

Love in the Age of Neuroscience

Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell

Late last year, over a period of several months, America and Britain were awash in reviews of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, the latest novel by Tom Wolfe. Most reviews criticized the novel's cheap and tiresome devices (excessive repetition, capitalized words, overly dramatic punctuation), stock characters (the ingénue, country bumpkins, frat boys, salacious sorority sisters, dumb jocks, politically correct professors), and, most egregiously, its preoccupation with student sex. Several reviewers were disturbed by the reference to "loamy, loamy loins" by an author in his mid-seventies—a man thoroughly out of touch with his young subjects, perhaps even jealous of their vivacious sex lives. But these critics, with rare exception, entirely overlooked the central themes of the novel. As John Derbyshire wrote in *National Review*, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a reminder of the "darker side" of recent discoveries in the human sciences, especially in neuroscience and genetics. At stake is the "metaphysic" which provides sense and direction to our lives, including the complicated encounter between men and women. The novel invites us to ask: Is love possible in the age of neuroscience? Or have we unmasked human beings only to discover that love is an illusion?

Postmodern Learning

The university, like American and Western society as a whole, was transformed by the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Grounded in an uncompromising individualism of personal choice, the sexual revolution established the legitimacy of casual, pleasure-seeking sex, independent of procreation, family, and even affection. The story of Charlotte Simmons explores the consequences of this momentous change in human behavior and association. Wolfe helps us see that there is no free lunch: In giving full rein to our biological impulses, there is a toll to pay in human longing and human happiness. As Peter Berkowitz reflects in a superb review essay in *Policy Review*:

[W]hat if men and women are different in ways that go beyond the structure of their sex organs, and so experience sexual relationships

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differently? And what if the exercise of the new freedom imparts lessons to both men and women about life, and develops habits of heart and mind, that interfere with the capacity to give oneself to and care for another . . . ? What if relationships teach how to withhold one's heart, to embrace another with one eye always fixed on the exit . . . ? And what if such lessons, habits, and teachings are more easily acquired than discarded?

Charlotte's experiences at the fictional Dupont University shed light on these questions, as the ambitious girl from backwater North Carolina is transformed by her sophisticated and salacious surroundings. Far from being the path to higher civilization and refinement of character, Dupont is a toxic impediment to the yearning for higher things, built on a dogmatic denial that higher civilization and refinement of character are even possible. Where, in a former age, the impressionable young student might have aspired to religious salvation or genuine wisdom, today's typical college student lives more for entertainment, sensation, and release, all the while demanding and largely getting immediate gratification. The individual still seeks status and recognition. But the marks of distinction are all too often inebriation, "hooking up," expertise at sarcasm ("sarc one," "sarc two," and "sarc three"), and insouciance toward matters intellectual and moral. As students learn about and fall into this new ethic, the university not only fails to stand in opposition, it accelerates the process. Dupont, that composite of Duke, Stanford, Yale, and the University of Michigan, corrupts the promising young Charlotte. For revealing this disturbing truth, the author has been reviled by those who are thereby revealed.

More importantly, the teaching of Dupont University is precisely that the soul and the moral dimension of being are illusions. In the past, the university (at its best and in principle) sought to cultivate the human soul toward completion or excellence. The modern university, as Wolfe portrays it, denies that there are truthful distinctions between higher and lower; it teaches that the soul is not real, and that perfection of the soul is thus a thing of the past.

The setting of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is truly "postmodern"—a world dominated by Nietzsche and neuroscience, a world which has jettisoned the moral imagination of the past. Not only is God dead, but so is reason, once understood as *the* characteristic that distinguishes man from the rest of nature. We now understand ourselves by studying the behavior of other animals, rather than understanding the behavior of other animals in light of human reason and human difference. We learn that it is embar-

rassing for any educated person to be considered religious or even moral. Darwin's key insight that man is just another animal, now updated with the tools and discoveries of modern biology, has liberated us from two Kingdoms of Darkness. Post-faith and post-reason, we can now turn to neuroscience to understand the human condition, a path that leads to or simply ratifies the governing nihilism of the students, both the ambitious and apathetic alike.

