

## 'WHITE FEAR' IN DON DELILLO'S "WHITE NOISE"

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*Abstract: Don DeLillo's "White Noise" bears the characteristics of postmodern realistic prose. It is a faithful depiction of issues like academic life, consumerism, media, technology, pollution, chemical poisoning, family relationships during the nineteen eighties/ nineties, concerns which undoubtedly are our own, too. The red thread of the novel, though, is the protagonists' obsession with death, their hopeless struggle with an organic Fear of Death. This article tries to show that DeLillo managed to tackle tragic events, anxieties, and profoundly disturbing apprehensions with subtle irony and humor.*

*Keywords: death, toxic event, evacuation, Hitler studies, sunset*

Published in 1985, DeLillo's eighth novel "White Noise", winner of the National Book Award for Fiction explores several themes that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century: rampant consumerism, the growing influence of the media, intellectualism and academia, dark conspiracies, family issues. The real backbone of the novel, on the other hand, is Fear, more specifically the Fear of Death the two protagonists are obsessed with.

"White Noise", a postmodern realistic novel was not meant to be an 'apocalyptic' piece of writing. *I never set out to write an apocalyptic novel. It's about death on the individual level, (De Pietro 2005)* DeLillo confessed. Nevertheless, an astute reader is bound to detect postmodern – certainly contemporary, too – concerns, such as the toxic influence of tabloids, the unpredictable (often dangerous) technological progress, the addictive buying and consuming of unhealthy food, the fragmentariness and estrangement when it comes to family relationships, the hollowness of academic life, the questioning of knowledge. In capturing crucial aspects of modern and postmodern life, the author predicted major tragic events like the toxic spill in India or the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl or even prophesied the 9/11 despicable terrorist attack. One can even detect a 'déjà vu' in the evacuation scenes followed by the quarantining of hundreds of people exposed to a mysterious toxic leak: *We are quarantined. We are like lepers in medieval times. They won't let us out of here. They leave food at the foot of the stairs and tiptoe away to safety. This is the most terrifying time of our lives. (DeLillo 2022, 189)* Very recently we have experienced this dread globally. The lethal, *the shapeless growing thing, a dark black breathing thing of smoke (DeLillo 2022, 129)* makes me think of the immense cloud of lethal viruses which took hold of the whole world in 2020.

As bleak as the plot of "White Noise" may sound, it has to be underlined that Don DeLillo's intention was not to depict a gloomy world inhabited by hopeless people. Conversely, the author infused tragedy, despair, apprehension with humor, irony, and sarcasm, the result being a dark comedy. *Maybe the fact that death permeates the book made me retreat into comedy, (De Pietro 2005)* he stated when asked about the novel. His book proves to be mainly about prosaic events, about daily worries and well-

guarded mysteries, but also about the Fear of Death humans are tortured by. Even though the end of the book does not give an answer or a cure, it does not leave a bitter taste either.

This article tries to demonstrate that, although the topics tackled are serious issues modern and postmodern society is facing, the ironic, at times humorous overtones increase the interest and attention of the reader.

Jack Gladney and his fifth wife, Babette and four of their respective children from previous marriages, Heinrich, Steffi, Denise and Wilder live in the provincial town of Blacksmith. Jack is chairman of Hitler Studies/ Studies in Advanced Nazism at the College-on-the Hill, Babette teaches posture to elder people. Heinrich, who is fourteen, is a moody, introspective teen. He exchanges chess moves with an imprisoned mass killer, and is knowledgeable in various domains. Denise, an eleven-year-old girl, constantly spies on her mother and protests against her unhealthy habits. Steffi is a very sensitive, shy, slightly younger girl, and Wilder is the youngest child of the family and a constant reassurance for everyone. Interestingly or humorously, the children in this book are more competent, more watchful than their parents. They are stronger emotionally and attuned to the natural world. In a way, they also function as a warning signal for their elders.

