

David Foster Wallace, "This is Water." Commencement Speech Delivered at Kenyon College to the Class of 2005.

In his commencement speech to the Kenyon College graduating class of 2005, David Foster Wallace asks the graduates to pay attention to the world around them. He challenges them to examine the real value of an education, which, as he claims, has very little to do with knowledge and a lot to do with awareness of what surrounds us. His example of a white-collar worker shopping for groceries in a crowded supermarket after a long work day drives home the point that unless graduates really "learn how to think," they will be, as he puts it, "pissed and miserable" when they confront the daily challenges of life. Towards the end of the speech, Wallace makes a bold claim: that in the daily grind of life, "there is no such thing as atheism; we all worship." He suggests to the graduates that a compelling reason for us to worship some transcendent being or some other abstract ideal, instead of material goods, beauty, power, or personal intelligence, is that worshiping these things will "eat you alive."

[Click here to listen to David Foster Wallace deliver his famous speech, "This is Water."](#)

[Click here to read a transcript of his address.](#)

Vocabulary

Below are 40 terms that some students may need to know in order to understand David Foster Wallace's commencement speech, "This is Water." Define each word as succinctly as possible; define each word as it is used in the speech.

deploy	cliché	arrogance	"hosed"	despise
parable	bracket (verb)	dismiss	lame	idle
banal	didactic	dogma	submit	insidious
platitude	atheist	default setting	hyperbole	rat race
trench	template	urgent	petty	myriad
genre	analysis	triumphant	white collar	gnawing
posit	hard-wired	abstract	infused	niceties
persuasive	bureaucratic	deluded	virtue	codify

Thinking Critically

Answer each question as completely as you can, using well-formed sentences. Although there is no "correct" answer, please be sure to support your answer with evidence from the text.

Wallace begins his speech by telling the audience a riddle about two young fish who do not realize that they live in water. He ends the speech by telling the audience that they must remind themselves every day, "This is water. This is water."

1. Wallace uses water metaphorically. What idea does the water metaphor convey? What does Wallace mean by water? Explain.
2. What is the rhetorical value of using the water metaphor at the beginning of the speech and at the end (this technique is called framing)?
3. Wallace uses the term "default setting" throughout the speech. What does he mean by this term? Why does he say that we need to "adjust" our default settings?

Towards the end of the speech, Wallace claims that in the day-to-day routine of daily life, "there is no such thing as atheism; we all worship."

4. What does Wallace mean by this statement? Can you give examples from things you have experienced or seen?

In September of 2008, David Foster Wallace took his own life. There seems to be some tragic irony in his suicide, in part because he speaks briefly about suicide in his speech.

5. Does knowledge of Wallace's suicide make a difference to you in how you perceive his speech? Does it (his suicide) change your opinion of what he says?

Writing Assignment

Listen to Wallace's speech and read the transcript again. In an essay of five paragraphs (7-sentence introduction, three 9-sentence body paragraphs, and a 4-sentence conclusion – in other words, 7, 9, 9, 9, 4) please articulate what you believe is the main point that Wallace tries to convey to the graduates. In your answer, you may, of course, write about more than one of the ideas that Wallace uses to help him make his point. Do you agree or disagree with what Wallace says? Be sure to use examples that are not taken from the speech to support your agreement or disagreement.