

Death Anxiety in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

Death is everywhere in *White Noise*. The title itself gives the reader clear idea that the novel presented something unpleasant, white is associated with and noise is something irritating. Throughout the novel the fear of death surrounded the main character. The fear of death lies at the centre of *White Noise*. Everything in the novel from the Hitler to the supermarket, from the air borne toxic event to the white noise of the novels title circle back to human beings' primal, deep seated fear of dying. DeLillo's novel details how modern life attempts to push this fear out of sight, and yet, as in the character of Jack Gladney, the fear continues to resurface and fills with dread.

i. Introduction

Don DeLillo's works have the attention from the world of American football players to the role of media and society and to explore the popular culture on the psychology of an individual. His *White Noise* (1985) is a complex and often humorous study of nuclear age of America from its new family structure to its new academic disciplines. He was influenced the writing of Walt Whitman, James T. Farrell Studs Lonigan, William Faulkner, Earnest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Herman Malville.

Although Don DeLillo began publishing fiction in the 1960's, and his first novel appeared in 1971, he was not in the list of major contemporary American authors until *White Noise* appeared in 1985, and it was an unexpected success, selling 300,000 copies. *White noise* was his most accessible book, less complexly structured, more traditional and realistic in his portrayal of

his American life than his other works. Dealing with many different issues from technology, ecological disaster and satirizing institutions from the Modish University to the contemporary family. He received National Book Award for *White Noise* (1985), Irish Times.

ii. Discussion

Death is a part of *White Noise* that seeps in with the sounds from the nearby highway: “traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of the dream” (WN4). Noises of activity and technology bring death to mind, the sound of the household machine, trash compacter, dish washer or refrigerator. The television and radios are always on in the house, sounds coming from various rooms. Ironically, the only place of silence in the entire book, a place that draws Jack in baffled and meditative nostalgia, is the old burying ground. It is place left out of modern culture, on the fringe of blacksmith, the names on the tombstones obliterated, the friends and relatives of the deceased themselves long gone. It is odd that Jack, with his fear of death, would visit such a place, let alone find some ambiguous sense of peace there.

DeLillo was inspired by Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973). DeLillo admits as an influence in his fiction, argues that the fear of death and its subsequent repression, the societal failure to accept and normalize death, the major force in the workings and development of our culture. DeLillo's post modern presentation of death and that described by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. For Baudrillard and DeLillo, “death is ultimate and signified the single natural event which ultimately cannot be subsumed into simulacra, models, and code”. According to DeLillo, individual has an intimate relationship with death.

Murray says that everyone afraid of death. Jack asks why normal people do not fear death as much as he does. Murray says everyone fears death just as much. The only difference is that Jack has never properly learned how to repress things like a normal person. Murray says “nothing is stronger than death. Do you believe the only people who fear death are those who are afraid of life?”(WN327). The people once know about their death, it is impossible to lead a satisfying life. This is the idea of Gladney. The two of them stroll through the supermarket. Murray waves at the brightly colored products and tells Jack that consumerism is all just a big

distraction from the death. It is all designed to keep people's minds occupied with something other than the death.

The best example for death- anxiety, Gladney took Heinrich and his friend Orest Mercator, he never fears about death. Heinrich says his father that Orest, the nineteen-year-old who wants to set the record for sitting in the room full of snakes. Gladney asks him, "do you think what happens after the frangs close on your wrist? Do you think about dying? Dose death scares you?"(WN305). Orest answers that he never gets such kind of fear. He says that, "everybody who's dead is now dead" (WN306). Orest further says that he likes only positive and without snakes only he feels negative.

Technology is one of the reasons behind the fear of death. In the second part of the novel arise a question that due to the people unfaith in god and people believed in science and technology. Technology here is always double-edged, the poison and the antidote, the disease and the cure. For Gladney and Babette, with their exaggerated fears of death, technology is the only way they can avoid both death and their debilitating phobia. Technology distances Gladney from death and their life. The scientific method upon which the technology is based, begins with a fundamental assumption of objectivity. Observation at a distance is necessary to form legitimate conclusions, to construct knowledge of an "invisible....impressive...disquieting" (WN55) truth. Unlike human beings, however, death is near the sum total of its data. Dylar fails to fulfill its promise because death is larger, more accommodating, than any technology which can be created. If death is defeated on one front, it simply expands and fundamentally redefines itself. It is akin to the nebulous mass growing within Gladney. It has no definite form but death has presence in the novel as a sound, *White Noise*.

The idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. The position connecting death and plot, especially the solution of the plot and the end structure of narrative, is repeated by narrative theorists and philosophers throughout the twentieth century.

All of the tradition elements are in place. Gladney has found out about Babette meeting a man in the motel for sex in exchange for obtaining Dylar. The modern people attitude towards death is seen and they think that through technology they get the remedy for everything. But death fate will not be defeated. There is a surprise visit from Gladney's father-in-law, Vernon

Dickey. When Gladney meets his father-in-law he thinks the angel of the death come to take him like that. Later he realizes that it was father-in-law.

Death anxiety brings many causes to the narrator and his family life. The modern world is like that it should be surrounded with chaos as it is seen in the supermarket. *White Noise* is postmodern fiction; it brings the reader the atmosphere of fragments. There is no central to hold everything.

Toward the end of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Jack and Murray go for an extended walk during which they discuss strategies for getting around death. Jack, professor of 'Hitler studies', is terrified of death; Murray, professor of popular culture, speaks confidently about the answers and alternative to Jack's fear. Murray outlines three mechanisms for coping with the fact of human death; faith in technology, faith in afterlife and murder.

The first two are evasive easily conflated, and involve placing the responsibility for death beyond oneself, in something over which one has no control. The third involves taking life and death into one's own hands, undermining both fate and chance through the sheer force of human will. In all three cases, the helplessness of the human when confronted with vulnerability and death is overcome, however artificially.

iii. Conclusion

DeLillo has to use fancy language sometimes because he is getting at some really out-there concepts. The thing is, though, he tries his very darndest to bring as along as readers. He want us to look at everyday things we take for granted, like the sounds of TV commercials and traffic noises, and look at them in a new way. He also wants us to come more critical of our world without alienating us, and this requires him to strike a very careful balance between difficult language and readable writing.

Don DeLillo, the universally acknowledged and applauded writer excels in his language, style and narrative tools. His works are no doubt a treasure hunt for the researchers.

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