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The Language of Landscape, Information, and Disturbance: An Existential Look at the Literary Techniques of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

In 1996, nine years after his first novel, David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest*, a mammoth text over a thousand pages long, including nearly one hundred pages of three hundred and eighty-eight endnotes printed in a font size smaller than the body of the novel. Though the novel presents an arduous task to its readers, *Infinite Jest* was met with wide acclaim: in 2005, Time magazine included it in a list of the one hundred best English-language novels since 1923. Ten years after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Cormac McCarthy published his tenth novel, *The Road*, which went on to receive the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, securing its place with *Infinite Jest* among the most respected works of contemporary fiction. *The Road* spans a generous two hundred and eighty-seven pages, as McCarthy's fragmented, vignette-like style leaves much empty space on each page. While Wallace's maximalism and McCarthy's minimalism could not be any more different in appearance, both novels address a series of similar existential concerns, ranging from the value of human consciousness to the question of suicide as an ethical course of action¹.

A thorough analysis of the respective literary styles executed by Wallace and McCarthy clearly shows that both authors *present* such existential questions and qualms to the reader without attempting to explicitly *answer* these questions. Instead, both Wallace and McCarthy write in a way that leaves the reader in a position to provide her *own* answers and to formulate her *own* morals and beliefs. Such techniques not only prevent the authors from imposing their own personal beliefs onto the reader, but allow for a more rewarding and entertaining reading

experience. Both novels demand an active “performance” from readers. Critic Frank Louis Cioffi has referred to *Infinite Jest* as being a text that employs a “performance of disturbance” (169). This description, originally coined for what appears to be a drastically different novel, can also be used to describe the reading activity of McCarthy’s *The Road*. While McCarthy’s minimalism appears to be so different from Wallace’s style, both McCarthy and Wallace executed their respective techniques to provide their readers an opportunity to be the lead-role in this “performance of disturbance”.

It is important to consider some biographical and cultural points before looking at the texts themselves. David Foster Wallace was born in 1962, and was thirty-four years old when *Infinite Jest* was published. America was a stable and prosperous world power in 1996, nearing the end of Bill Clinton’s first term of presidency. Wallace was a gifted student and athlete from a young age, but also suffered from severe depression which was treated with large amounts of medication and electric-shock therapy. In 2008, at the age of forty-six, Wallace committed suicide. Cormac McCarthy, born 1933, was seventy-three years old when *The Road* was published. McCarthy has lived in a hermetic and private fashion for much of lifeⁱⁱ. In 2006, America was in a state of turmoil: five years removed from the terrorist attacks of 2001ⁱⁱⁱ, one year removed from the Hurricane Katrina disaster, in the midst of an unfavorable war, bleak economic forecasts, and the largely unfavorable presidency of George W. Bush.

Part I: The Language of Landscape

The Road presents a post-apocalyptic view of America in a future that does not seem to be too distant from the time in which McCarthy was writing. America has been denuded of nearly all plant and animal life, resources, and sense of society. The few surviving humans wander across the destroyed countryside in a constant search for *something* in a land of nothing. McCarthy’s

language brings the reader into the world of the father-and-son team, through whom the narrative is filtered: “Desolate country. A boardhide nailed to a barndoor. Ratty. Wisp of a tail. Inside the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light” (17). The narrative’s bleak language and fragmented style carries on until the last paragraph of the novel, in an attempt to mirror the dreadful landscape the father and son traverse on their journey to nowhere. McCarthy’s language changes abruptly in the last paragraph, a stylistic move which will be discussed later in this paper.

Nearly each phrase of the narrative is expressed in a mere breath, as if to model the fact that *The Road* is a story of survival, and that this measurement of “breaths” follows from the beginning until the end of the father and son’s trek. This is one of the first instances of “performance” that the reader encounters, and since the “breaths” are shallow and often labored, the performance is already one of distress. McCarthy’s organization of the novel also demonstrates his minimalist approach: there are no delineated chapters, just a continuum of small paragraphs with ample amounts of white space between each paragraph. This particular style of organization, or lack of organization, echoes the absence of structure in what is left of the human world. The stanza-like paragraphs show brief snapshots of scenery, action, memory, and dialogue, while the white spaces between give the impression of indeterminably long silences and the passing of immeasurable amounts of time and distance. It is in these silences where the reader reflects upon the suffering and despair that McCarthy is trying to express in each stanza. The reader thereby performs, in each silence, a disturbing task of endurance amidst the constant presence of horror which coincides with the miserable trek of the father and son.

