

Fear, Media and Mayhem in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is an important work of postmodern literature that calls into question the impact of the information fed to humans by the media on a regular basis through its prominent theme of conflict within the self, as the characters believe artificially reinventing themselves is the only way to defeat death in a simulated world full of technology and information. *White Noise* explores the mass media of the 1980s, which was characterized by the omnipresence of newspapers, news anchors, talk shows, and radio hosts. DeLillo seems to argue that there was no way to distinguish what information was real from what was misinformed. The novel also explores, as I will elaborate on below, the evident differences between the characters of varying age groups and their contrasting responses to this abundance of information.

White Noise follows Jack Gladney, his wife, Babette, and four of their children—all from previous marriages. The main adults in the novel struggle with a crippling fear of death that they would do anything to get rid of. Death often comes up in conversations between Jack and Babette as they ask each other which of them they think will die first. We see Jack using his academic gown, sunglasses, the alias, J.A.K Gladney, and consumerism as a shield to protect himself from his near constant fear of death. He also links himself to an infamous historical figure by pioneering the field of Hitler Studies to give his own life significance. In addition to Jack, we see Babette reinventing herself in similar ways by exercising and buying large amounts of yogurt and wheat germ (which she never eats) in an attempt to trick herself into eating healthy because “she was not happy with her hips and thighs.”¹ We also get to know Murray, Jack's closest friend and colleague, who appears to have the meaning of life and death figured out with seemingly no fear whatsoever.

Many literary scholars have studied the question of why the novel's characters are so fearful of inevitable death and where this fear originated. In “Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species,” Cornel Bonca argues that, “[t]he death fear is with us from birth, and all human ‘projects’—especially the language we use to help us construct our belief systems—are designed to evade or deny or conquer the fear of death.”² This claim seems unlikely because in the text it is only the older characters who possess this fear, while the young children are unaffected. On the contrary, in “‘How the Dead Speak to the Living’: Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*,” Laura Barrett argues that the reason death is so feared in *White Noise* is because it is the only part of the cycle of life that is not simulated. For this reason, Jack tries to “outwit” death “by immersing himself in a language, a medium which he believes controls reality.”³ This idea seems more likely since coming to the conclusion that life is part of a simulation would require a more broad way of thinking, which typically develops with age. Similar to Bonca's argument, Arno Heller describes, in “Simulacrum vs. Death: An American Dilemma in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*,” how the fear of death in humans is caused by a “technologically and electronically generated hyperreality” because technology numbs the senses and causes the fear of death.⁴ Although Bonca and Heller have the right idea since technology definitely contributes to this fear, the technology itself does not cause it; rather, the origin of the unhealthy fear of death is not merely a part of being human, it is a result of the constant information being fed to them throughout their lives by media outlets.

The Gladney family live their lives with the TV and/or radio always on, continuously absorbing information—some true and some misinformed. When we see the Gladneys having conversations, they are often humorously (and unintentionally) punctuated with grossly misinformed information. For example, in one scene, the whole Gladney family is in a car

together, and Denise asks a question about a drug she found in Babette's possession. This question sparks a conversation amongst the whole family where they all spew incorrect factoids at one another, including Denise saying that tidal waves are called "origamis" and Babette saying "you can't copyright titles."⁵ When people strive to obtain as much knowledge as possible, they fear what they do not already know; meanwhile, when people are misinformed by the outlets they have always believed they could trust (including, apparently, the public school system), they begin to question what is reality and what is part of the simulacrum.⁶ This effect was more prominent in the 1980s when *White Noise* takes place due to the increased prevalence of television and other information gathering and disseminating media such as cable TV, CDs, home computers, etc. For Jack and Babette, death is feared because out of all of the knowledge humans are able to accumulate from these different information mediums, death is something no living person will ever be able to understand. For example, in several key scenes, nearly all of the action, including the physical and emotional symptoms felt by the characters, are entirely driven by what they are seeing and hearing in the media as the novel's events unfurl.

