A Thesis

entitled

"Once we stop denying death":

Fear, Death, and the Postmodern Generation in *White Noise*

by

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as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the Bachelor of Arts Degree

with Honors

in

English

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DECEMBER 2015

Abstract

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a novel deeply preoccupied with the fear of death, a fear that overwhelms the protagonist Jack Gladney and his wife Babette. I suggest that Jack struggles with a crisis of meaning in the face of the postmodern world of the novel. Often considered a critique of contemporary techno-consumerist culture, the world of *White Noise* is brimming with the presence of television, advertising, technology, consumer culture and prescription drugs. DeLillo himself has claimed that there is a direct link between technological advances and primitive human fear. There is a clear distinction between the generation of Jack and Babette and the youth of Jack's world, who are depicted without this existential crisis and as having a better grip on the postmodern world of the novel. I examine the differences between the two generations on their attitudes towards death and the contemporary world, ultimately suggesting that DeLillo employs them to argue that both a staggering fear of death and a total absence of fear are ill-advised. While there are members of the older generation who also do not exhibit this deep-rooted fear, they have each found something within the world of the novel to establish a sense of meaning. *White Noise* is Jack's search for such a meaning which I argue DeLillo ultimately suggests is not inherently found in any place, but is up to the individual to create.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Stroud and Dr. Gregory whose expertise, guidance, and encouragement made this thesis a possibility. Without their time and effort I would not have been capable of taking on this opportunity. I would also like to thank my fiancé Jesse for his continued support and patience throughout the duration of this project.

Table of Contents

Abstract……...ii

Acknowledgments……..iii

Table of Contents…….....iv

"Once we stop denying death": Fear, Death and the Postmodern Generation in *White Noise*……1

Works Cited…… ……..28

"Once we stop denying death":

Fear, Death and the Postmodern Generation in *White Noise*

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a novel largely preoccupied with the fear of death, a fear that cripples both the protagonist Jack and his wife, Babette. The novel follows the trajectory of Jack's attempts to recognize death and to give meaning to his life—and therefore his death. The novel depicts the children within Jack's world without this crisis and as having a better grip on the contemporary world than their parents. I suggest that *White Noise* depicts a distinct type of generation gap between the youth of the novel and the older generations, who are overcome by their fear of death. The only adults in the novel who live without this existential crisis, have found something specific in the postmodern world to latch onto for meaning, often some form of religious faith. *White Noise* is Jack Gladney's search for such a meaning, a meaning DeLillo ultimately concludes is not inherently found anywhere but is rather up to the individual to create.

Having grown up in pre-postmodern America, before most of the commodities so frequently mentioned in *White Noise* existed—such as ATM machines, credit cards, microwaves, trash compactors and psychiatric drugs—Jack struggles to find a sense of meaning in the techno-consumerist world of the 1980s, a world that in no way seems to be helping him prepare for his own mortality. Critics have frequently discussed the ways in which the characters try to deal with death, including cultivating ignorance of it, taking prescription drugs, engaging in consumer culture, putting faith in science and technology;

however, few literary scholars discuss the ways in which the characters employ religion as a means of approaching death. I believe that DeLillo includes various representations of religion as further ways in which the characters attempt to escape death. However, like the other examples of dealing with death, religion doesn't prove to be a substantial way of giving death meaning for Jack. By including the failure of the age-old form of providing a meaningful death for Jack, yet at the same time providing no sign of an adequate substitution for religion or any other way to create meaning, I believe that DeLillo ultimately suggests that there is no all-embracing way to escape death or way to create meaning but is left for the individual to create for themselves.

