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IN SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN POSTMODERN AMERICA: THE CASE OF DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the negative effects of consumerism on people in the postmodern American society in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). It will examine the threat of consumerism to humans through employing postmodern theories of Jean Baudrillard and Fredrick Jameson, and argues that consumerism physically and mentally affects individuals, depriving them of their individuality and assimilating them into a collective consumer society. On the physical level, people cannot avoid environmental and toxic dangers in their consumerist society, even white noises can harm them. Moreover, and most importantly, consumerism can cause people serious mental problems, leading people towards faulty perceptions about their own identities and their ultimate search for a hyper-reality to compensate for their individualistic loss.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Identity, Don DeLillo, Consumerism, Collective Society.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the defining features of American literature is a desire for the heroic figure and the chase after the American Dream (Bloom, 2009: xv). Theodore Gross argues in his book *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* that “Yet it is not an idle phrase, the American Dream [. . .] It reflects our romanticism and our sentimentality; our energetic chauvinism and our parochialism; our idealism and our authority; our hungry need for heroism” (Gross, 1971: vii). The American imagination is rebellious and is in constant search for a place outside of society to recreate a smaller society that is more compatible with the characteristics of the individual hero. The American hero, using Mark Twain's words, is characterized by “light[ing] out for the territory” (Twain, 2008: 295), he has longed to explore the unexplored spaces out there.

The American individual is defined by the dream of social success and the desire to be free from social restrictions (Bloom, 2009: xvi). Thus, there is an intense focus on the individual and his development, socially and economically, in a modern world shaped by materialism and consumerism. The American Dream guarantees each and every individual the possibility of social and material success; yet the American hero seeks life outside of his society in the sense that he feels himself alienated from his surroundings and unable to fit.

The twentieth century is marked by failure and frustration, and this is especially evident in American literature and the portrayal of the American individual who finds himself lost in a post-war society governed by capitalization and materialism. American novelists portrayed their modern society and the modern American individual with resistance to old

traditions and values, skepticism in institutions, and thirst for materialism that can never be quenched. And this is evident in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*, published in 1985, which is an example of postmodern novel that focuses on the character of Jack Gladney, a Midwestern professor pioneering the field of Hitler studies at the fictitious College-on-the-Hill, his wife Babette, and the rest of his family.

In Search for Identity in Postmodern America: The Case of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Jack Gladney resides in an American college-town with his fourth wife, Babette, and their four children from previous marriages. Both Gladney and Babette are obsessed with the fear of death, which increases after he gets exposed to the airborne toxic material. Babette, on the other side, decides to take part in experimenting of Dylar, a drug which is supposedly helpful in getting rid of the fear of death and she has an affair with Willie Mink, the project manager of the company testing Dylar. When Gladney discovers the relationship between Babette and Mink, he decides to take revenge by attempting to kill Mink, and he gets shot in return. He ends up at a hospital run by nuns who give him a talk about faith and belief, or the lack of it. At the end of the novel, Gladney enjoys shopping, an activity that he seems

to enjoy as part of his identity throughout the novel.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo investigates the image of a heroic narrative of community identity (Halldorson, 2007: 25). Jack Gladney is a pragmatic man whose identity is based upon how he sees the reality of his world. However, Gladney is stripped of his identity and is left naked in the face of his society. Gladney assumes several identities throughout the novel, he is a professor, a husband, an ex-husband, a father, an American, and a consumer to say the least; and all these identities contribute to his self-confidence. DeLillo gives a darkly comic vision of America defined by the white noise of technology that consumes the American individual through examining the late twentieth century American condition (ibid 25).

What is interesting in *White Noise* is DeLillo's representation of the white American individual and the absence of race. DeLillo portrays the forces in postmodern life that inhibits the individual's self-rule and autonomy. He even demonstrates how this autonomy is nothing but an unattainable fantasy that white American middle-class society is deceived by (Engels, 2000: 171).

