

“Consider the Lobster”: A Summary

Laura Nesbitt

David Foster Wallace’s 2004 article “Consider the Lobster,” originally published in *Gourmet* magazine, investigates a topic not generally covered by such publications—the sensations of one of the animals who becomes our food. Wallace, an American essayist, novelist, and English professor, dubs himself as readers’ “assigned correspondent” of the 56th Annual Maine Lobster Festival (236). Boasting 25,000 pounds of fresh-caught lobster, cooking competitions, carnival rides, live music, and a beauty pageant, the MLF draws 100,000 visitors from across the country (236). However, Wallace emphasizes that no amount of lobster paraphernalia and clever marketing strategies can divert him from the serious question, “Is it right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?” (243). In his article, Wallace seeks not to answer this query, but rather to provide thought-provoking information and allow readers to draw their own conclusions. For example, he calls attention to promotional material provided by the MLF which describes the lobster’s nervous system as simple, decentralized, and lacking the structures which resist pain—an explanation which Wallace then rejects as “incorrect in about nine different ways” (245). Additionally, he points out that in truth lobsters do have nociceptors, which he describes as, “pain receptors sensitive to potentially damaging extremes of temperature,” such as boiling water (250). To provide further illustration of the lobsters’ consciousness, Wallace invokes the obvious “struggling, thrashing, and lid-clattering” which accompanies the lobsters’ descent into the boiling kettle and adds that, according to most ethicists, this combination of neurological structures and behavior can be used to determine a creature’s pain capacity

(249, 248). Having worked through the complexities of the issue, Wallace returns to his original question: is it possible to truly defend the act of consuming flesh without acknowledging the act's inherent selfishness? Wallace leaves readers of *Gourmet*, which uses the catch phrase "The Magazine of Good Living," to ponder their own "ethical convictions" and reflect on the dichotomy between the MLF's celebratory façade and its "Roman-circus" tendencies (254, 253). In this manner, Wallace has set up his readers to reflect not just on the lobster but on the larger moral questions behind their carnivorous lifestyle.

Works Cited

Wallace, David F. "Consider the Lobster." *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005. Print. 235-254.