Man, Unsouled

The novel begins with a brief description of the experiment that won fictional Dr. Victor Ransome Starling the Nobel Prize. In his experiment, Dr. Starling removed the amygdala from thirty of sixty cats. The "amygdalectomized cats" went into "a state of sexual arousal hypermanic in the extreme." The cats mounted one another, forming a daisy chain "as long as ten feet." (If this summons up images of a fraternity party, you've caught Wolfe's drift.) When the thirty other (non-amygdalectomized) cats were released from their cages after observing the sex-crazed felines for several weeks, they likewise entered a "state of sexual arousal hypermanic in the extreme." This was Starling's "aha" moment, when he discovered "the existence—indeed, pervasiveness—of 'cultural para-stimuli.'" Cats with healthy brains would act deranged if surrounded long enough by truly deranged cats. This discovery "radically altered the understanding of animal and human behavior," showing us that "a strong social or 'cultural' atmosphere, even as abnormal as this one, could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of perfectly normal, healthy animals."

In time, we learn from Dr. Starling how neuroscience explains the condition and interaction of all organisms, humans included. The neuroscientists call it "allometry," as one precocious and self-consciously cute Southern student explains:

[A]llometry is the study of the relative growth of a part of an organism in relation to the growth of the whole. It's a really... *bangin'* way to describe morphological evolution... Allometry allowed Mr. [E.O.] Wilson to like... do the submarine... He went down... *under* the anecdotal level, the surface level... and found mathematically corroborant first principles... and that way he doesn't... *have* to say an ant is like a human being or that a... baboon is like a sea slug—because he can show that behavior at *that* evolutionary level is demonstrably... the same as behavior at *this* evolutionary level.

In other words, the interaction of human beings is the same as the interac-

tion of sea slugs (and vice versa). The lesson is radically democratic and egalitarian—and thus altogether politically correct.

In an earlier lecture on José Delgado's *Physical Control of the Mind*, the professor states that there is no free will, purpose, or intention in human action. To illustrate the point, Dr. Starling shows a film of a bullfight. The bull, having been stabbed with several picadors, is enraged and charges the matador. "In this case," says the professor, "Delgado has implanted an electrode in the bull's caudate nucleus, which is just under the amygdala. As you can see, the bull is charging full tilt. When it came close enough to make it interesting, Delgado pressed a button on the little radio transmitter in his hand, and the bull's aggressiveness vanished." What do we learn from this famous experiment? According to the professor:

The instantaneous lesson was that an emotion as powerful as a raging urge to kill can be turned off . . . by stimulating a particular area of the brain. The more profound lesson was that not only emotions but also *purpose* and *intentions* are *physical* matters. They can be turned on and off physically. . . . The philosophical implications were enormous, and he recognized that right away. His position was that the human mind, as we conceive it—and I think all of us do—bears very little resemblance to reality. We think of the mind—we can't help but think of the mind—as something from a command center in the brain, which we can call the 'self,' and that this self has free will. Delgado called that a 'useful illusion.' . . . He called the self nothing more than a 'transient composite of materials from the environment.' . . . After Delgado, neuroscientists began to put the words *self* and *mind* and, of course, *soul* in quotation marks. . . . We'll show you the real thing, the material of your own brains and central nervous systems, the autonomous circuits that operate outside of what you conceive as 'consciousness,' the behavioral responses you couldn't change even if you trained for a lifetime.

The task of neuroscience is to understand human behavior as it really is, without illusions. This new way of seeing the mechanisms of man confirms that the soul does not really exist and that our behavior is simply a physical reaction to stimuli over which we have no control. Human beings *think* they have free will and that their choices have meaning. But this is one of the comforting myths of the past that neuroscience is proud to overcome. As Dr. Starling explains, this time with a thought experiment borrowed from a fellow neuroscientist:

Let's say you pick up a rock and you throw it. And in mid-flight you give that rock consciousness and a rational mind. That little rock will

think it has free will and will give you a highly rational account of why it has decided to take the route it's taking.

In other words: Human beings are simply rocks. Neuroscientists are rocks who know they are rocks. Human beings are bodies in motion, bodies that falsely believe they have free will. But neuroscience, armed with tools like fMRIs and PET scans, promises a true description of human behavior, a final lifting of man's religious and moral illusions. And that life without illusions may amount to nothing more than the joyless quest for joy or the soulless interactions of the soulless. The consequences of this shift in human self-understanding are enormous.