The way the severity of the fear of death seems to correlate with the ages of the characters supports the idea that fear comes with knowledge, those as seen above, much of that "knowledge" is not factual. In *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us*, American social psychologist James W. Pennebaker explains:

How we feel about ourselves is generally quite positive up until about age twelve. From about thirteen to twenty, our self-esteem levels drop to some of the lowest levels in our lives. Thereafter, to around the age of seventy, most people's self-esteem gradually increases. In fact, by around the age of sixty-five, many of us feel as good about ourselves as when we were nine years old—which is as good as it ever gets.⁷

These statistics could be applied to the amount of information each age group generally retains. Children below the age of twelve tend to be naive, inattentive to the negative aspects of what goes on around them, and unable to understand the concept of morality. Between the ages of thirteen and twenty, people start to retain information and pay more attention to everything they see or hear; therefore, they become depressed or numb due to the realization that the world is not a happy place. Finally, after the age of twenty years old, people start to figure out their own coping mechanisms to escape the fear of death. This can be seen throughout the Gladney family—specifically those who permanently live in Jack and Babette's household—because the amount they struggle with the fear of death correlates to their age, and people naturally pay more attention to what is going on as they get older. DeLillo not only displays the chronological development of the fear of death through Wilder, Steffie, Denise, Heinrich, Babette, and Jack, he also provides us with the character Murray Siskind, who appears as the voice of reason in *White Noise*.

The youngest of the Gladney family is Wilder—Babette's six-year-old son—who is, unsurprisingly, the most innocent character in the novel. This can be observed in the scene where the family sees Babette teaching a posture class on TV. The rest of the family fell silent and were disturbed by the image of Babette on TV as Jack questions what the two-dimensional digital image of his wife means: "Only Wilder remained calm. He watched his mother, spoke to her in half-words, sensible-sounding fragments that were mainly fabricated. . . . The small boy remained at the TV set, within inches of the dark screen, crying softly, uncertainly, in low heaves and swells, as Murray took notes."⁸ Being only six years old, Wilder is too young to process that

not all of the information he is given is real. He is the only character who looks at Babette on the TV as if she is actually there in person because he is the only character who has not yet started to realize the existence of the simulacrum. Heller explains: "It is not by coincidence that this scene concludes the first part of the novel. As the story progresses, Wilder turns into a kind of contrast figure to the adults—the epitome of an otherwise lost spontaneity and naturalness."⁹ This instance can be used to make Wilder an origin point of the developing fear of death in the characters because he does not yet possess it.

Like Wilder, Jack's nine-year-old daughter, Steffie, is still too young to be aware of the deeper meaning of all of the information given to her throughout her life; however, she is still a bit more aware than her younger stepbrother. Throughout the novel, Steffie is seen getting upset when she sees parents fighting on TV shows. Although she appears to be aware of the situations being presented to her on TV, these situations only stick out to her because she can relate to them as a child from a broken home with divorced parents. Due to her young age, she still has not developed enough in her way of thinking to understand concepts that do not directly apply to her, as seen when Jack picks up the phone and a computer-generated voice begins speaking to him: "I gave the phone to Steffie," Jack says, "When it became clear that she was occupied with the synthesized voice, I spoke to Babette in low tones."¹⁰ In this scene, Steffie pays more attention to her conversation with the computer-generated woman than to the real, and more relevant, conversation Jack and Babette are having at the same time.

Denise, Babette's eleven-year-old daughter, however, has a more mature way of thinking than her stepsister. As Pennebaker mentions, the age where the perspective of a child significantly shifts is between twelve and thirteen years old.¹¹ Being eleven years old, Denise is notably more aware than Wilder and Steffie since she is so close to the next age group. *White Noise* displays the paranoia Denise accumulates from the information she gathers from media platforms in numerous scenes throughout the novel. For example, one scene where this idea is portrayed is when Denise expresses concern about Babette chewing gum because she had read a warning about the gum causing laboratory animals to get cancer, and she fears the gum will cause her mother to develop health problems as well. Another instance of accumulated information causing Denise's paranoia is when she makes Babette wear sunscreen: "Denise would not let her mother go running unless she promised to apply layers of sunscreen gel. . . . They had bitter arguments about the need for this. Denise said the sun was a risk to a fair-skinned person. Her mother claimed the whole business was publicity for disease."¹² Although Denise is clearly paranoid that something bad is going to happen, she trusts the media and takes all information at face value rather than thinking more broadly, which proves her innocence is still intact despite being slightly more developed than her younger siblings.

