

Mother's Relics: The Impact of Mothers' Fate on Transhumanist Choice

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The transhumanist version of immortality, which is also the human's choice to end or never end their lives, is interwoven with the living world where humans have to accept their ends without postponement in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*, via the antitheses between two mother figures. Cryonics technology validates human's power to choose their ending, resulting in the pure immortal consciousness of Artis, the protagonist's young but dying stepmother. However, his own long-gone mother's ghost lingers in his memories vividly, keeping him alive but alone and full of sorrow. The mirroring of these two mothers' lives helps the protagonist make his own choice: to choose future illusory immortality or to live in the real world with the inescapable death. This is a transhumanist question, not only for the protagonist but for all the human beings and DeLillo himself. Here, DeLillo makes his own choice distinct from people's typically chosen.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, transhumanist, feminism

Introduction

Don DeLillo's *Zero K* was published in 2016, in which the protagonist is asked to choose between immortality and living in the anguish of the actual world. The novel is divided into "In the Time of Chelyabinsk" and "In the Time of Konstantinovka" by an individual chapter of Artis' soliloquy in eternal death. Convergence is a futuristic human cryonics site located in southern Kazakhstan's distant and arid desert region. The second section is set in downtown New York City and follows Jeffrey Lockhart's stepmother, Artis, and father, Ross Lockhart, who have chosen to escape death by cryopreservation.

Jeffrey finally discovers his identity as a human being, that is, what he is under the name, "a man expanded by grief" (DeLillo, 2016, p. 187) through the contrast of the fates of two mothers featured in the novel, Artis, a young and dying stepmother, and Madeline, Jeffrey's dead birth mother whom his father deserts.

This transhumanist decision has received a great deal of attention in recent years. In "'A Phantom Life Within the Braincase': On the Transhumanist Subject and Its Limits in *Zero K*" (Li, 2021), the author examines the subjectivity of human beings in the posthuman situation. However, his essay concentrates mainly on Jeffrey, the male protagonist, without acknowledging the cause for his choice, namely the effect of his mothers, particularly his birth mother. Jeffrey's ability to face an unavoidable result is derived from his vivid recollection of Madeline rather than a setup program. "Transhumanism and the Biological Body in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*: A

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Material Feminist Perspective”, on the other hand, presents a material feminist perspective on the story and comprehensively explores the biological body and transhumanism in Don DeLillo’s *Zero K*. The author first discusses the loss of materiality in the transhuman era, with “the dehumanizing effects of technology and the invasion of consumer culture into personal lives” (Ng, 2021, p. 1), before attempting to visualize the unseen materiality in *Zero K* by introducing the symbolic meaning of the stone room, hospice, English garden, catacomb, veer, and bodies in pods in the material society. Finally, the author proposes a reconsideration of humans’ and nonhumans’ material coexistence. In the author’s opinion, *Zero K* can be viewed as a work on “the bodies, and material feminism” (Ng, 2021, p. 18). Although this article focuses mainly on the material effects of commercial culture’s invasion, the novel’s spirituality cannot be overlooked. The search for identity and the nature of humanity cannot be described solely from one point of view. Instead of “circumventing death and prolonging life as intended” (Ashman, 2019, p. 1), the author of ““Death Itself Shall Be Deathless’: Transrationalism and Eternal Death in Don DeLillo’s *Zero K*” contends that DeLillo “presents cryonic freezing as a sort of eternal death” (Ashman, 2019, p. 1). This essay discusses transrationalism and perpetual death in DeLillo’s *Zero K*. According to the author, all scenarios lead in the same direction: death. Moreover, DeLillo coined the term “Zero K” to describe a new type of death. However, in this article, the author downplays the importance of the protagonist’s two mothers, one of whom supplied the novel’s first endless death, the first remorse, and Jeffrey’s first question about the existence of human beings, another being a ghost living in Jeffrey’s memory, telling him to stay. These three representatives of Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* research provide us with meaningful reading and research insights, but they ignore the essential feminine roles of Artis and Madeline in the theme of transhumanist choices.