Backwater Nietzsche

This dogma of soullessness is the sub-text for the entire novel. The administration, faculty, students, athletes, and fans are so immersed in this postmodern world that they cannot imagine anything else. Even before arriving on campus, while still in the rural backwater of Sparta, North Carolina, Charlotte Simmons has been tutored in the doctrines of Nietzsche. Miss Pennington, Charlotte's frumpy spinster mentor at Allegheny High, directs Charlotte to the German philosopher as a means of understanding and then dismissing the resentful attitude of her mediocre high school classmates, who are trying to drag her down like Nietzsche's tarantulas. Most of the students aren't "even worth the trouble it takes to ignore them," Miss Pennington says, but Charlotte is special. To see a student accomplish something that she would not have otherwise accomplished, to help "create a new person"—that alone justifies all the frustration of forty years in the classroom. You are Charlotte Simmons: the higher (wo)man who will overcome petty drudgery and achieve greatness. Apparently, even in remote areas of the country, the recognized authority is not the Bible, not reason, not the principles of civil and religious liberty. It is Nietzsche and the will to power.

A few hours after Miss Pennington has assured Charlotte of her superiority, Charlotte's family retires to its poverty-stricken (by American standards) home. On television is a news report recounting the Dupont commencement speech delivered that day by the governor of California, who is also a leading GOP candidate for the presidency. The theme of the governor's speech is a democratized version of Nietzsche's call for "re-valuation." As the governor says: "Over the next hundred years, new sets of values will inevitably replace the skeletons of the old, and it will be up to you to define them." Charlotte Simmons is elated. She is not only a

future leader but also a maker of that future. The governor is not calling for the discovery or rediscovery of old or eternal principles; he is saying that the next generation must replace old values and invent new ones. The past, like God, is dead. The future is unlimited. And in God's absence, the leaders of men must become the makers of values. The will to power of the future world aristocracy is the goal of this elite education.

Charlotte and her parents are both excited by what lies ahead, though apparently for different reasons. Charlotte's parents, especially her mother, are the only people in the novel who believe in the Bible and traditional morality. They are not embarrassed to be considered moral or even religious. They are oblivious to the fact that they are about to send their child, their "good, good girl," to a place where morality and the soul are regarded as merely embarrassing reflections of an unsophisticated past. Charlotte's parents believe that education is the key to a better life. They know that the future leaders, the ruling class, will emerge from the modern university. But like so many parents and alumni, they have no idea that what the university teaches is postmodern, post-moral, post-religious. They do not understand that the education offered by Dupont requires a complete break with the traditions of family and nation. They like how the governor sounds, but they do not grasp what he means. But Charlotte, unlike her parents, brings elements of the postmodern dogma with her to Dupont University from the beginning. Once there, she embraces and comes to understand this dogma of soullessness more profoundly. She becomes more sophisticated and, so it seems, more miserable.

Lonely Recognition

If there is one persistent theme in the novel, it is Charlotte's loneliness. Whether in high school, at Dupont, or returning home for Christmas break, Charlotte is alone. She is sometimes overwhelmed by this condition. She believes no one is more lonely than she is, and sometimes feels like she doesn't even exist. Even at the end of the novel, when virtually everyone who is anyone at Dupont is looking at her during the basketball game in the Buster Bowl, "the uneasy feeling, the sometimes desperate feeling" reemerges. This is no mere literary device. The loneliness is a consequence of the postmodern worldview: God is dead, the soul and free will are illusions, and each of us is alone. Contrast this dogma with the belief expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his inaugural homily: "Those who believe are never alone—neither in life nor in death." The new pope believes that the faithful are never lonely. The Nietzscheans and neuro-

scientists know that this faith is just a useful illusion. Charlotte, unlike her mother, is not religious. She is desperately alone and that desperation derives from believing that the religious and moral signposts of the past cannot guide or comfort her.

In the Biblical and Aristotelian universes, there are rules that guide the relation of man to man. The Bible teaches that you should love and serve God, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Aristotle teaches that every human being has a natural desire for happiness coupled with a natural lack of self-sufficiency, which results in natural partnerships (family, friends, fellow-citizens). These partnerships, when guided by moral and intellectual virtue, constitute true human happiness. But if the soul and free will are illusions, then friendship and love are illusions as well, or mere words based on illusions.