The oldest and most developed of the kids is fourteen-year-old Heinrich, the only biological son of Jack. Heinrich is at the age when Pennebaker claims people feel the most negative, and naturally he is very skeptical of most things.¹³ One of the more notable instances of Heinrich calling the truth into question takes place in the first part of the novel when he is in the car with his father discussing the rain. Heinrich says he heard on the radio it is going to rain tonight, and Jack argues that it is already raining. Jack, pointing to the rain on the windshield of the car as he is driving Heinrich to school, says we do not have to disregard our senses just because we heard something on the radio, to which Heinrich replies, "Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. . . . There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't

hear a sound doesn't mean it's not there."¹⁴ He continues to argue with Jack for the remainder of the car ride about the subjectivity of truth. From this scene, we can gather that Heinrich has a more theoretical way of thinking than his three younger siblings; he has the ability to acknowledge that humans are incapable of knowing everything—including death. Being of the age where people tend to become aware of how little humans actually know, it is not difficult to see why Heinrich pushes back against Jack's views of reality more than the other Gladney kids.

After examining each of the immediate children, it becomes apparent that Jack and Babette suffer from the most debilitating fear of death in the Gladney family. As previously mentioned, Pennebaker explains that after the age group of thirteen years old to twenty years old—which is represented by Heinrich—people begin to slowly feel better in regards to mental health up until they are about sixty-five years old.¹⁵ This is the case in *White Noise* because this is the age where people are developed enough to begin creating their own coping mechanisms for this fear. Even Jack acknowledges a correlation between the development of his fear and his age when he says, "I tell myself I have reached an age, the age of unreliable menace. The world is full of abandoned meanings. In the commonplace, I find unexpected themes and intensities."¹⁶ This is where the previously mentioned artificial personalities come in. The two characters who turn to artificial solutions for their problems—Jack and Babette—both belong to this age group. Jack turns to his academic facade, and Babette turns to becoming a test subject for a new drug manufactured to eliminate the fear of death called Dylar. Clearly, neither of these methods work for them; therefore, they are not getting better. When Jack, a well-known scholar of Hitler studies, fears being exposed at a Hitler conference for being unable to speak German, he feels this lack of purpose because the identity he wholeheartedly believed would save him from death ultimately failed him, and he does not understand how he could possibly come back from such a failure. Since these characters are in the younger half of this large age group where people are trying to figure out how to cope with their problems, it is understandable that they have not made much progress yet, or have even regressed some, since things tend to get worse before they get better. There is still time for these characters to redeem their innocence during their lifetimes, but for Jack, who has apparently been exposed to the deadly toxin that propels the novel's main action, the clock is ticking.

This leads us to Murray, the outside voice of reason in the text. Like Jack, Murray is also a college professor who devotes himself to studying a famous figure—Elvis Presley. Like a good social scientist, Murray is seen analyzing the Gladney family throughout the novel, and, unlike the Gladneys, he seems to be fearless when it comes to death. However, just because Murray is unaffected by fear does not mean he has never been affected. He is a representation of the end goal of the twenty-one years old to sixty-five years old age gap which Pennebaker discusses.¹⁷ Although he is roughly the same age as Jack and Babette, he was able to discover a more successful coping mechanism than these two crucial characters. His procedure revolves around avoiding the lifestyle that the media encourages. One of the more interesting characteristics of Murray is that he refuses to buy name brand items from the grocery store, opting instead for the generic white labels that blandly advertise the cast-off bits and pieces of their brand name. According to John N. Duvall, these generic products are "outside the media and the very postmodern culture he ingenuously praises. Everyone shall enter the postmodern flow—everyone except Murray, who will remain distanced precisely in order to plot, interpret, and control."¹⁸ The lifestyle Murray has crafted for himself allows him to be happier because he has learned to separate himself from the information the media attempts to force on him. One way the media subconsciously shapes the characters' thinking is through advertisements, which

interrupt the narrative in numerous places in the text. For example, when the Gladney family are evacuating their home because of an airborne toxic event, the radio interrupts Jack witnessing all of the other people trying to evacuate by saying, “It’s the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue.”¹⁹ These advertisements subliminally reinforce the consumerist lifestyle that the characters live by, even in moments of panic and desperation.