Where McCarthy uses minimalism to depict a continent void of nearly everything, David Foster Wallace employs a maximalist approach to language and style to portray the fictional

futuristic world of *Infinite Jest*. Like *The Road*, *Infinite Jest* lacks a certain formal arrangement often found in the traditional novel. There are no clearly delineated chapters—the narrative is divided most often by a statement of a specific date and time. Wallace’s dates and times, however, are largely inaccessible to the reader, since this fictional world has “subsidized” time, where numerical years have been replaced with corporate advertisements, such as “30 April – Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” (87). Wallace also uses the occasional descriptive heading, some of which exceed an entire page in length, to divide the text. For example:

“ENORMOUS, ELECTROLYSIS-RASHED ‘JOURNALIST’ ‘HELEN’ STEEPLY’S ONLY PUTATIVE PUBLISHED ARTICLE BEFORE BEGINNING HER SOFT PROFILE ON PHOENIX CARDINALS PUNTER ORIN J. INCANDEZA, AND HER ONLY PUTATIVE PUBLISHED ARTICLE TO HAVE ANYTHING OVERTLY TO DO WITH GOOD OLD METROPOLITAN BOSTON, 10 AUGUST IN THE YEAR OF THE DEPEND ADULT UNDERGARMENT, FOUR YEARS AFTER OPTICAL THEORIST, ENTREPRENEUR, TENNIS ACADEMICIAN, AND AVANT-GARDE FILMMAKER JAMES O. INCANDEZA TOOK HIS OWN LIFE BY PUTTING HIS HEAD IN A MICROWAVE OVEN” (142).

This device of division is far from effective. There is “so much” in this text and in this world portrayed by David Foster Wallace that is quite the task to divide it. *The Road*, on the other hand, has divisions on nearly every page. We see here the difference between an American landscape that is “impossible to divide” and an American landscape that is so divided, it barely even exists.

Infinite Jest’s maximalist approach aims to describe a nation much different from the America found in *The Road*. Wallace’s story takes place in a time of excess-everything. America has merged with Mexico and Canada to create the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.) which harbors a massive waste-dump in New England known as the “Great Concavity”. If McCarthy’s reader reflects upon *The Road* during the dramatic pauses between paragraphs, Wallace’s reader reflects upon *Infinite Jest* as she flips to the end of the book for a large number of endnotes, each with a varying amount of importance. “The novel forces the

reader to perform actions that she wouldn't ordinarily have to do while reading, things that draw the reader out of the engagement with the text and into a paratextual mode..." (Cioffi 162). It is in this "paratextual mode" that the reader reflects upon the existential predicaments placed before her and begins to formulate her own ideals and morals. Wallace's intent was premeditated, as he explains, "It's trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of linguistic work" (Boswell 121). Where Wallace's reader must endure the linguistic labor to make such a relationship work, McCarthy's reader must endure the silence and loneliness his aesthetic of absence creates.

The concept of hope plays an important role in the performance of disturbance. It could be argued that *The Road* is a testament of hope, even though it is set in the direst of circumstances. While the landscape is ravaged and society is destroyed, the father and son still continue on their journey, with the *hope* of finding anything in the desolate land. Therefore, McCarthy's minimalism also functions as an agent of hope, since there is such "absence" everywhere, there might be hope *somewhere*. By continuing their journey, unlike the suicidal mother, the father and son fulfill the father's hope of bringing his son to a better place. The reader, in her continued reading, also possesses hope: a hope that the novel will end with some glimpse of happiness, at least for the boy. In the mysterious last paragraph of the novel, McCarthy abandons his minimalist aesthetic, which could also be interpreted as a sign of hope: since the language is no longer reduced to "breaths", perhaps the boy, and maybe even the ruined world, turned out to be fine. The phrase "Of a thing which could not be put back," may seem to be a hopeless statement, but this could also be seen as hopeful for a new, mysterious something (287)^{iv}.