“Relationship,” on the other hand, is a more accurate term for the interaction between human beings (or any other natural organisms). Relationships can be understood according to the principles of neuroscience. Remember allometry: “the study of the relative growth of a part of an organism in relation to the growth of the whole.” The relationships between human beings simply involve the growth (or evolution) of a separate and alone part in relation to other parts of a whole. This interaction, at least among humans, results in a competition guided by nothing beyond the desire for recognition, which seemingly overcomes the loneliness of the mere individual. The competition for recognition at Dupont manifests itself as an interminable battle of wits and sexual conquests. Though more playful than what we find in Hobbes, this war for recognition resembles his war of all against all. It also resembles Hegel’s tragic interplay between master and slave, in that everyone desires what they know no one can give; what one gets in recognition can never really satisfy one’s insatiable desire for it.

This desire for recognition, shaped by the interplay between Charlotte’s desperate loneliness and desperate desire to belong, is central to the novel. Charlotte is brilliant (a perfect score on the SAT), beautiful (“I bet you get *really tired* of people telling you you look like Britney Spears”), and athletic (legs sculpted by running cross-country in the hills of North Carolina). The most striking thing about Charlotte Simmons, however, is that she wants to be a star. She wants to be recognized. She is animated by *amour propre*. Her main concern seems to be what she thinks other people are thinking of her. While she says she wants the life of the mind, what she really wants is to be recognized as the best at Dupont. She not only wants to be number one, she wants everyone to recognize her as number one. As

Harvey Mansfield observes, “Charlotte . . . wants to be unique . . . but she doesn’t know whether that means being unique on her own or impressing others with her uniqueness.”

Charlotte has tools, especially intelligence and beauty, which make it easy for her to win this battle for recognition. But Charlotte also has baggage—her past—that makes it difficult for her to win recognition on her own terms. When she first arrives at Dupont, Charlotte is ashamed of her background. She is small-town, backwoods, and terribly poor, especially when compared to her Groton-educated, wealthy roommate Beverly. But Charlotte is smart and cute. She manages to attract the attention of many young men, including Jojo Johanssen, the “great white hope” on the national champion basketball team; Hoyt Thorpe, the best-looking and coolest guy in the most exclusive fraternity on campus; and Adam Gellin, the brilliant, if nerdy, journalist and would-be master of the universe.

Charlotte loves being the center of attention, whether it is at her high school graduation, or holding Hoyt’s hand at a Saint Ray fraternity party, or sitting with Jojo in the student snack bar, or showing off in class with a brilliant answer to a professor’s question. She is never happier than when she sees herself being recognized by others. The trick is getting others to recognize you rather than being one of those recognizing someone else. It is rule or be ruled. It is a power game. If you are not on top, you are on the bottom.

As Hoyt’s very hot date at the fraternity formal, Charlotte wins recognition. Adam showers her with praise, just like Miss Pennington did. Eventually, she is recognized by the most powerful figures at Dupont—the basketball coach, the college administration, and others—as the girlfriend who turned Jojo around. As the story ends, the little girl from Sparta is known and recognized by everyone: “Charlotte loved that, because it said not one but three things. It said, ‘You’re Jojo Johanssen’s girlfriend, you’ve got him so spellbound he’ll do whatever you say—and everybody knows that! Everybody knows who you are!’” But even though Charlotte has attained universal recognition—she *belongs*—she is still not happy:

Why, then, the uneasy feeling, the sometimes desperate feeling, that came over her now . . . and almost every day? If only she had someone to talk to about it . . . to assure her that she was a very lucky girl, after all. . . . But there was—when she thought it through—only Jojo. Aside from him, she was as alone as on the day she arrived at Dupont. . . . She sure hoped not too many had gotten a real eyeful of the glum, distracted, thoroughly uninterested look on her face. She clicked on

the appropriate face *just like that*. Since the crowd had now launched into rhythmic clapping to the one-beat cadence of *Go go Jojo*, Charlotte figured she had better join in, too. So she worked on keeping the joyous smile spread across her face and clapping with some semblance of enthusiasm.

Even at the moment when Charlotte has attained what she seeks, she is still miserable. Despite her victory in the battle for recognition, she is still alone in the world, struggling to maintain the appearance of happiness for her crowd of onlookers.

Bodies in Motion

What is striking about Charlotte's relationship with the three young men in the novel, Hoyt, Jojo, and Adam, is that she seems to have contempt for the two who treat her well, yet respects and desires the one who treats her badly and tosses her aside. While Charlotte has been a good influence on Jojo—he is now a more serious student, trying to live a life of Socratic virtue (even though he still wants to escape a cheating scandal with impunity)—Charlotte cannot respect him. In part, this is because Jojo is not the brightest bulb in the room; ultimately, she can, and does, rule him. On the other hand, Charlotte would like to love Adam but she cannot. He is a geek, a nerd, and everyone can see it. She is grateful to Adam for his kindness during her depression, but in the end he is just not manly enough.