White Noise depicts a constant pattern of eroding tradition which further exaggerates the generation gap and reveals the grounds of the contemporary world the novel stands on. This eroding tradition is apparent in the case of the Gladney family. The mother, Babette, is on her third marriage while the father, Jack, is on his fourth. They have four children living in the home with them, none biological siblings, or even half-siblings, for that matter, and also have at least three other children living outside of the home with other parents. Even the validity of Jack and Babette's marriage is questioned when Babette admits to sleeping with the mysterious Mr. Gray in order to obtain the experimental, anti-fear-of-death drug, "Dylar." The children in the novel often act more competently than their parents and fill the typical parenting roles of the family. Eleven-year-old Denise is the first to notice Babette's use of Dylar, not Jack. She is the first to spring into action during the evacuation as she packs items for the whole family while Jack clears the table after dinner, a chore often reserved for children. She councils her younger step-sister on toughness and hounds her mother for "habits that struck her as

wasteful or dangerous" (DeLillo7). Heinrich is the first to hear the news of the Airborne Toxic Event and also acts as a leader at the evacuation shelter, lecturing groups of adults on the effects of "Nyodene Derivative" or, as it is more often put, Nyodene D., the chemical expelled during the train car accident that caused the toxic event. This pattern of the children being more responsible and more comfortable in the world than their parents repeats continuously throughout the novel.

The academy is another area where the traditional world erodes. Jack Gladney is the chairman and founder of the Hitler Studies department at the prestigious College-on-the-Hill, but can hardly speak a word of German. He is never seen on campus without his dramatic dark glasses and academic robe, but is described by another faculty member when caught off campus as "a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). It's also fair to mention the absurdity of an entire "Hitler Studies" program existing at any college in general. As Paul Cantor puts it, "—Hitler often seems to stand as the lone remaining absolute: the incarnation of absolute evil. Even the most broad-minded tolerance for cultural diversity seems to stop short of embracing Nazi culture as a legitimate human possibility" (51). The college itself is described as being filled with professors who "read nothing but cereal boxes"(DeLillo 10) and who find great academic and intellectual significance in remembering precisely where they were when James Dean died and how many times and at what places they have brushed their teeth with their fingers. *White Noise* consistently depicts the university as severely lacking substance when it has traditionally been a place of significant intellectual contribution. This representation of the university can be taken as a micro-representation of the larger world DeLillo also indicates as lacking in substance. The once solid and reputable institutions of the nuclear

family and the university have deteriorated in the world of the novel, where television, advertising, consumer culture and technology have taken increasing prominence in the lives of the characters.

In direct relation to the rise of the techno-consumerist world, the novel is deeply concerned with the fear of death. Both Jack and Babette are terrified of death, Jack especially after his exposure to Nyodene D. As Richard Powers remarks, "At the book's heart is the naked question: what to do with a fear of death that leaves every human action doomed and pathetic?" (xiii). Both Jack and Babette constantly attempt to deal with this fear throughout the novel, considering various strategies, even going to the extreme of seeking out dangerous miracle drugs aimed at curing their fears. DeLillo once remarked in an interview that, "There's a connection between the advances that are made in technology and the sense of primitive fear people develop in response to it. In the face of technology everything becomes a little . . . atavistic" ("Dangerous" 82). His remark speaks to the generational gap displayed throughout the novel, where this fear of death applies more to the older generations, considering they've seen more of these "advances that are made in technology."

While Jack is aware he will someday die, he deals with this knowledge in the first section of the novel, "Waves and Radiation," by largely ignoring it. He avoids seeing doctors. He surrounds himself with children, comforted by their youth. He takes the most comfort from his three-year-old step-son Wilder, the only character in the novel completely unaware of death, who lives totally in the moment. Jack also takes solace in studying Hitler. DeLillo describes Jack's obsession with Hitler as a form of self-comfort: "Gladney finds a perverse form of protection [In Hitler Studies]. The damage caused by

Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be so over-whelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself" ("An Outsider" 71). Jack often thinks about death, subtracting his own age from those he reads about in obituaries and wondering if he or Babette will die first, but does little to act on it. However, after his exposure to Nyodene D. in the second part of the novel, "The Airborne Toxic Event," he is forced to confront his death. He is no longer afforded the ability of just thinking on it and regarding it as something far enough off that it doesn't deserve his immediate action.