A lot of the conversations and sections of the novel are fragmented or interrupted by other sounds or noises, like

segments from the radio. This in fact shows how life in the postmodern culture is fragmented, and how the individual living in this society is fragmented himself. There are bits and pieces everywhere, but no whole entity. The novel tries to capture the texture of the 1980's in America through focusing on consumerism and how it shapes the American character. There are many advertisements, reference to pop culture, television and radio use besides other aspects of postmodern "white noises" that lurk in the background yet plays a significant role in shaping the American character. DeLillo uses popular culture in the same way that other writers use political culture to shed light on what is going on in their society.

Moreover, there are many references to other references, which gives the sense of loss of meaning in the characters of the novel. Gladney, for instance, loses his sense of life and does not really understand what is going on anymore, and he fears death. Death is a predominant theme in the novel that characterizes how people feel. There is a sense of loss and disconnection to the real world. According to Jean Baudrillard, there is no possibility of transcending meaning in a capitalist society (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). In such capitalist societies, we often experience a sense of void that leads to the individual's attempt to fill with products

and re-products of what is real in order to transcend his sense of loss and meaninglessness. Raman Selden states that according to Baudrillard "signs no longer correspond to, or mask, their 'real-life' referent but replace it in a world of autonomous 'floating signifiers'" (Selden, 2005: 201). Thus, the hyperreal is created to make up for that meaninglessness. Oftentimes we see in American literature how the American society is affected by capitalism after WWII and how it created a sense of emptiness, or separation from the old traditions and faith. Thus, Americans attempt to fill that void with products, technology, and consumerism, yet this white noise can only add more to the void rather than fill it.

Thus, the American thirst for the unreal is itself the product of consumer ideology. Baudrillard adds that the fake is more perfect than the real, that's why it is more desired since it creates the sense of perfection. The individuals in the novel live in a world characterized by unescapable illusion and their perceptions are shaped by mass media and consumerism (Baudrillard, 1994: 77). Furthermore, Stephanie S. Halldorson writes:

DeLillo's characters are more often heroes who are hiding out as assumed heroes. Like Gladney,

they are shocked to find their self-styled, self-reliant heroic image of themselves to be nothing but image. They live narcissistic lives, small and tight, where they are both hero and audience to their own purchased image of heroic narrative. (Halldorson, 2007: 25)

Consequently, the image of the hero here is weak and unable to hide its chaos and disorder. Thus, we can see that all Gladney's attempts to identify himself through various acts fall short of his goal. He tries to identify himself through technology one time when he takes the Dylar pill, thinking it will cure his fear of death, and also he tries to identify himself through violence when he shoots Mink in a fit of anger and revenge. And he even counteracts this behavior of identification by attempting to re-identify himself yet again through saving Mink's life whom he shot. All these attempts of re-identification fail to give Gladney a sense of meaning in his life, and this identification of the individual "I" is at the heart of the novel. Gladney struggles to find his individuality in a society absorbed by consumerism that renders him similar to every man in any city. He even admits his falsehood and fake identity when he says "I am the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo, 1986: 7). Halldorson further argues that Gladney is in fact a "perfect

American citizen" (Halldorson, 2007: 113) in the sense that he lives a naturalized form of life which forms a representation of the real, which renders him in the role of the "false hero" (ibid 113) as a result of hyper-reality.

Moreover, the characters in the novel can only locate themselves within crowds and in places that express collective identity (Olster, 2008: 82), such as The-College-on-the-Hill, the evacuation center, and the supermarket which denotes "common identity" (DeLillo, 1986: 58). To add to this collective identity, these places harbor exotic products from different countries, and people who speak different languages, which contributes more to the sense of loss and alienation from the image of the American individual, because these places exhibit a sense of collectiveness rather than individuality, hence the loss and meaninglessness in the characters' lives. They are being pushed further away from their own selfhood and into a collective, consumer-driven society which assimilates everyone.