The real desire of her life is Hoyt. Hoyt is every girl's dream: handsome, cool, cocky, and attentive in all the little ways that tingle the imagination of the star-struck female. Hoyt rules. He is the real man in the novel, a take-charge guy. Saint Ray fraternity boys measure their worth by whether Hoyt laughs at their witticisms. Hoyt rules without even appearing to rule. That's part of his coolness. Hoyt is a man who, as Tom Sawyer did for Becky Thatcher, takes a beating for Charlotte. The beating is not unrequited, however.

Charlotte agrees to accompany Hoyt to the Saint Ray formal in Washington, D.C. The interminable description of this affair culminates in drunken, unerotic sex between Hoyt and Charlotte. When it is over, Hoyt tosses her aside with a simple "You okay?" This action is typical of Hoyt. He is well known in the Saint Ray house as the champion fornicator. He is a man who fornicates with women whose names he does not know, so his treatment of Charlotte is consistent with his treatment of other women. It is his usual body-in-motion. In minutes, Charlotte goes from the elation of being recognized as the beautiful girl with the coolest guy at the formal

to the realization that she has been used and tossed aside like a plastic champagne glass, never again of any interest to Hoyt. What Charlotte wanted was to have Hoyt

eager for her, like an animal. That was what made her . . . *thrill* inside. He was a beautiful animal at the peak of his rude animal health. And yet she could always control him. “All the way”—that was exactly what she wanted him to want! To know that this beautiful animal named Hoyt—the coolest and sleekest and most beautiful animal, the elite animal of the elite Dupont—to know that she had reduced his world to a single obsessive thing—wanting *Charlotte Simmons*! That was what *she* wanted! He was the animal, and she was the hunted. He was in love with her. That she knew. He lusted for her. That she knew. To see his love and his lust and his very mind, for that matter, turned white-hot and forged into a single super-concentrated alloy—whose shape *she* would determine—that was all she wanted!

But once the hunter makes his kill, Charlotte’s elation turns to disappointment and hatred.

But why, exactly, is Charlotte disappointed? It is not that she has lost her virginity. While she doesn’t want her mother to know what happened, Charlotte doesn’t consider losing her virginity a big deal. From the beginning of the novel, she has been embarrassed that she is a virgin. So what causes Charlotte to go into a deep depression that lasts for weeks (and hundreds of pages)? What Charlotte hates is not the fact that Hoyt had sex with her, but the fact that Hoyt deceived her—and that she naïvely deceived herself—into believing that their affair was more than just sex. To think that Hoyt might really love her is to live under the illusion that there might be the possibility of an attachment that was more than a temporary relationship between bodies (or orgasmic organisms) interacting with one another. To think that Hoyt is capable of love is to believe that there might be relationships that are potentially permanent rather than simply episodic moments in which bodies hook up and then move on. To believe in love is to believe in the existence of the soul. Without the soul, there can be no love between bodies in motion. After she has been discarded by Hoyt, what really makes her angry is that she was the fool of her own deception:

She took a self-destructive, self-hating pleasure in wrapping her body about such a filthy, sordid memorial, a shrine not only to a little fool but also to a little fool’s illusion that men fall in love. Men didn’t *fall* in love, which would be surrender. They *made* love—made being an active

transitive verb that rhymed with *raid*, the marauder out for blood, *laid* the raider who got laid, *daid* as a bug I got my killing ov'ere' at the Hyatt Ambassador *Ho*-tel in Washington, D.C.

Charlotte learns that in the postmodern world there is no more meaning in a sexual encounter than there is in any other relationship between organisms. Sexual interaction between two human beings has as much meaning as two wild animals humping in the woods. While the temporary hook-up overcomes the desperate feeling of loneliness, the sense of belonging is merely temporary—just two bodies in close proximity. If the soul is an illusion, then there can be no souls yearning for completion. Love is dead. There is only rule or be ruled, use or be used. This realization depresses Charlotte greatly.

