

Worksheet for David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster"

Pre-Writing

1) Food culture is a set of practices, beliefs, and habits. Communities have food cultures. Ethnicities have food cultures. Nations have food cultures. In NYC we can be a part of many different food cultures. Consider the food culture or cultures in which you grew up. What is distinctive about it or them? Are there elements of the culture that you especially like or dislike? What makes you feel this way?

2) Consider your own eating habits. Do you consider them to be ethical (morally the right thing to do)? Can you justify eating meat or not eating meat, for example? Explain why or why not.

3) If animals can suffer and feel pain like human beings, why is it ethical to kill and eat some animals like chickens but not other animals like pets? To push this further, is it ethical to eat animals but not human beings?

Breaking Down the Text

1) Wallace begins his essay with a lengthy, detailed description of the Maine Lobster Festival. What impression of the festival does this description create for the reader (or you)? Why, in your estimation, would Wallace choose to be so detailed?

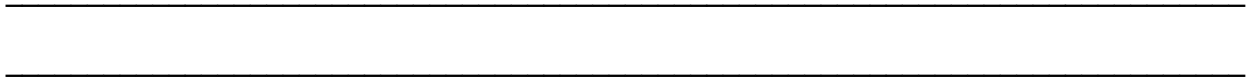
2) After discussing the festival, Wallace turns his attention to the lobster itself, considering everything from its biology and history of its name to its use as a food and the various ways it can be cooked. What significant facts do we learn from these passages? Again, why might Wallace have chosen to be so detailed here?

3) Early in his essay, Wallace poses a series of questions to the reader, including: “Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive for our gustatory pleasure?” and “Is the previous question irksomely PC or sentimental?” (2). What are your responses to these questions? (Remember “sentient” means able to perceive and feel.)

4) Wallace acknowledges that “the questions of whether and how different kinds of animals feel pain, and whether and why it might be justifiable to inflict pain on them in order to eat them, turn out to be extremely complex and difficult” (2). How are they complex and difficult questions? Explain.

5) Wallace confesses that the issue of whether or not to eat meat is “uncomfortable for me, and for just about anyone I know who enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel or unfeeling” (3). Do you feel similarly uncomfortable when it comes to this issue? Why or why not?

6) Wallace argues that while live lobsters are on full display at the Maine Lobster Festival, live cattle would never be publicly displayed or killed at the Nebraska Beef Festival (3). Why is this?



7) If, as Wallace argues, a lobster “behaves very much like you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water,” does this mean that it is unethical—or even immoral—to boil them (4)? Explain why or why not?

8) Wallace argues that “an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering” (4). What does he mean by this? Do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with him? (Remember “criterion” here means a standard for something, what we measure something by.)

9) Wallace suggests that in the future, people may look back at our current eating habits and regard them “much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Mengele’s experiments” (5). Who were Nero and Mengele? Do you believe it’s a possibility we will be viewed this way? Why or why not?

10) Wallace concludes by asking another series of questions. For those who have ethical concerns about eating meat and yet still do, he asks, “[W]hat ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands...?” (6). For those who simply refuse to think about the ethical implications of eating meat and still do, he asks, “Is your refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it that you don’t want to think about it?” (6). Answer whichever of these questions that applies most directly to you. If you’re not a meat eater, find a friend or family member who is and ask them.

After finishing reading the text:

Have you ever eaten lobster? After reading Wallace’s article, what are your thoughts on having eaten it or eating it again in the future? Do you think Wallace was trying to stop you from eating lobster or did he want something different than that?