Jack and Babette are prisoners of postmodern anxieties, their Fear of Death gradually taking control of their lives. The plot gains momentum when a toxic event turns their lives upside down, and brings their fear to a climax. At a close look, the whole novel centers around the greatest fear of all: the Fear of Death. Both Jack and his wife are increasingly tortured by the dread of dying, although for a while they are not aware of one another's terror of death. Jack finds out that Babette is taking Dylar, an experimental medicine meant to annihilate the fear of death, and that she has had an affair with Willie Mink, aka Mr. Gray, the inventor of the treatment. Jack decides to confront Mr. Gray and shoot him, but fails. The final scene, Wilder crossing the highway on his tricycle, does not bring healing from fear but reconciliation nonetheless.

In making Jack Gladney the protagonist and the narrative voice, DeLillo brings into focus both academic and family issues. Jack Gladney, the founder of Hitler studies in the States wears an academic gown and dark glasses, and 'improves' the sound of his name by turning it into J.A.K. Gladney. Ironically, Jack confesses: *I am the false character that follows the name around.* (DeLillo 2022, 20) He also states that he can't teach his classes on Hitler if he does not wear his dark glasses which, in fact, ruin his eyes. Although he is the head of Hitler Studies, Jack does not speak a word of German. All his efforts to learn the language have been in vain. As host of an international Hitler Conference, he limits his German vocabulary to a few introductory words. Besides studying Hitler, students at the College-on-the-Hill take a course in car accidents given by a new member of the Blacksmith academia, Murray J. Siskind. Murray, a visiting lecturer at the college, *a stoop-shouldered man with little round glasses and an Amish beard...seemed embarrassed by what he'd gleaned so far from his colleagues in popular culture.* (DeLillo 2022, 11) Winnie Richards, the young research neuro-chemist, who figures out the composition of the Dylar pill, is exceedingly shy, blushes a lot and avoids

contact with students or colleagues: *She was a tall gawky furtive woman who blushed when someone said something funny. (DeLillo 2022, 211)* There is a lot of irony and numerous humorous remarks on university life and teachers. Babette herself, a housewife, teaches old people ‘correct posture’ – of all subjects one could teach seniors - at the Congregational Church. She patiently – and somehow belatedly - explains and demonstrates the way in which they should walk, lie and sit.

The supermarket in Don DeLillo’s novel is a special place, where Jack and Murray frequently meet, where Murray meets Babette and admires her without restraint, but is also *full of elderly people who look lost among the dazzling hedgerows. (DeLillo 2022, 193)* It is also the place where Wilder grabs colorful, glittering items which excite his sensory system. The author’s bitter irony is directed towards greedy customers: *There were two new developments in the supermarket, a butcher’s corner and a bakery, and the oven aroma of bread and cake combined with the sight of a bloodstained man pounding at strips of living veal was pretty exciting for us all. (DeLillo 2022, 193)* It is impossible to ignore the sarcasm in these lines. When visiting the Mid-Village Mall in Iron City, Jack is suddenly and absurdly seized by a frenzy of shopping, buying and buying things in spite of himself. The whole family is mesmerized by the glitter of goods, the live Muzak, as if in a trance. While they are vital locations for the modern consumer, supermarkets are sad, impersonal, crowded places governed by contrasts and metallic voices bellowing from loudspeakers.

The ‘White Noise’ of the supermarkets is echoed and intensified by the hubbub of television and the loud ‘sounds’ of the bold print tabloids which promote sensationalist journalism. Babette entertains blind Mr. Treadwell by reading articles from the yellow press. She also frequently reads out loud advertisements, even obituaries. When asked about his opinion on media, Murray says: *Waves and radiation...I’ve come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. (DeLillo 2022, 60).* Characters in “White Noise” very much rely on the news broadcast on the radio or television. Ironically, every catastrophe on TV makes the watchers wish for more disasters, more terrifying events. Erupting volcanoes, mud slides, earthquakes, plane crashes, calamity and death – accompanied by Chinese food - bring the family together on Friday nights. The human brain seems to need the repetitions, the commercials, the hidden messages, the mantras. In the end, television either fills the watchers with rage or it scares them to death. Jack even has an almost mystic experience when he unexpectedly sees his wife on the fluorescent screen. In a moment of utter confusion, the black and white figure of Babette seems to come from the past, from beyond death. Virtual reality encroaches upon and distorts Jack Gladney’s reality.

