

Judges' Commentary on "The Meaning of Death"

by

Robert Wallace

"The Meaning of Death" received a Second Place Award

in the 2011-12 Composition Program Writing Contest

Robert Wallace's ambitious essay "The Meaning of Death" is a powerful, thoughtfully executed inquiry about inquiry itself, presented through his exploration of Susan Griffin's essay "Our Secret," his own conversations with his girlfriend about death and loss, and Hegel's concept of dialectic. Written in response to an assignment that asked students to work through Griffin's difficult essay by examining "the connections that she implies and asserts" by looking at the in-between spaces of her essay, her "powerful and surprising juxtapositions" and even the text's use of "blank space," Wallace makes the assignment his own by working within Griffin's style to juxtapose his own views with those of Griffin and Hegel. His essay is at once an inquiry about inquiry itself, as well as a controlled exploration of death and the human desire not just for meaning, but for truth—and how, in Wallace's own words, "Meaning arises out of the process of inquiry; the search for meaning *is* the meaning" (4).

By uniting his own experience discussing the death of Steve Jobs with his girlfriend with Griffin's attempts to understand Heinrich Himmler's "grotesque parody of humanity" in instituting gas vans rather than firing squads because Himmler had noticed his own

soldiers were upset by watching death unfold before them, Wallace's essay attempts to think dialectically about death, loss, love, and life (3). When Wallace incorporates Hegel's concept of dialectic, he does so in a way that not only allows his readers to better understand his suggestion that Griffin's essay itself is engaged in a dialectic enterprise as she teases out her more nuanced understanding of Himmler, but also in a way that allow us to understand how dialectic plays out in the every day, and that his own essay, with its juxtaposed texts from himself, Griffin, and Hegel, is attempting to do something more than simply answer an assignment. Ultimately, while this essay is about the act of inquiring and the search for meaning and answers, it is also about confronting the problem of death. In the end, while Wallace works the essay to a supposed conclusion that "the opposite of death, or at least the one presented above [by Griffin], is love" he still takes that conclusion away, participating in an ongoing inquiry by asserting that "truth is not that simple" and finally deciding, at least for now, that life, as the synthesis of love and death, is the answer, "life in all its messy, multithreaded complexity, scrabbling for answers and returning with more and more questions" (8). Nothing about living is ever simple, Wallace shows us, and similarly, nothing about this essay is simple, as it asks readers to think hard alongside Wallace in order to come to complex—if temporary—conclusions.