Part II: Information, Identity, and the Infinite

Time is a difficult entity to control in both novels, and it is virtually useless in *The Road*. The father discarded his calendar some years ago and the only way to determine a temperate season is through McCarthy's occasional description of the weather. This absence of time has two main effects on the reader and her performance. First, the reader is unaware of how far into the future the apocalypse has occurred, which creates the fear that the apocalypse could happen at any time. Secondly, the reader is unaware of how long the father and son have been wandering, which creates a sense of an endless, perpetual despair. This sense of endless despair helps reverberate the novel's rapidly recurring images of horror and doom. These effects, caused by intentionally absent "stage directions", push the reader's performance into an even more disturbing setting, one in which the reader is not simply handed a "version of disturbance" from the author, but one in which she must form a setting from her own preconceived notions of disturbance. A setting comprised of personal disturbances has a much more traumatic effect compared to the effect created if McCarthy had instead placed his own details of disturbance into the text.

The Road also lacks proper names of people and places. This causes the reader to identify the main characters as "father", "son", and "mother", which further pulls the reader into the performance of the novel. If the reader substitutes the image of her own father, son, or mother for one of the main characters, or better yet, if she substitutes *herself* for one of the nameless characters, she is going to consider the moral dilemmas with more self-interest than if the characters and places were appropriately named by the author. This, undoubtedly, introduces even more personal elements of disturbance. The reader learns only the very basics of the characters' backgrounds, leaving her with the opportunity to "fill in" the shells of the characters with her own traits or the personality traits of people she may know. If this happens, not only is

the reader invested in the performance of *The Road*, but so too are the people close to her in her own life. McCarthy's characters lack identity since there is really nothing in their surroundings from which to derive anything but the simplest identity. Identity is also dependent upon other people, and the lack of society in *The Road* leaves the father and son with only one another to shape their identities upon.

Wallace's approach is the complete opposite: he gives the reader every bit of biographical information imaginable for a long list of characters to help portray each character's inner most thoughts and perspectives. Since the landscape and society of *Infinite Jest* is abundant, there is plenty from which to derive intricate character identities. "Wallace's novel, with its addictive prose and its restless, insistent empathy for all these crippled, deformed, despair-ridden characters, succeeds in drawing readers 'out of themselves,' effectively reversing thrust on our fall into 'the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life'" (Boswell 170). Not only does the reader empathize with Wallace's "damaged" characters, but she is bound to find a way to relate with at least one of the characters in a more tangible way. Whether it is through age, physical description, or a shared life experience, the reader of *Infinite Jest* is likely to identify with one of the fictional characters and does not have to "fill-in" any characters as the reader of *The Road* does to fully embrace the performance. When the reader embarks on her attempt to read *Infinite Jest*, she gives up quite a bit of herself in order to access the detailed stage of the novel. By placing herself in the foreign perspectives of so many characters, the reader's own character is brought into light, which allows her the opportunity to establish, or reestablish, her morals and beliefs.

It might seem strange to suggest that *The Road* and *Infinite Jest* share a similar ending, considering the extreme differences in setting, style, and lengths of the two books. However,

both novels share the strategy of having “inconclusive” endings, and to some extent, “inconclusive” beginnings. *The Road* never explains the exact cause of the apocalypse, whether it was brought on by man (e.g. atomic bomb, act of terrorism) or natural causes (e.g. weather, supernatural disaster), leaving the reader to speculate and imagine her own version of the apocalypse. Likewise, the ultimate source of addiction in Wallace’s novel is an entertainment cartridge suitably titled ‘Infinite Jest’, though the content of the cartridge is never revealed, other than that it is a silent, black and white film starring Joelle Van Dyne. Wallace, it seems, wants his readers to envision something so addictive that it can cause a complete loss of interest in anything else. The reader, if she has made it this far, is nearly experiencing such an addictive substance: the novel itself. The only reason she has continued to the end of the novel is because she could not tear herself away. Wallace thereby coaxes the reader, possibly against her will, to examine her own weaknesses and desires. Where the cartridge ‘Infinite Jest’ leaves its viewers in a permanent state of insanity, the novel should leave the reader in a state of existential contemplation, which, if it does not drive her to insanity, will be present in her mind for an ‘infinite’ amount of time.

