

# Fear of Death and Power of Innocence: A Study of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

WANG Nian-nian

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Honored by Mark Osteen as the “The American Book of the Dead”, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* unveils the fear of death resides in the mind of contemporary Americans and their struggles against the fear. Among these efforts is to seek comfort in Protagonist Jack's youngest son, Wilder, who is the emblem of a primitive and innocent power that is uncontaminated by science and technology in the chaotic world. Furthermore, this article further analyses and reveals the consoling power of Wilder's innocence. Nonetheless, through the degradation from a solemn and scared crying to a pathetic and mundane crying, it also shows the brevity and vulnerability of the power, which proves that, instead of a permanent cure, this innocence can only serve as a sedative to ease the postmodern fear of death.

*Keywords:* *White Noise*, death fear, innocence

## Introduction

*White Noise*, Don DeLillo's 1985 novel which received the National Book Award, further portrays white noise as the inescapable toxic environment. This kind of white noise exists everywhere and in everything, manipulating people's minds and behavior. DeLillo's novel particularly depicts the postmodern consumerist society as being full of toxic threats through the lives of the Gladneys: Jack Gladney, a college professor in the small town of Blacksmith, Babette Gladney who is the mother of the family, and four of their children from previous marriages: Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder. The novel is structured around two major incidents: an airborne toxic event and Jack's discovery of Babette's participation in the trial of a new drug called Dylar.

Interestingly, critics have employed various perspectives when examining *White Noise* and have reached very different conclusions and interpretations. For example, in “American Simulacra: DeLillo's Fiction in Light of Postmodernism” (1999), Scott Rettberg maintains that *White Noise* is distinctly postmodern in that it presents the stories of characters who face life in a post-modern, post-industrial, televisual culture and matches many of the aspects of post-modernity defined by Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. By contrast, in “Dissenters Are Never Superheroes” (2005), Michelle Rene argues that *White Noise* is not entirely post-modern, but instead attempts to unravel issues of humanity such as love, danger, and death around the protagonists. In addition, some critics have chosen to focus on environmental issues in DeLillo's fiction. Moreover, in *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (2007), Elise Martucci uses ecocritical theories, particularly Leo Marx's discussion of the conflict between technology and nature found in traditional American literature, to explore how technology changes perceptions and mediates reality.

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WANG Nian-nian, M.A., lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

This paper endeavors to study how the fear of death, though repressed, governs the lives of the fictional characters in the novel and thus to unfold Jack Gladney's internal struggle against his overwhelming fear of death. Among these efforts is to seek comfort in Jack's youngest son, Wilder, who is the emblem of a primitive and innocent power that is uncontaminated by science and technology. Furthermore, this article reveals the consoling power of Wilder's innocence by sorting out the clues in the novel. However, instead of a permanent cure, this innocence can only serve as a sedative to ease the postmodern fear of death.

### The Fear of Death

Death, through every epoch of human history, has been an unsolved mystery for philosophers, thinkers, scientists, and different individuals, because it is all pervasive and omnipresent, whose effect instills fear in everyone. Human beings now have learnt to repress the primitive fear by constructing culture of consumerism. The concept of death is all pervasive which threads all the themes of *White Noise*. In the novel the writer portrays his fictional characters trapped in the intricate web of contemporary bourgeois world, hyperreality, advertisement, media stimuli, machine, and consumerist culture. Interwoven with the intricacies of technology, media and images is the perpetual fear of death imbedded in the consciousness of the fictional characters. The writer attempts to deal with the philosophical subject of death by juxtaposing it with consumerist culture of the 20th century.

Many critics have focused on the theme of death in the novel and observed that white noise is the electric sound of death. David Cowart in *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* clearly observes that DeLillo has attempted to transcend the metaphorical status of death by juxtaposing it with electromagnetic white noise of the surroundings (Cowart, 2002, p. 73). In other words, the white noise is the electric sound of death, as mentioned in the novel in the conversation between Gladney and his wife:

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white."

"Sometimes it sweeps over me," she said. "Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little. I try to talk to it. Not now, Death." (DeLillo, 1984, p. 228)

Jack Gladney, the narrator of the novel who betrays his compulsive fear of death from the very beginning but he does not disclose his fear to his wife, Babette nor does she until the last part of the novel. "Who will die first?" (17, 35, 115, 118) is the question that keeps popping up in the narrative highlighting the significance of the issue in the novel. This fear has instilled in Gladney the feeling of incompetence and insecurity which leads him to feel that his life is superficial and insignificant. He attempts to camouflage such weakness in his personality by choosing a different avatar and building his personality on the aura of the historical figure of Hitler. He wears a pair of glasses with "thick black heavy frames and dark lenses", which starts affecting his sight badly as he keeps seeing colored spots at the corner of his eyes. Even at Babette's imploration he does not remove them. His fear pushes him to a space where he is no longer comfortable in revealing his true self. For Gladney, Hitler ceases to be a dangerous figure responsible for the merciless massacre of Jews, but becomes a protective shield to ward off death. Gladney's attitude towards the figure of Hitler is noteworthy as he becomes more than a utility chosen from an antique shop with a pure end of meeting his needs. He shows these

documentaries to his students in College on the Hill with the sole aim of being identified as somebody virtually akin to Hitler. In one such documentaries of Hitler, he perceives:

Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of the death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitation in the name of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. 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. (p.87)

This excerpt from the text reveals Gladney's need of hiding himself behind others, be it Hitler or any other brutal historical figure like Genghis Khan or Atta, the Hun. He, in fact, identifies himself with the crowd in the documentary, each individual of which is hidden as the unidentifiable part of the mass crowd. Since death is an inevitable phenomenon that happens to every individual an individual, becoming a part of the crowd becomes a natural choice to lose one's individuality and thus avoid death.