While I argue that Jack's dread stems from his lack of meaning in the contemporary world of the novel, literary critics have suggested otherwise. I include a brief mention of the surrounding discussion on this idea to better position my own argument amongst it. Mark Conroy suggests that, "Gladney's life has been in severe drift for many years, but his malaise may be best seen as a crisis of authority. His life is falling apart because it needs several registers of traditional authority in order to stay together" (154). Although I agree with Conroy that Jack's crisis of authority is important, I believe that Jack's issues are significantly deeper, extending beyond authority to meaning itself. Jack has sources he turns to for authority in his life: cable television, news media, and most significantly, Hitler. Yet, he lacks meaning to give to his life, and essentially his death. After first being diagnosed with his ambiguous death he thinks to himself, "I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses" (DeLillo 137). His gown and glasses provide him with a sense of identity and meaning. Wearing this costume, he becomes J.A.K. Gladney, department chairman and founder of Hitler Studies, a significant contributor to the great field of higher education. Without them he is simply, Jack, "A

big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). While fleeing the first evacuation shelter and headed to the next, he hopes his heroism in getting his family to safety will provide him with a sense of meaning. When the children and Babette are not visibly frightened by the toxins he thinks, "I wanted them to pay attention to the toxic event. I wanted to be appreciated for my efforts in getting us to the parkway. I thought of telling them about the computer tally, the time-factored death I carried in my chromosomes and blood. Self-pity oozed through my soul. I tried to relax and enjoy it" (152).

Leonard Wilcox asserts that "Jack Gladney . . . is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world. He exhibits a Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling" regarding death and attempts to preserve earlier notions of an authentic and coherent identity by observing the tribalistic rituals of family life" (348). Wilcox similarly claims that, "In modernist fashion, he struggles in an almost Sisyphean way to glean meaning from the surrounding noise of culture—" (349). I believe that Wilcox's suggestion is slightly too sweeping, considering that modernism is such a large and varying movement to define. However, I do concur that there is a generational gap existing between the characters in the novel and that this gap is defines their attitudes towards death and their relationship with the postmodern world. I also agree that Jack relies on his family life for comfort and coherence. As mentioned previously, Jack takes comfort in his children's youth and it could even be suggested that he married Babette due to the optimistic and vibrant nature he perceived in her (DeLillo183-89). Wilcox also claims that, "Moreover, for. . . DeLillo a media-saturated consciousness threatens the concept of meaning itself" (Wilcox 347). Although, while this may be true for the older generations, I assert that the concept of meaning isn't threatened for those born into or those who grew up in the postmodern,

consumerist age. He also describes Murray Jay Siskind as a postmodernist. Murray "insists that looking for a realm of meaning beyond surfaces, networks, and commodities is unnecessary; the information society provides its own sort of epiphanies, and watching television, an experience he describes as 'close to mystical' is one of them" (350). This type of acceptance, however, proves to be unattainable to both Jack and Babette.

Despite the malaise of Jack and Babette, this crisis of meaning and a meaningful death are not issues for the youth of the novel. This is most noticeable with Jack's son, Heinrich. While the thought of death is overwhelming and horrifying to Jack, Heinrich almost seems to enjoy it. Death surrounds him and he appears to embrace it. He plays chess with a convicted serial killer, and during the Airborne Toxic Event is almost giddy over the disaster. "He spoke enthusiastically," Jack describes, "with a sense of appreciation for the vivid and unexpected. I thought we'd all occupied the same mental state, subdued, worried, confused. It hadn't occurred to me that one of us might find these events brilliantly stimulating" (126). His best friend, Orest Mercator, is training to set a record for the most time spent in a pit full of venomous snakes. This is a farcical goal to Jack. "Do you think about dying?" He asks Orest while the three are out to dinner. "Does death scare you? Does it haunt your thoughts?" (253) Jack asks him, unable to comprehend, with his great fear, how someone could be so unafraid of death. Jack is shocked when Orest claims that he doesn't fear death, but that he's more concerned with putting his name in the world record book. Jack insists he will be bitten by the snakes, "You will, you will. These snakes don't know you find death inconceivable…They will bite you and you will die" (198). The attitude of Orest and Heinrich compared to Jack on

the matter is striking as it is apparent that they have embraced the chaos of life and the immediacy of death that Jack rejects.

