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ENG 410

9 Dec. 2018

Prolonged Sentences in David Foster Wallace's "All That"

David Foster Wallace's short story "All That" is a story written from the perspective of a man in the throes of a crisis of faith. The unnamed narrator recounts stories and moments that he believe instilled a disposition toward reverence for God – namely, a toy cement truck which he was told by his parents possessed magic powers. As he writes, he disvulges his thoughts in a very manic, uncensored, and unorganized fashion. These sentences often begin with one thought and end on an entirely different note, with the use of various punctuation to extend and frame the spiraling mind of the narrator. This results in the narrator – and by proxy, Wallace himself – creating fascinating, often page-long sentences stuffed to the brim with plot and character detail that reveal a person truly in the midst of a traumatic identity crisis.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator writes of a toy cement mixer that was gifted to him as a Christmas present. One day as he was playing with it, his mother, "in a moment of adult boredom," tells him that the cement mixer is magic. Whenever he pulls it behind him, she claims, the cement drum spins. However, it only spins under the conditions that he is pulling it and that he is not looking at it. The moment he looks at the toy, the drum ceases spinning. Before defining for the reader these parameters, the narrator creates an incredibly long sentence that ruminates on the nature with which his mother told him of the toy's magic:

> The magic – which my mother likely reported to me from her vantage on our living room's sofa, while watching me pull the cement mixer around the room by its rope, idly

> asking me if I was aware that it had magical properties, no doubt making sport of me in the bored half-cruel way that adults sometimes do with small children, playfully telling them things that they pass of to themselves as "tall tales" or "childlike inventions," unaware of the impact those tales may have (since magic is a serious reality for small children), though, conversely, if my parents believed that the cement mixer's magic was real, I do not understand why they waited weeks or months before telling me of it. (Wallace)

This sentence begins simply with "the magic" as a compact noun phrase. An em dash is placed afterwards. An em dash as a punctuation mark has versatility; it can be used in place of parentheses, commas, or colons. However, coming off of a noun phrase which has not been completed by a verb phrase, readers expect the em dash to be used as a parentheses or comma, so as to indicate a pause from whatever "the magic" is doing. And of course, a pause indicates a return.

However, the narrator does not return within the sentence to say what "the magic" is doing. Rather, what follows the em dash is a relative pronoun that sets up a description of how the his mother tells of the magic. The relative phrase that follows is "which my mother likely reported to me from her vantage point on our living room sofa," describing from where his mother told him. The phrase functions as a standard relative, giving place and manner to the magic, but altogether could be removed from a sentence with little consequence.

The first several phrases that follow the initial relative all modify the mother's reporting, serving adverbial functions. Following the relative is a subordinating conjunction in "while" that connects the action of "watching [the narrator] pull the cement mixer around the room by its rope" to his mother. The phrase functions adverbially, modifying how his mother reported to him

the magical properties of the cement mixer. In this way, the phrase disregards the relative function of "which" and builds upon the relative as if it were its own sentence, perhaps reading like: "Mother reported to me from her vantage on our living room's sofa while watching me pull the cement mixer around the room by its rope."

Midway through the sentence, though, focus is shifted from the mother to how adults "make sport" of small children. After the narrator states that his mother was "idly asking me if I was aware that it had magical properties," he adverbially modifies her asking with the phrase "no doubt making sport of me in the bored half-cruel way that adults sometimes do with small children" (Wallace). The narrator uses "in the bored half-cruel way" as a subordinating conjunction to transition from discussion on his mother to discussion how adults taunt small children for fun.

He modifies the idea in the same way that the mother's actions were modified. We get more phrases separated by commas that tell of adults sharing "tall-tales" to satiate their own boredom, not quite knowing how severe the impacts of these tales could be on the mind of a child. He uses a parenthetical aside in this bottom half of the sentence to explain why telling fantastical tales to children is dangerous: because "magic is a serious reality for small children."

The placement of the clause as a parenthetical aside is odd because its information is not inherently less significant than the rest of the information in the sentence. Technically, the sentence is still serving functioning as a pause from talking about "the magic" that opens the sentence. Moreover, all of the phrases after the em dash are serving to describe the manner in which his mother reported the magic; the phrases taken as a whole still serve a relative function, even as the narrator has extended it to discuss where his mom was, what she said to him, and the effects of what she has said. With this as the case, there is no clear reason why the reality of

magic in the lives of children is less important than how adults play with the minds of children.

As he concludes thoughts on how adults make light of childrens' whimsy, he makes one final shift to express confusion at his parents' decision to tell him about the magic. The transition is made with "though" and "conversely" acting as conjunctive adverbs. He goes on to say that if they thought that the cement mixer was magic, it is odd that they would not tell him until months after he received it. The phrases that comprise this thought create two clauses that could act as their own sentence; they do not modify explicitly any of the prior phrases.

With the three distinct shifts that the sentence takes, a traditional writer would likely use three or more sentences. One possible collection of sentences could look like: "My mother reported the magic to me from her vantage on our living room's sofa, while watching me pull the cement mixer around the room by its rope. She idly asked me if I was aware that it had magical properties, no doubt making sport of me in the bored half-cruel way that adults sometimes do with small children by telling them things that they pass off to themselves as 'tall-tales' or 'childlike inventions,' unaware of the impact those tales may have (since magic is a serious reality for small children. Though, conversely, if my parents believed that the cement mixer's magic was real, I do not understand why they waited weeks or months before telling me of it."

Writing sentences in a traditional manner would not do the character justice. The character is writing about his life in an effort to parse out why he has a religious nature. Given that he is writing in a time of crisis, his thoughts are very sporadic and though there is a logic to their flow, they are not organized in any polished way. Later in the story the character alludes to his haphazard writing, saying in a parenthetical aside that he is "not putting any of this well.... and will go back over this as carefully as possible when I am finished, and will make changes and corrections whenever I can see a way to make what I'm discussing clearer or more

interesting without fabricating anything." His run-ons and rambling tangents are essential to communicate how distraught he is.

In the specific sentence examined, the character reveals his distress in how he remembers learning of the cement mixer's magic. He remembers where his mother was sitting. He places her thoughts in a broader context of how adults interact with children. He thinks of how those interactions affect children. He then questions, using the logic of his child-self, why his parents waited to tell him of the mixer's magic. When people analyze noteworthy moments in life, they elevate the interaction to being representative of some greater meaning or idea. This type of analysis lets people believe they have befuddling moments figured it; it brings comfort.

The narrator is doing this same thing in this sentence, trying to figure out why his mother told him this and what it means in his life. Wallace is examining this specific idea: how do people interpret landmark events? Wallace's exploration through his character allows readers to see the thought process of not only the character, but humanity at large. In times of crisis, people jump from thought to thought, point to point, aimlessly in attempts to grasp at something true. The narrator begins with "the magic," but ends with wondering why his parents shared the magic with him. The truth of why they shared it is never reached, but his attempts to find it is what Wallace is dissecting.

Works Cited

Wallace, David Foster. "All That." *The New Yorker*, 14 Dec. 2009, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/12/14/all-that-2. Accessed 12 Nov. 2018.