Student Name

Instructor Name

ENGL 1200

Date

Considering More Than the Lobster

In a 2004 issue of *Gourmet* magazine appeared an article detailing the food and fun of the Maine Lobster Festival. Though a simple subject, upon partaking in the various pastimes of the event, the author, David Foster Wallace, leaves with a burning question: “Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?” (Wallace 243). Through neuroanatomy, behavior philosophy, and ethical theory, the author uses all means necessary to try to answer this question. Yet this piece is rather broad in its scope. It is a demonstration of not just ethics but the various roadblocks encountered when everyday people consider their own beliefs. Misinformation blurs evidence needed to make ethical choices, and the issue is partisan, with two sides being represented by politically charged groups. The cacophony of discomfort in everyday life is distracting and it can be difficult to find places to ask these questions. In his work, David Foster Wallace is asking us to consider far more than the lobster, but how and why some questions are so hard to ask. The piece starts off with a standard, and somewhat pessimistic, description of the Maine Lobster Festival. With a basic explanation of the various paragraph-long list of ways to eat lobster that are offered at the fair, and a list of the festivities, approximately two pages in the reader gets a good understanding of what it is like to an attendee of the Maine Lobster Festival. Yet, the article goes on for eighteen more pages. With a sudden shift in tone and subject, David Foster Wallace asks a question that he deems so essential to eating lobsters that he must unpack it for the public, and the rest of the article is spent looking into the ethical ramifications of boiling lobsters alive. While at first the issue may seem simple, once the moral can of worms is opened, answering the question turns out to be far more complex than a simple right or wrong answer.

A detail that cannot be overlooked is the Maine Lobster Promotion’s role in all of this. When looking into the neuroanatomy of lobsters David Foster Wallace finds legitimately incorrect information at part of the festival. A sign in a tent put up by the MLF states that “There is no cerebral cortex, which in humans is the area of the brain that gives the experience of pain” (Wallace 245). As the author discovers, this is not technically incorrect, yet it leaves out an important point. While lacking a cerebral cortex, lobsters are equipped with other necessary biological hardware needed to experience pain. In addition, when placed in boiling water lobsters exhibit the behavior of an animal in pain. After looking at this evidence the author concludes that: “It takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist hairsplitting not to see struggling, thrashing, and lid-clattering as just such pain-behavior” (Wallace 249). Although it may be impossible to prove that lobsters feel pain, stating that they have no cerebral cortex and therefore no pain is an incorrect assumption. Obscuring this information showcases that Maine Lobster Festival may not have the most educational motives for displaying this information.

What makes this misinformation an even bigger issue is how pervasive it seems to be to the locals of Maine. The first person that David Foster Wallace encounters that states that lobsters don’t feel pain is Dick, a cab driver from the area “whose son-in-law happens to be a professional lobsterman and one of the eating tent’s main regulars” (Wallace 245). Although Dick himself is not directly involved in the lobster industry, his opinion on the subject speaks volumes to what those who live in Maine and are surrounded by all things lobster feel about the subject. While knowing Dick’s family background in unnecessary for describing his role as a cab driver, its inclusion helps Wallace drive home the point that misinformation is at the helm of this issue. In order to make decisions in line with one’s ethics and boundaries, complete factual information is needed. While the sign at MLF is not directly responsible for Dick’s understanding of lobster neuroanatomy, it speaks to the larger issue of misinformation. After learning more about how lobsters may feel pain David Foster Wallace did not come out and say he changed his mind about eating them. But after doing a deep dive into the science of how they feel pain, he states: “I like to eat certain kinds of animals and would like to keep doing it, and I haven’t succeeded in working out any sort of personal ethical system in which the belief is truly defensible instead of selfishly convenient” (Wallace 253). Although his opinion hasn’t changed, the author was able to look at all the evidence presented and make a personal choice based on that. Relating back to the roadblocks in the way, this section of the piece illustrates how vital correct information is for making sound ethical decisions.

The Maine Lobster Promotion Council has issues, but on the other side of this ethical dilemma stands the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, (PETA), known for its own set of quirks. This group is known for being extreme and harsh with its attempts at getting the public to refrain from eating animals or animal products. They are described as “conspicuous” and their presence at the Maine Lobster Festival is so visible that Wallace says that PETA’s attendance is: “One of the very first things we hear about the MLF” (243). While backlash exists everywhere, it seems that wherever the Maine Lobster Promotion Council promotes eating lobster, Peta will be right there to offer a fire counterpoint.

PETA’s extremist aesthetic is an issue of its own. The average person doesn’t want to identify with them. The author is so worried that readers will be turned-off by their rhetoric that when towards the end of his discussion, David Foster Wallace articulates that lobsters most likely do experience pain in some capacity, he follows it up saying: “I’m not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here” (253). Siding with PETA is so socially undesirable that it makes it difficult to consider the ethical issue at hand. This adds yet another layer on to this convoluted question. By exploring this, Wallace explores just how difficult democracy is when social and status factors come into play.

The description of the festival is also deliberate and an important precursor to the ethical discussion. First and foremost being that “The assigned subject of this *Gourmet* article is the 56th Annual MLF” (Wallace 236). But it goes beyond merely filling a box. By page 239 the description is much less matter-of-facts and more detailing petty complaints. Phrases such as: “institutional tables,” “the total noise is masticatory,” “iceless and flat” (Wallace 239) paint a rather bleak depiction of what to many is supposed to be a fun summer festival. While far less dramatic than getting boiled alive, David Foster Wallace points out the low-grade level of suffering involved in attending a festival such as the MLF. This air of general discomfort may well be how the festival avoids feeling like a “Medieval torture fest” (Wallace 253). It is easier not consider ethics when distracted by inconveniences. A sound argument against eating lobsters could be made, but in a line of hot, sweaty, and hungry people the last thing on their minds is the suffering of the lobsters clawing their way to the top of the pot. Like misinformation and partisanship, the distraction of discomfort is another roadblock to ethical discussion.

While an article concerned with the ethics of boiling lobsters, an important distinction to make is that this is not a persuasive piece. David Foster Wallace approaches the issue from a curious viewpoint, and not one of proving three main points to sway readers to his side of the aisle. The piece is an open dialogue; “I am not trying to bait anyone here – I’m just genuinely curious” (Wallace 254). While without a solid stance one way or the other that does not mean the piece is without a conclusion. The second to last page buried in a footnote the author summarizes the issues. “Suffice it to say that both the scientific and the philosophical arguments on either side of the animal-suffering issue are involved, abstruse, technical, often informed by self interest or ideology, and in the end so totally inconclusive that as a practical matter, in the kitchen or restaurant, it all still seems to come down to individual conscience, going with your gut” (Wallace 252). Although the last nineteen pages have detailed the argument from every side, this footnote states that even after all, that for most people, going with their gut is the best and most practical way to approach the situation.

If the conclusion amongst comparative neuroanatomy, philosophical considerations, and behavioral analysis seems to be “go with your gut,” then why bother to have this discussion at all? Why take the time to ponder this question? What makes a question within “the limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other?” (Wallace 254). Despite most choosing to partake in eating lobsters, it is still hard to ignore some ethical quandaries as the shellfish frantically attempt to claw their way towards the fresh air that they had known mere moments ago. To David Foster Wallace this seems to make it an unavoidable question. When queries arise, a place is needed to discuss the implications and variables at hand. Issues stay stagnant if the conversation around is left muted, Open dialogue is essential for true democracy. While it would be simplistic to imagine the Maine Lobster Festival and merely a state fair with a lobster tent, this piece shows the importance of asking questions despite “aesthetic compromise” (Wallace 239).