The Ending of Two Mothers

Artis’s Choice and Ending

In the first chapter, Jeffrey is invited to “pay the briefest of visits and say an uncertain farewell” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 2) to his stepmother, Artis, who is “one whose mind and failing body would soon begin to drift, on schedule, into the void” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 1). This introduces the second choice instead of death: immortality to Jeffrey. Cryonic suspension is what Artis is completely ready for, through which “The body will be frozen” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 3) and “The time will come when there are ways to counteract the circumstances that led to the end. Mind and body are restored, returned to life”. This process is called the Convergence. It is said to be “Medically, technologically, philosophically” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 4). This is the reason why a woman like Artis will be involved in it. Artis is imagined as “the scientist as ascetic, living for periods in crude encampments, someone who might readily adapt to unsparing conditions of another kind” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 7) by Jeffrey. She deserves more than just helpless dying, like Jeffrey’s birth mother, Madeline. In Jeffrey’s heart, he does not totally believe in his father and the Convergence, during which Artis will still be dead. “She would die, chemically prompted, in a subzero vault, in a highly precise medical procedure guided by mass delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 35).

Not until Ross Lockhart, Jeffrey’s father, makes up his mind to go with Artis, even if he is a healthy man, Ross asks Jeffrey, “Isn’t this what everyone feels when someone close, someone intimately attached, is about to die?” (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 83) after he has left Madeline, Jeffrey’s birth mother, alone to die. The Convergence is believed to be “Die a while, then live forever” (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 86). However, Jeffrey still has doubts

towards it. "You're walking straight into a distortion of light" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 87), says Jeffrey. However, not until Artis is near her time, she asks Jeffrey to go with them in a severe manner; Jeffrey begins to consider this invitation. But only after one day, Ross changes his mind. He discards Artis, just like the way he did to Madeline. Despite keeping asking for Artis' forgive, he is still tortured by this decision after. When Artis's body is frozen, her consciousness seems still awaken.

There is a soliloquy of her. She keeps asking, "But am I who I was?" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 119). This is the ending of her mind, while the ending of her body is more satisfying. "Her body seemed lit from within. She stood erect, on her toes, shaved head tilted upward, eyes closed, breasts firm. It was an idealized human, encased, but it was also Artis" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 195).

Madeline's Choice and Ending

Compared to Artis, Madeline has few choices of ending, especially after the divorce. She begins working full-time raising Jeffrey, until that day, she has suffered a stroke. Ross did not even show up once before her death. "When my mother died, at home, I was seated next to the bed and there was a friend of hers, a woman with a cane, standing in the doorway" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 4). However, after years, he decides to go with another woman. He even cannot, or is not willing, remember her name, rather than an identity as the mother of his son. This causes Jeffrey's anger and some jealousy for the absence of the father's character in childhood.

The Impact on Jeffrey's Transhumanist Choice

When Artis goes into the Convergence, she asks Jeffrey to join them. However, Jeffrey still feels repulsive towards this so-called immortality. Moreover, when Ross backs down, the faint possibility arisen by Artis' invitation goes out. Ross finds a good excuse using words said by Jeffrey when arguing.

You said if I went with her, it would reduce you. My over-dominance, the thing you can't escape. Even loving her too much, even choosing to die too soon. It would have been the kind of surrender in which I gain control instead of relinquishing it. (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 108)

Jeffrey does not buy his lies. Nevertheless, he takes the Convergence seriously instead of treating it as a total scam. He begins to think about the future, even about a future brother from his spirited, young father and Artis.

This kind of imagination of a better result ends the second time Jeffrey goes to the building to accompany his father's going. He is alone in his room, waiting for another guidance. However, his mother's spirit shows up. She seems so inappropriate to the building built by his father. "How ill-suited these two words were to this huge cratered enclosure, where people maintained a studied blankness about their nationality, their past, their families, their names" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 187). Madeline, a woman who once stabbed Ross, as an attack on this pursuit for immortality, is here to save her son. Not with happiness, warmth, but with a traumatic memory, Madeline calls forth the humanity in her son with the scene of "a woman's last breath" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 187). This contributes to Jeffrey's final return to the real living world.

Conclusion

"My mother was ordinary in her own way, free-souled, my place of safe return" (Don DeLillo, 2016, p. 188), thinks Jeffrey. His mother may not be as appealing as Artis, just like real life filled with grief and ending up dead

compared to the immortal. However, it is these feeling that makes Jeffrey a man rather than an ideal body and a mind full of questioning its identity.

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