Thus, Gladney suffers throughout the novel to maintain his identity and the individual "I" that he created for himself at the beginning of the novel when he described himself as "I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in

North America in March of 1968” (DeLillo, 1986: 1). He even struggles later on with maintaining this “I” at the evacuation center when he privileges himself as someone more superior than the others. He argues:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and manmade disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith. (DeLillo, 1986: 51)

Here, Gladney identifies himself again as a college professor who does not belong to the lower class of the society, and thus is not supposed to go through such horrible situation simply because he is a college professor who lives in an aristocratic neighborhood. This kind of identification is tied to the desire for acquiring material wealth in a capitalized society that identifies humans according to

how much money they have, what they wear, and what kind of neighborhood they live in. This “I” suffers and eventually fades as the novel progresses, especially in collective settings. DeLillo describes these settings with different words to denote this sense of collective identity that Gladney suffers from. For example, he describes the evacuation center after the incident as:

The place was crowded, still quite cold, but the sight of nurses and volunteer workers made us feel the children were safe, and the presence of other stranded souls, young women with infants, old and infirm people, gave us a certain staunchness and will, a selfless bent that was pronounced enough to function as a common identity. (DeLillo, 1986: 58)

He gives descriptions of individuals that together, they make this common identity, thus eroding the individual “I”. In another scene, DeLillo describes a tourist attraction more like a “religious experience” (DeLillo, 1986: 5), rather than a place of entertainment. Babette states:

We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies." There was an extended silence. The man in the

booth sold postcards and slides. "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism." (DeLillo, 1986: 5)

Again, this sense of collectiveness adds more to the separation from the individual "I" as the characters start to perceive themselves as parts of a collective, rather than unique individuals, which is the opposite of what Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized in his essays in the late nineteenth century about the importance of the American individuality and unique character (Emerson, 2001: 120).

The novel opens with a description of moving-in day at The-College-the-Hill. However, DeLillo draws a catalogue of items that students bring with them from their homes to their dormitories. Gladney examines these products in a way that shows how the American society is absorbed by materialism and the possession of products that seem to give a sense of identity or significance to their lives. The narrator, Gladney himself,

watches as the students enter their dormitories with their belongings:

As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the jurik food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. (DeLillo, 1986: 1)

This shocking long list of products is what identifies the postmodern American society, and Gladney notices from the beginning this sense of wanting to identify one's self with products in order to fill the void caused by the aftermath of WWII. However, this void is filled with nothing but a white noise from his surroundings that can only add more to his alienation in a collective society.

In an interview with Don DeLillo, he states that “There’s something menacing and violent about a mass of people which makes us think of the end of individuality, whether they are gathered around a military leader or around a holy man” (Nadotti, 1993: 87). This same crowd can be seen in *White Noise* which Gladney realizes that he must risk his own individuality if he assimilates with it as he realizes that “Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd” (DeLillo, 1986: 33).

Further, Arthur M. Saltzman states that “In *White Noise*, however, the task is further complicated by the way in which figures are disarmed by the flood of data, cultural debris, and otherwise indigestible stimuli that contribute to the condition that titles the novel” (Saltzman, 2003: 196). Technology, especially electronic media plays an important role in the novel as it strains people’s capacity of locating themselves in the postmodern world, let alone, identifying themselves away from their consumer-driven desires. Fredrick Jameson states that technology ““seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our

minds and imaginations to grasp” (Jameson, 1991: 37). Thus, technology and mass media create a world which is no longer visible and controlled by a dominant power characterized by dull, white noise.

At the end of *White Noise* Gladney fails to re-identify himself with anything, even with a compassionate image of himself as Mink’s savior. He loses his belief in everything around him, even in himself. The German nun who attends him at the hospital after wounding himself in his fight with Mink tells him that “As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe” (DeLillo, 1986: 145), suggesting that faith has died in the postmodern world, and that even the nun’s belief is nothing but a pretense in order to keep life moving on and to give sense of meaning in this void they live in, because simply and as the nun puts it, “some must appear to believe” (ibid 145). Losing his faith as a result of living in a post-war world, Gladney seeks to re-identify himself and find faith somewhere else, especially in consumerism, which is ironically the main cause for his alienation from his society and God at the same time.

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