Heinrich, of the postmodern generation, isn't affected by this crisis of meaning like Jack and is seemingly content, other than suffering typical teenage angst and having a receding hairline by the age of fourteen. Of course, children and adolescents often do not fear death but those in *White Noise,* particularly Heinrich, seem to go even further than not fearing death but to actually embracing it—a sharp contrast to their parents. While Jack admits that his own fear didn't begin until his twenties, DeLillo gives us no indication that Heinrich will follow the same fate. When Jack asks him if he would like to spend the summer with his mother on an ashram in Montana, he states,

> Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? (45)

This type of analytical breakdown of the simple question of if he wants to visit his mother is something Heinrich does multiple times throughout the novel. He debates Jack on whether it is actually raining or not when it clearly is, and insists that it's the daily "waves and radiation" we're constantly exposed to that will truly be the end of us, not some grand disaster. He is content with his brain chemistry and impulses, because to him that's all we are and that is all we can hope to be, simply the impulses of our brain chemistry, and there isn't anything wrong with that to him. There is no compulsion to

find something bigger and more meaningful about death, because whatever may change in his life isn't going to change those impulses. Why want? Why worry?

The other children in the novel also do not share this dread. As Babette points out when talking about her adult education classes, "This world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing" (163). Those who are born into the postmodern world seem to be content in it. Jack and Babette, likely born during the 1930s, at a time when American society was more coherent and based on tradition, are faced with great fear when looking at postmodern society (DeLillo 47). In an interview with Mervyn Rothstein, DeLillo touches on this generational divide, remarking,

> Death seems to be all around us—in the newspapers, in magazines, on television, on the radio . . . . Nevertheless, I can't imagine a culture more steeped in the idea of death. I can't imagine what it's like to grow up in America today. I can't imagine what it's like to be a child, surrounded by the specter of death. ("A Novelist" 24)

While DeLillo may not be able to imagine himself personally as a child in the postmodern world, he certainly has a consistent way of representing them, at least in the case of *White Noise.* The youth of the novel consistently appear to be better at keeping up with the information age and appear more content than their parents. While Jack and Babette dread death the children, particularly Heinrich and Orest, appear to embrace it. They are not only immune to this fear but appear to be engaged in a kind of fatalism.

While searching for the bottle of Dylar that Denise stole from Babette, concerned for her mother's well-being, Jack eventually decides to tell her that the pills are to treat

the fear of death. It's understandable that a girl of only eleven years old would be shocked to hear of her parents taking such a drug and that this information would even cause her to experience the fear herself. But that isn't the case for Denise. Jack tells us, "The first thing she mentioned were the side effects. Every drug has side effects. A drug that could eliminate the fear of death must have awesome side effects, especially in the trial stage" (239). This is a rather mature stance for a girl of her age. She suggests that the drug could really only help "up to a point" and that taking it simply for the power of suggestion is "a little stupid" (239). Jack waits for her to ask if she will eventually share in the same dread one day, but she doesn't. All she says is that she threw the pills away. It's clear from her brief conversation with Jack that death isn't something she fears, nor does she imagine she will someday. Even Steffie, at only seven years old, appears more confident than Jack and Babette at points in the novel. While at the supermarket, Steffie takes Jack's hand. He later realizes,