Although advertisements themselves are not necessarily misinformation, they imply that buying a product will make a person’s life better, which is not necessarily true. When people like the Gladneys constantly have the TV on, this implication gets drilled into their heads until it is all they know, thus leading to a society where people believe consumerism will solve all of their problems. This is why Jack believes shopping sprees, sunglasses, and academic robes will solve his problems, and Babette believes wheat germ, chewing gum, and Dylar will solve her problems. Murray explains these tendencies when he says, “Fear is unnatural. . . . Pain, death, reality, these are all unnatural. We can’t bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe.”²⁰ When Murray chooses to protest this consumerist lifestyle by only buying off-brand items at the grocery store, he no longer fears death because he sees things as they are instead of how corporations want him to see them. By avoiding media schemes and learning that disguising problems with consumerism does not solve them, he has learned to think for himself.

The final stage of Pennebaker’s description of life that is represented in *White Noise* is the claim that people feel as good at sixty-five years old as they do at nine years old.²¹ This is also proven through Murray’s way of thinking. In a conversation with Jack, Murray says, “‘My students and I discuss this all the time. . . . I tell them they have to learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages.’”²² If Murray truly has the secret to happiness and fearlessness figured out—and the secret is to “look as children again”—it would make sense for a sixty-five year old to be just as happy as a nine year old because they see things the same way.²³ Therefore, although Jack and Babette are intensely struggling with the fear of death, they will most likely learn to cope with their fears, like Murray does, within the next thirty years or so and will become as unaffected by these things as Wilder or Steffie by the time they are around sixty-five years old.

Pennebaker’s ideology is proven to be true throughout the novel because each age group he describes in his claim is accurately represented by the characters. More specifically, Murray is the key to understanding how to truly defeat the fear of death and why people evolve in the way Pennebaker claims. Murray is the only character who understands the way information the TV and other media provides affects human development. He realizes the only way to prevent this negative impact is to be aware of what is real and what is fake. In the first part of the novel, Murray tells Jack, “TV is only a problem if you’ve forgotten how to look and listen.”²⁴ This is why Murray is often seen taking notes when the Gladney family is watching TV. He has learned to observe information and process it instead of mindlessly absorbing the information given to him until all he knows and understands are the ideas the media wants him to have, such as how consumerism improves the quality of life.

The key to escaping the fear of death, as discovered by Murray, is to not allow the media to replace one’s own perspective. Although the information from media outlets causes the fear of death in the Gladney family, Murray has discovered that this fate is not inevitable. Once Jack and Babette learn to see the world the way Murray does, to “look as children,” they will successfully

defeat the fear of death. They will finally be able to tune out the “white noise” that prevents them from achieving happiness.

Notes

- ¹ DeLillo, 7
- ² Bonca, 31
- ³ Barrett, 102
- ⁴ Heller, 37
- ⁵ DeLillo, 80-81
- ⁶ Simulacra, according to postmodern French theorist Jean Baudriallard, are copies of copies that depict things that no longer have an original referent because the original has been replicated so many times that the copy (or simulation) replaces our perception of reality.
- ⁷ Pennebaker, 61
- ⁸ DeLillo, 105
- ⁹ Heller, 43
- ¹⁰ DeLillo, 48
- ¹¹ Pennebaker, 61
- ¹² DeLillo, 264
- ¹³ Pennebaker, 61
- ¹⁴ DeLillo, 23
- ¹⁵ Pennebaker, 61
- ¹⁶ DeLillo, 184
- ¹⁷ Pennebaker, 61
- ¹⁸ Duvall, 144
- ¹⁹ DeLillo, 122
- ²⁰ DeLillo, 289
- ²¹ Pennebaker, 61
- ²² DeLillo, 50
- ²³ DeLillo, 50
- ²⁴ DeLillo, 50

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