The final phrases of *The Road* show the traumatized boy as he joins a family of strangers in the road, followed by a mysterious paragraph which depicts fish in a stream at some point in the ambiguous past. Whether or not the boy survives, whether or not the family that found him is in fact non-cannibalistic, and whereto the boy continues is never addressed. In the last sentence of *Infinite Jest*, the setting shifts suddenly after nearly a hundred pages depicted from recovering addict Don Gately’s hospital bed to Don Gately on a beach, lying on his back in the rain^v. This shift, like the shift seen in the last paragraph of *The Road*, cannot be explained with any textual evidence. After more than a thousand pages of labor, the reader still does not know much: Does

Don Gately survive? What has happened to Hal Incandenza? What has become of the ‘Infinite Jest’ cartridge? The reader subsequently asks a set of reflective questions: Do I want the boy to survive or to avoid a horrible existence in a wasteland? Would I prefer Hal to have ingested DMZ^{vi} or to have witnessed the ‘Infinite Jest’ cartridge?

The Road leaves the reader to contemplate the forces of good and evil, the limits of the human will, and the presence of God in any kind of world, not just the post-apocalyptic. *Infinite Jest* leaves the reader with a sense of feeling duped—she has just read an enormous amount of text and does not even get to enjoy the pleasure of an evident moral. These inconclusive endings are the most important aspects of the novels: it is here where the reader comes to her own understandings of the novels and here where she further shapes her own morals and realizes that she alone controls her existential beliefs. The “performance of disturbance” has lowered its curtains, but the lead-role is still in character, attempting to process the labor and agony she has just endured. If these novels were to close with more conclusive endings or with more apparent morals, the reader would miss out on the purpose of the performance: to contemplate, indefinitely, what it is that makes her human and to realize that it is she alone who can decide the fate of her existence.

Part III: Freewill and Suicide in Life and Performance

The literary canon is filled with suicidal characters and suicidal instances, from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Both *The Road* and *Infinite Jest* continue this tradition with each having a very important character who has committed suicide prior to the beginning of each novel’s action, but still manages to maintain a strong presence and influence throughout. The mother in *The Road* kills herself by presumably slitting her wrists with a “flake of obsidian” in order to regain some notion of control over her life, even if it means ending it: “I

didn't bring myself to this. I was brought" (56, 58). The situation which the apocalypse has brought her to appears to be stripped of any glimmer of hope, except in the choice of suicide, the one action she can control. After learning of the mother's suicide, the reader, along with the father and son, continues *The Road* knowing that this journey of theirs is so bleak and despairing that it could not be endured by the mother figure, someone very close to them^{vii}.

James O. Incandenza, the founder of the Enfield Tennis Academy, the patriarch of the Incandenza family, and the creator of the 'Infinite Jest' cartridge, is one of the main characters of *Infinite Jest*, even though he committed suicide prior to the novel's beginning by placing his head in a microwave oven. James Incandenza, who also suffered from alcoholism, is supposedly the only person to ever watch 'Infinite Jest' in its entirety, since he was already insane when he viewed the cartridge. The reader, fully invested in the action of the living characters, reads on with the knowledge that the creator (Incandenza) of the main *setting*, *icon*, and even *characters* of the novel was unstable, addicted, and suicidal. Furthermore, since the cartridge shares the same name as the novel, the reader cannot help but worry about the relationship between Wallace and James Incandenza, both the creators of an 'Infinite Jest', and the relationship between the effects of viewing cartridge and the effects of reading the novel.