> Steffie was holding my hand in a way I'd come to realize, over a period of time, was not meant to be gently possessive, as I'd thought at first, but reassuring. I was a little astonished. A firm grip that would help me restore confidence in myself, keep me from becoming resigned to whatever melancholy moods she thought she detected hovering about my person. (19)

Steffie is portrayed as fulfilling a type of parenting role for her father, comforting him, sensing his discomfort before he even displays it. While on the road to the first evacuation shelter Jack and Babette exchange worried glances over the news of the event on the radio when Steffie from the backseat asks, "Is this a mild or a harsh winter?"

indicating little concern or thought about the evacuation (120). She even volunteers to be a victim during the SIMUVAC crisis simulations, indicating again a lack of fear. Another clear example is with Bee, Jack's twelve year old daughter who visits the family for one chapter. Jack is shocked to hear that she flew into Iron City from "Indonesia, more or less" alone (86). "From the Far East to Iron City can't be that simple" Jack asserts, but Bee indeed makes it safely to Iron City (86). While she is staying with the family Jack describes her maturity for her age: "She was self-possessed, and thoughtful . . . She took taxis to school and dance class, spoke a little Chinese, had once wired money to a stranded friend" (94). She is described throughout the chapter as adult-like and quite clearly has a solid grip on the contemporary world. She even critically discusses with Jack the flaws of her mother and step-father: "The basic problem is that she doesn't know who she is. Malcom is in the highlands living on tree bark and snake. That's who Malcom is. He needs heat and humidity" (95). DeLillo also displays this generational gap with Jack's college students. He describes them in the opening scene as youthful and vivacious: "The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. The summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always" (1). DeLillo never depicts the college students as worried about their exams or part-time jobs, or anything else for that matter. Each time they're brought up something about their youthfulness or their high financial status is mentioned**.** There is no indication that this merge into the chaotic, unpredictable, postmodern society, without the reliability of tradition, has affected even the college students, many likely in their twenties, like it has to the older generations.

There is frequent critical discussion on the ways in which Jack attempts to escape death. Joseph Dewey outlines the ways in which DeLillo brings forth "an array of strategies for confronting the invasive immediacy of death" (Dewey 86). Ultimately, what we see in *White Noise* are sundry ways the characters go about trying to establish meaning in their lives as a way of dealing with death. Strategies Jack considers include plain acceptance of death, as offered by Winnie Richards, who argues that it gives meaning to life,[1] disengagement, as offered by Heinrich, and reckless defiance, as offered by Orest Mercator (86-88). Dewey also includes "containing the fear of death via information overload," as offered by Denise where, "Death for her becomes another medical event, decidedly inglorious, a prosaic data transaction, with all the mystery of, say, an appendectomy," as well as Wilder, who "has evidenced no interest in language and thus enjoys (as his name suggests) an immediate involvement with the moment and with the natural world, uncomplicated by the sort of awareness that troubles his elders—" (88). And also, of course, Murray's suggestion that a way to beat death is to kill:

> Siskind theorizes a tempting way around helplessness: you can be a die-er, and accept death, or you can be a killer and thereby gain life credits, a kind of scorecard contest . . . by controlling others, you buy yourself time, defy the law—both natural and juridical— by indulging the violence and energy of assertion (88).

While I agree with Dewey on each of these points, I would also argue that DeLillo includes other strategies, such as the faith in science and technology that Heinrich establishes with his focus on brain impulses as the guiding forms of life, and Babette,

[1] I would also add Vern Dickey, who has complete disregard for his health, completely unconcerned with death, into this category.

who attempts to deal with her incredible fear by taking the prescription drug, Dylar. Also included in this category is Jack's German teacher, Howard Dunlap, who claims he lost his faith in God after the death of his mother and only found comfort in weather and meteorology (DeLillo 55). I would also suggest that another, less discussed attempt at creating meaning out of death is with the age-old form of dealing with death, religion. Religion offers the promise of a way to escape death by living multiple lives through reincarnation or by living eternally in a kind of paradise through faith if only you believe in it and live a certain way. As Jack's colleague Murray Jay Siskind points out, "Millions of people have believed for thousands of years . . . .This must mean something" (273). Religion comes up numerous times throughout *White Noise,* with references to Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Protestantism, Sikhism, and Jehovah's Witnesses. DeLillo also makes references to a type of postmodern spirituality found in technology and consumerism. However, DeLillo does not depict religion as a legitimate way of dealing with death or giving meaning to one's death in *White Noise*—at least for Jack.

