we call *American tragic flaw* a feature of tragedy that finds its origins, manifestation, and characteristics in the American society; as a result, the tragic flaw suffered by the protagonists is also found in the *American tragic flaw*, the two coexisting and influencing each other. David Foster Wallace's critique of the United States of his time, a nation heavily influenced by the corporate environment, an entertainment-dependent, capitalist, consumerist, post-ironic and dehumanizing nation, finds its characteristics in the essential traits we discover in the protagonists of his novels and story collections. Similar to the protagonists, the United States of America is depicted by Wallace as a nation that is out of control, unable to communicate effectively, lonely, with its own reasons to feel shame and guilt, plagued by fear, failure and the fear of failure, and, not least, lacking the hope that it can redeem itself. The tragic flaw of the protagonists is also reflected in the tragic flaw of a nation that has become its own worst enemy and, just like the protagonists, suffers from a tendency that is almost impossible to avoid: that of self-destruction.

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