The endless uncertainty and anxiety of the postmodern world is best expressed in the protagonists’ Fear of Death. In “White Noise” the reader can easily detect the author’s increasing focusing on death, dying and the fear of dying. *Who will die first? (DeLillo 2022, 35)* reoccurs obsessively all through the novel, apparently without any reason. Gradually, terrible signs of menace, disaster and death shift to the center of the discourse. News of catastrophes, toxic spillages, violent deaths aggravate Babette and Jack’s dread. When he wakes with a myoclonic jerk, Jack meditates on dying: *Is this what*

*it's like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed? (DeLillo 2022, 21)* Another time, Jack wakes up *in the grip of a death sweat (DeLillo 2022, 56)* at 3.51 in the morning, and asks himself if death is odd-numbered. When they meet at the supermarket, Murray tells Babette that Tibetans believe that there is a transitional state between death and rebirth, and that death is basically a waiting period. Mr. Treadwell's sister, Gladys passes away because of *lingering dread, (DeLillo 2022, 117)* after having spent many hours lost in the mall, a college teacher loses his life during the spring break. The Blacksmith grade school has to be evacuated after students complain of headaches, eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. One of the workers inspecting the area, although masked and wearing a Mylex suit and boots, simply collapses and dies.

This unfortunate incident is a preamble to the major occurrence in the novel, 'the airborne toxic event', the fulcrum of Don DeLillo's book. The toxic chemical, Nyodene Derivative – a fictional substance – is said to cause skin irritation, sweaty palms, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, convulsions, coma, miscarriage, but it also brings about, strangely, a feeling of 'déjà vu'. In fact, no one knows for sure what the spillage of the mysterious stuff, *the black billowing cloud, (DeLillo 2022, 135)* causes or what it consists of. Ironically, though, Jack Gladney believes that the dark cloud *had released a spirit of imagination. People spun tales, others listened spellbound. (DeLillo 2022, 184)* There is also an unexpected comparison of the chemical mass with a death ship in a North legend accompanied by armored, winged creatures. The lesson Heinrich, the wise fourteen-year-old, wants people to learn from this mishap is that we all should get to know our chemicals!

After being exposed to the poisonous substance for more than two minutes, Jack feels that he harbors death in his body, and when he asks a SIMUVAC (Simulated Evacuation) worker whether he will soon die, the latter gives him an evasive answer: *Not in so many words. (DeLillo 2022, 161)*. Even the evacuation and quarantining are not what the evacuees believe it to be, it is only a simulation, an exercise for a future occasion, which speaks of the endless uncertainty and confusion governing the postmodern era.

The most tragi-comic moment of the plot is, notwithstanding, Jack's trying to kill Willie Mink, former Mr. Gray, and ending up by being wounded himself, and saving his 'enemy' and victim from dying. Ironically, his aim has also been to get Dylar pills for himself.

The exquisite, very long sunsets in Blacksmith after the toxic event, and Wilder's narrow escape while crossing the busy highway on his tricycle are serene moments in the end of "White Noise", and leave the reader hoping for better times. This leads us to the conclusion that, even though Don DeLillo sends serious messages and warnings to the postmodern world – to our post- postmodern one, too - he does it in a subtle, ironic, at times humorous way.

This novel poses so many inescapable questions like: *What if death is nothing but sound?...Electrical noise...Uniform, white (DeLillo 2022, 228)*, but it does not offer answers. The question that we have to answer, though, is what the meaning of 'White

Fear' is. A tentative answer would be Fear of Death, a huge wave which hits from everywhere, and cannot be stopped, which most of us have to come to terms with.

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