Conroy states that, "What DeLillo is most conscious of is how the more elaborate forms of spirituality that preceded consumer culture still inhere, in a degraded and superstitious form, within consumer culture" (165). These "degraded and superstitious forms" are found scattered throughout the novel, from Murray Jay Siskind's religious awe in the supermarket to Jack's feeling of "self-growth" while shopping at the Mid-Village Mall. Examples of traditional religion appear a handful of times throughout the novel, although they are not deemed important by the Gladney family. The closest thing to church attendance the family has is sometimes accompanying Babette on her way to teach a posture class in the Congregational Church basement. However, none of them

other than Babette, her mostly elderly students, and sometimes Jack actually go inside. She teaches posture: how to correctly sit, stand and walk. Jack thinks upon watching her one evening that, "We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming" (DeLillo 27). And he is "always surprised at their acceptance and trust, the sweetness of their belief" (27). Her students do not come to the church to gain any kind of spiritual or religious knowledge but rather to learn how to "ward off death" and to "redeem their bodies from a lifetime of bad posture" (27). They are never doubtful of what she tells them and they trust in her authority. DeLillo's use of a church basement as the space for these elderly people to attempt to prevent their deaths and to redeem their bodies from years of use juxtaposes the traditional uses of a church as a place to learn not about how to prevent one's death but rather to live eternally through faith. Later in the novel, Babette tells the family that her classes are going so well they want her to teach another class on "eating and drinking." A class on eating and drinking is laughable, especially when aimed towards senior citizens who have been eating and drinking their entire lives. Eating and drinking are clearly basic components to remaining alive. We see Babette's students, who are mostly elderly and likely aware of their impending deaths, trying to deal with their deaths by imagining that if only they learn the basic steps to remaining alive even better, they could stay alive even longer. This is one of the earliest examples DeLillo provides of characters attempting to evade their eventual deaths considered by Jack**.** DeLillo consistently uses humor throughout the novel and these passages mentioned are only a few examples. By employing humor in each of the scenes where characters are depicted as trying to escape their deaths or establish meaning in

their lives he places no form of doing so over the other. Each fall short for Jack and prove to be insufficient.

It's ironic that DeLillo uses the space of a church for the characters to gather with their yearning for an affirmation of their beliefs and search for knowledge to improve their lives, considering these are often reasons for attending an actual church service. Due to this, these scenes reflect replacement of traditional religion with faith in technology and information. In the case of this section, we see Babette performing as a pastor or priest-like figure, dispersing life-enhancing knowledge to her students that they believe may help ward off death. She even makes references to religious practices like "yoga, kendo, trance-walking . . . Sufi dervishes and Sherpa mountaineers" (29). While acting as a priestly figure, Babette appears to have everything together, or may at least appear that way to her students but she is in reality a sort of false-priest, considering her own deep rooted fear of death. This shows the unsustainability of her methods to fend off death, as they don't even work for the teacher of the class.