Since so much of *Infinite Jest* has to do with addiction, it is important to consider the link between addiction and suicide. Certainly, an addicted person is more likely to suffer from mental and/or physical anguish than a non-addict, causing them to be more likely to commit suicide. However, the mother in *The Road*, to the reader's knowledge, is not an addict, though she surely suffered some anguish as a result of the apocalypse. "As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (McCarthy 57). This statement correlates with the end of Part I of this paper: the mother commits suicide as a way of finding "hope" in an empty

environment. Hope for the mother is only attainable in the mystery that lies beyond human life. She must reach this unknown frontier if she is to find any hope. On the contrary, James Incandenza commits suicide as a last act of “hopelessness” in an attempt to escape a world so “filled” that it can no longer hold a place for hope. The mother’s suicide is with the intent of *reaching* a different place while James Incandenza’s suicide is with the intent of *escaping* his current place. While these two may seem similar, it seems that the mother’s suicide is the more positive of the two (not that a suicide can be a positive thing). The mother’s intent is to *arrive* somewhere, while James Incandenza longs to *escape* his current state. While it is a subtle difference, it is certainly worth considering. More importantly, both suicides were *active choices* by these characters.

The reader, assuming the role of the “performer”, is taunted by these suicides and is tempted to “commit suicide” as the performer. McCarthy and Wallace incorporate suicide heavily into the novels with the intent of enticing their reader to stop reading and to quit the performance of disturbance, thereby making a *completed* performance all the more worthwhile. With each presence of white space or pause to flip to the endnotes, the reader is handed opportunities to stop and end her performance, just as the mother and James Incandenza have ended their own lives. Here, the performer must consider the effects and consequences of suicide. By abandoning either of the novels, she will be forced to spend the rest of her life with the guilt of killing her performer-self. Even though the reader herself is probably not going to commit suicide, she still thinks about suicide as a means of ending one’s existence, and can hence establish her own feelings on the subject.

Both novels, in addition to being “performances of disturbance”, are also works of endurance: McCarthy’s reader must jump from one bleak/violent/horrific scene to the next, knowing that the

horror will likely continue until the end of the novel. After the first few pages the reader realizes this constant horror and must decide if she wishes to subject herself to such an emotionally trying task. Wallace's work is so long and time consuming for the reader^{viii}, that it becomes a test of mental endurance and a measurement of dedication to a particular project. Janet Maslin of the New York Times said of *The Road*: "Its fearless wisdom is more indelible than reassurance could ever be." The wisdom gained through the experience of reading *The Road*'s performance-based style is a far greater reward than if McCarthy had tried to offer some knowledge of his own. Cioffi points out that, "Wallace makes us work hard, but the performance is rewarding" (166). The performances of disturbance dictated by *Infinite Jest* and *The Road* are certainly cruel to the readers, but the lasting effects of each performance are worth the struggle.

Conclusion:

David Foster Wallace himself turned out to be a suicidal character, dying by his own hand in September 2008. Even the author, it seems, could not posit any answers on the questions of existence left at the end of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's suicide should not be taken as anything more than *Wallace's own way* of addressing these existential concerns, since he strategically structured *Infinite Jest* for the reader to come to her own conclusions and to avoid the danger of pushing his own beliefs and morals onto his audience.

In a 1991 interview with San Diego State English professor Larry McCaffery, Wallace said, "Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (Max 50)^{ix}. This quote exemplifies what separates lasting literature from other contemporary works of fiction. Literature does something for the world, and in the case of *The Road* and *Infinite Jest*, this benefit to society does not have to be a lesson learned or a moral gained, but rather an

opportunity to actively participate in a work of art. It is in these abundant *possibilities*, allowed for by the carefully constructed strategies of *Infinite Jest* and *The Road*, where the artistic genius of each novel lies: not in one *possibility* preached by the authors, but in the innumerable amount of possibilities that the human race can potentially realize.

A “performance of disturbance” successfully describes the reading experience of both of these novels, and as unpleasant as the process may have been, these performances will not soon be forgotten by the reader—further support for the critical acclaim garnered by both works. The reader steps away from these novels with both a sense of accomplishment and the weight of many intense existential questions left lingering in her consciousness. Such striking differences in the presentation of these books show that this budding subgenre of the novel is not limited to any particular aesthetic style. Instead, the effectiveness of the “performance of disturbance” approach is an extension of the author/narrator/reader relationship, the reader’s tolerance for disturbance, and the author’s affinity for shaping the novel’s aesthetics to mirror the novels content. Many of the separate narrative techniques and literary experimentations seen in *Infinite Jest* and *The Road* have been previously used by other postmodern writers, but few, if any, can compare to the brilliant craftsmanship of David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy, whose novels encompass so many relevant and fascinating overlaps between content and technique.