But in the end, an enlightened Charlotte absolves Hoyt of all responsibility, because he was just doing what bodies in motion do. She now sees more clearly and comprehensively what it means to know that the soul does not exist. Her classroom learning now meshes with her extracurricular education. All relationships are allometry, my dear, nothing more, nothing less. Reminding her of the experience of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, this dark knowledge virtually knocks her out. Yet when she emerges from her depression, she is stronger. She will never be a fool for love again. She will treat everyone, including her roommate, accordingly.

In the end, this is the most difficult lesson for Charlotte to learn: Nothing can overcome the loneliness at the center of the heart of darkness. Charlotte undergoes a metamorphosis. She learns to see the existential consequences of neuroscience: If the soul and free will are illusions, then there can be no relationship between man and woman (between organisms) that is sacred. Relationships, human and otherwise, are simply the interaction, in various cultures, of "the organism's constant probing in the process of natural selection." Every relationship is based on force or fraud. Every relationship is the result of the willful overcoming of one's solitary state, imposing one's desire upon another or else being imposed upon. Charlotte rules Jojo in the end, but it brings no satisfaction. She admires Hoyt because he embodies the unbridled self-assertion that is the true spirit of re-valuation. Charlotte's desire for greatness culminates in the honest appraisal that greatness itself is an illusion. Rather than offering a way out or suggesting an alternative, Dupont University is simply the dogmatic reflection of the postmodern human condition, without illusion. As her depression ends, Charlotte arises from the ashes, emerging more powerful than before. To paraphrase Nietzsche, that which has not

destroyed her has only made her stronger. Stronger, yet not happy, knowing that happiness itself is not really real.

The Soul and the City

I Am Charlotte Simmons is an indictment of the primary centers of higher education in America today. These institutions do not well serve the real longings and earnest ambitions of the young people who flock to them, at great cost and with great expectations, year after year. Instead of pointing students to a world that is higher than where they came from, the university reinforces and expands the nihilism and political correctness that they are taught in public schools, imbibe from popular culture, and bring with them as routine common sense when they arrive on campus. Of course, these two ideologies are largely incompatible: nihilism celebrates strength (or apathy) without illusion; political correctness promulgates illusions in the name of sensitivity. But both ideologies are the result of collapsing and rejecting any distinction between higher and lower, between nobility and ignobility, between the higher learning and the flight from reason.

This tragic miseducation of the young has two kinds of consequences. The first is personal. As the new pope declared to the conclave that elected him, “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” This sounds very much like the world of Dupont. But of more immediate importance is what the new pope added: People who live in a world “emptied of God” suffer from “leaden loneliness and inner boredom.” Given the vacuum resulting from the evaporation of all that is higher, it is hardly surprising that Charlotte feels so alone, that she is desperately driven to “hook-up” with others in whatever way she can, and that she inevitably finds the result of doing so to be wholly unsatisfying. Compared to the inhabitants and products of Dupont University, the oft-maligned other-directed “gray flannel suits” of the 1950s were deep. In their case, there was at least a genuine self that was presumably denied and repressed.

The second cost imposed by the teachings of Dupont is political. The American experiment depends on a self-governing citizenry. This self-governance is a form of moderation in which the individual restrains personal desire and ambition in light of something higher than himself. This is as true of citizens as it is of leaders. Such voluntary restraint—a function of a soul that respects, loves, and admires something higher—is absent at Dupont, where everyone wishes to be the master of all. The indi-

vidual in the world described by Wolfe is limited only to the degree his will is thwarted by another equally unrestrained “playa.” There is nothing moral about this interaction, for there is nothing beyond individual will by which one’s actions may be judged. The metamorphosis of Charlotte takes her beyond all virtue; it represents a paradigmatic instance of adaptation in the interests of survival in a changing environment. By constituting the environment requiring such adaptation, and by requiring the abandonment of self-governance (while making it impossible), Dupont has not only harmed the young student, it has betrayed the American Republic.

If Wolfe’s description of Dupont accurately portrays the character of our elite universities, then the dissolution of the American way of life is nearly complete. Our ancient faith is no longer a vibrant and effective part of the education of future leaders. Our ability to perpetuate our culture and our constitutional soul will wither alongside our belief in the soul itself. As Lincoln understood, once it loses its ancient faith, the Republic cannot long endure. Perhaps our situation is not as dire as the metamorphosis of Charlotte Simmons makes it seem. But if the portrayal is right, only time will tell whether Wolfe’s diagnosis of our condition can help effect a recovery.