Babette, on the other hand, believes that no one would completely understand her fear and, therefore, she plays sly on her family. Her fear, unlike Gladney's, manifests slowly but strongly over the time. Babette is looking for solutions all the time to get rid of her fear. She finally comes across a solution in an advertisement on a tabloid, *National Examiner*, in which a company wanted volunteers for a secret research on eliminating a fundamental condition of human brain—the fear of death. Since, Babette suffers from compulsive fear of death she participates in the trial of this new drug, Dylar. As a cure to curb the fear of death, it represents the absolute commodification of the contemporary society where even death is made a product by which profits can be generated. Like any other commodity it makes false promises and proves unproductive. When Gladney learns about the drug, he wants to try it as well despite knowing how it has disappointed his wife and has reverse effects. When his daughter suggests against it, he replies,

We are talking about death ... In a very real sense it doesn't matter what is in those tablets. It could be sugar, it could be spice. I am eager to be humored, to be fooled ... This is what happens ... to desperate people. (pp. 288-289)

Through this conversation the novel depicts that in a society which is absolutely saturated with consumerism, the people are ready to give up the banal realities for consumer ecstasy.

The obsession with the fear of death creates a deep sense of insecurity in the characters, which subtly yet solidly gets consolidated in their psyche. Babette and Gladney dwell in a world where supermarket tabloids, advertisements, and commercials and the media have fabricated a matrix of consumer culture that compels them to consume not only what is needed by them but also what is made to sell them regardless of their requirements. They believe in instant gratification and consumption. Consumerism not only manufactures products but illusive power and comfort to the people. The people start believing that consumer products can give them identity and help them in their hopeless situation. Instead of accepting the inevitability of death, the consumer culture is trying to cash on it by manufacturing drugs like Dylar that claims to suppress the fear of death. This culture of consumerism has rendered the denizens of cosmopolitan cities insensitive and impervious to the exploitative designs of the multinational companies that have created an artificial environment of insecurity and fear, something which they promise to cure if the products launched by them are purchased and used.

### The Power of Innocence

The most illuminating revelation of Wilder's source of power comes from Murray: "He doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all". These two simple lines lay bare the core of Wilder's strength. At the age of about two years old, he is not yet obsessed with material products or knowledge, innocent from the allure of the consumerist society, from the abundant and confusing knowledge of the world but most importantly, from the knowledge of death. This ignorance grants him the "freedom from limits" and exemption from harm", and makes him an omnipotent littler person. In a word, Wilder is still protected by the innate innocence and not yet contaminated by knowledge, and that endows him a holy and mighty power of innocence to protect himself and to console the adults. Nevertheless, this power can at the same time be vulnerable as well.

Wilder's loss of innocence is shown in the last chapter of the novel, where he narrowly escapes death but comes to know about death at last. While many critics notice the significance of Wilder's escape of death, what they make out of the scene vary dramatically. Mark Conroy puts his emphasis of reading on the escape, believing that up until then, Jack still "hopes to see it as a 'good omen' and is seeking guidance from Wilder, and thus considers this passage a proof that Jack "has indeed succumbed to superstition" (Conroy, 1994, p. 109). Annjeanette Wiese, however, realizes that the near-death experience is no longer an exemplification of Wilder's power. Rather, it is a shift that suggests Wilder "becomes aware of being in a precarious or at least undesirable situation", a moment of truth for Wilder (Wiese, 2012, p. 17).

This knowledge of death and this realization of the reality are an irresistible force that deprives Wilder of his innocence and pulls Wilder down from the altar, which is justified by his fall: "He reached the other side, briefly rode parallel to the traffic, seemed to lose his balance, fall away, going down the embankment in a multicolored tumble". It is not just a fall from the highway; it is also the fall from the altar, and once fallen; there is no way he could find his connection back to the pure and primitive place anymore. From that moment on, the more knowledge he is about to gain, the further away he is to be from the wilderness he comes from.

### Conclusion

From the analysis above, we are able to see how Wilder possesses the power of innocence which is capable of consoling Jack and his wife, but we are also faced with the fact that this power is limited and vulnerable. Once reaching the age of learning and knowing, this exposure to modern world will pollute the soul of the child and this power of innocence is thence forever gone. Just like Babette's two most desirable but unobtainable things in the world: "Jack not to die first. And Wilder to stay the way he is forever". Death is inevitable and irreversible, and so is the loss of innocence. Nevertheless, although Wilder is not the antidote or the permanent cure for the protagonists' death fear, he serves as the sedative that eases their pain for a moment.

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