□ Some of these existential questions and concerns are similar to the problems of despair addressed in Søren Kierkegaard's 1849 text *The Sickness Unto Death*. While this is typically seen as a "Christian Existentialist" text, some of the dilemmas it presents are similar to the problems the characters and readers of these novels face, such as the human conception of death, tension between the "finite and the infinite", and despair in relation to and recognition of the Self. These human concerns, for the purpose of this paper, should be considered from a secular point of view.

□ Due to Cormac McCarthy's evasion of the media, interviews and direct quotes from the author are hard to find. In addition, because *The Road* was published so recently, there is not much criticism available on the novel. This paper seeks to use the criticism of *Infinite Jest* to show how *The Road* is another example of a "performance of disturbance" for the reader.

iii I want to note that I do not wish to argue the influence of the September 11 terrorist attacks on contemporary fiction in America, but 2001 should be accepted as a turning point in American culture and priority. *Infinite Jest* was written during a time when Americans were, for the most part, not filled concerned over impending attacks. The level of anxiety in 2006 and in the years prior (McCarthy's composition time) were nothing like the first few months after September 11, but the level of anxiety was certainly higher than it was in 1996. The stability of the country is also an important factor: Wallace could afford to spend nearly nine years working on *Infinite Jest* and the audience of 1996 had more time for leisure activities than in 2006 (though whether or not reading a "performance of disturbance" is a leisure activity is up for debate).

It is also worth noting the influence of technology on the American readership. While time spent on computers and the internet had begun to reduce the amount of time the average American spent reading before 1996, America's dependency on computers in 2006 was considerably greater. Yes, novels over a thousand pages long will continue to be published and novels around three hundred pages in length were published long before 1996. But one cannot help but wonder if the *impact* these novels had would have been the same if *Infinite Jest* had been published in 2006 and/or *The Road* published in 1996. I merely posit these questions of cultural impact for the readers of *this* text to ruminate upon; I do not seek to offer my own opinions.

iv iv The role of hope in *Infinite Jest* will be discussed further in Part III and in the conclusion.

v □ This is an example of one of the lingering existential dilemmas found at the novel's end. Is Gately's appearance on the beach supposed to be a finite death, or possibly his arrival in heaven? This echoes the Kierkegaard questions posited above.

vi □ To demonstrate an example of one of Wallace's endnotes, here is the text verbatim from the endnote(#8) explaining DMZ in *Infinite Jest*: "I.e.: psilocibin; Happy Patches; MDMA/Xstasy (bad news, though, X); various low-tech manipulations of the benzene-ring in the methoxy-class psychedelics, usually home-makeable; synthetic dickies like MDMA, DMA, DMMM, 2CB, para-DOT I-VI, etc.—though note this class doesn't and shouldn't include CNS-rattlers like STP, DOM, the long-infamous West-US-Coast 'Grievous Bodily Harm' (gamma hydroxybutyric acid). LSD-25 or -32, or DMZ/M.P. Enthusiasm for this stuff seems independent of neurologic type" (984).

vii □ "Them" referring to both the father and son in the novel and the reader herself. If the reader is acting out the "performance of disturbance" to its fullest, she has inserted her own mother into the mother character of the story.

viii It took this reader two months of dedicated reading. A worthwhile performance, indeed.

ix □ This further shows why Wallace's suicide should not be seen as an answer of the problems presented by *Infinite Jest*. In the same *New Yorker* article, Wallace is quoted as saying, at different points in his life "My ambitions at this point are modest and mostly surround staying alive," and that he considered suicide "a reasonable if not at this point a desirable option with respect to the whole wretched situation" (53). Wallace's lifelong struggle

with depression can obviously be attributed to his suicide decision. However, such quotes as the one listed above and “I am young and confused and obsessed with certain problems that I think right now distill the experience of being human,” show that the author was writing with the hope that his readers would understand their own existences better and be better suited to manage their lives (52).

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