These passages also highlight the emergence of the information age and the effect it has upon the people of America, especially older generations. They seem to have lost their confidence in their own knowledge and have become dependent on sources like the media and cable television to tell them what to do, echoing Conroy's statement about the need for authority. A need for authority and a need for meaning are interrelated. A sense of greater authority and also meaning in life are often reasons one engages in religion. By submitting to a higher authority, religion creates meaning in the lives of those who do so. These passages of the novel help display the state of religion in *White Noise*, where it too has succumbed under postmodern culture, which has largely replaced it with consumer

culture, science and technology, further indicating the shifts in society. Church basements are now where people are depicted as going to affirm their beliefs and for guidance on how to deal with death, rather than to live forever with faith. "Religious" experiences are not limited to places of faith but occur at tourist attractions, in the supermarket, and while watching TV, often having nothing to do with any actual religion (DeLillo 12, 38, 50). Without religion, the characters in this novel, as we see with Babette's students, are left to fill the void with whatever they are able to find. It is also notable that it is not the whole family that attends these classes, but only Jack and Babette. The children are not in need of improving their health in an attempt to prevent their deaths because they have already embraced the evitable.

The clearest example of religion actually functioning in *White Noise* is with the family of Jehovah's Witnesses that Jack and Babette meet at an evacuation shelter during the "Airborne Toxic Event." This scene also provides an example of other adults without this crisis who have established meaning in something in the contemporary world. The family, consisting of a twelve year old boy and his two parents, are found passing out tracts to other evacuees. "God Jehovah's got a bigger surprise in store than this," the mother tells Babette while making small talk about the event (128). "God Jehovah?" is Babette's only reply. The two-worded, questioning reply from Babette indicates confusion and even disinterest in the words of the other woman. "That's the one" the other woman assures her, as if there are other Gods out there to choose from, bringing back DeLillo's inclusion of a wide variety of faiths (128).

After an "earnest and prolonged" handshake the husband of the family asks Jack what the government and all of the armies of the world are doing about "it." The man

quickly clears up Jack's confusion and insists that God's second coming is upon them. "People feel it. We know in our bones. God's kingdom is coming" (131). However, this doesn't jar Jack in any way. Rather, he tells the man that "earthquakes are not up statistically" when he claims that the world-wide rise of natural disasters and diseases are signs of the end-times. The man tells Jack that people on his door-to-door visits are "getting right down to business" about the matter. His evidence for this is that they ask him seemingly comedic questions like, "Is there seasonal change in God's kingdom?" and "Are there bridge tolls and returnable bottles?" (132). Jack describes the man as being eerily self-assured and wonders about his freedom from doubt. Jack asks himself, "Is this the point of Armageddon? No ambiguity, no more doubt?" (132). Doubt and ambiguity are feelings both Jack and Babette hold in regards toward death. To the both of them, not knowing what they will experience after they die or if they will experience anything at all is what they fear about death the most, as indicated when they discuss death together: "What if death is nothing but sound? . . . You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful" (189). This Jehovah's Witness couple is able to avoid this crisis by establishing a way to free themselves from the "doubt and ambiguity" that plague Jack and Babette. It's also notable that in this scene DeLillo makes reference to the family having a child of a similar age to the Gladney children with them, but only the parents are depicted as reaching out to the other adults. It isn't uncommon for Jehovah's Witness children to accompany their parents on door-to-door visits, often with the goal of delivering their message to other children. However, in the world of *White Noise* only the older generations seem to need their outreach.

In this brief section DeLillo shows us that somewhere in this postmodern world traditional religion does indeed still exist, and is able to work for some people. Although, he questions how relevant it really is to other members of this world and how seriously it should be taken. Neither Jack nor Babette, who are both obsessed with their fears of death, latch onto the idea that if only you believe you can "live eternally." It's clear that Jack is unfazed by the man when internally wondering about the possible Armageddon and thinks, "If enough people want it to happen will it happen? How many is enough people? Why are we talking to each other from this aboriginal crouch?" (133). Upon ending the conversation, the man hands him a pamphlet titled "Twenty Common Mistakes about the End of the World." DeLillo's implementation of humor in these closing sentences again positions him as placing no form of meaning above another. Jack's conversation with the Jehovah's Witness man comes immediately before his diagnosis of ambiguous death. While he doesn't take the man seriously, this conversation helps to fuel his strong desire after the diagnosis to create some kind of spiritual meaning. After listening to Babette read tabloids aloud to the blind and elderly, Jack decides to watch his children sleep, which he claims, "—makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God" (141). When he hears his daughter Steffie mutter something in her sleep, he assumes it must be something significant, projecting his desire for meaning on to her: "In my current state, bearing the death impression of the Nyodene cloud, I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort" (148). All Steffie says however, are the words, "Toyota Celica." The words are just part of the girl's unconscious brain-jumble, likely from a commercial, but Jack finds them to be incredible: "The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with

looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform" (149). Despite this minor comfort, Jack still finds himself terrified of his death diagnosis.

The topic of faith as a way of dealing with death comes up again after Jack confides in Murray about his great fear. Murray suggests that Jack should attempt to get around death by choosing a belief system to follow:

> Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyper-space, the resurrection of the dead and so on. Some gorgeous systems have evolved from these beliefs, study them . . . Millions of people have believed for thousands of years. Throw in with them. Belief in a second birth, a second life, is practically universal. This must mean something. (272-273)

Jack claims that Murray makes them sound like, "convenient fantasies, the worst kind of self-delusions" and also admits that without true belief he doesn't feel that they would work (273). As Babette unintentionally demonstrates with her classes in the church basement, information and science have taken the lead in the world of *White Noise* as the main providers of an understanding of the world around them. As Matthew J. Packer claims, "The casting out of the earliest human science (religion) by the advanced knowledge of the latest science of techno-consumerism paradoxically reinstates the sacred, which DeLillo depicts reappearing in the supermarket—the 'truth' of the market being its reputed sanctity, the inviolability of the economic" (649). Jack notes on his way to the supermarket one day that some of the houses, park benches and streets in the neighborhood were in need of repairing but "the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical, and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us.

Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip" (DeLillo162). Babette too finds herself trusting technology to help with her fear of death by means of the drug Dylar. Both Jack and Babette appear to rely on the supermarket for comfort, but they don't put their faith in it like Murray, who also suggests to Jack that he "put his faith in technology" as a way of evading death (272).

Another distinct example of an adult who finds meaning in the world of the novel is Murray Jay Siskind, who takes a peculiar stance on meaningfulness. Described as a postmodernist by Wilcox, Murray finds a sort of meaning in the mysticism provided by the information age. In an interview DeLillo states that in *White Noise* he "tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness" which Murray clearly is attuned to ("An Outsider" 71). While shopping in the supermarket he tells Jack and Babette, "This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data" (37). Despite technology and modernity being what brings on Jack's fear, he too at times finds comfort in the world of technology and consumerism. While shopping at the Mid-Village mall with his family Jack claims that, "I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled all around me" (84). When visiting his local ATM machine Jack feels that, "Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval . . . . I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed" (46). These instances provide minor comfort but do not prove to be enough to truly help him with his fear.

The last appearance of what seems to be traditional religion is strategically near the end of the novel when Jack drives Wille Mink, Babette's Dylar provider, to a small Catholic clinic after shooting him but deciding not to kill him after he was shot himself. After attempting Murray's suggestion of killing to earn "life-points" and failing to find comfort from doing so, Jack is portrayed again projecting his desire for meaning around him. While a nun works on mending Jack's arm he notices a picture of JFK shaking hands with the Pope in heaven. We again see Jack considering religion as an attempt to console his fear of death,

> I had a sneaking admiration for the picture. It made me feel good, sentimentally refreshed . . . . Why shouldn't it be true? Why shouldn't they meet somewhere, advanced in time, against a layer of fluffy cumulus, to clasp hands? Why shouldn't we all meet as in some epic protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining? (302).

Jack then asks the nun, "What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?" (302). "Do you think we're stupid?" The nun asks Jack. But Jack insists that she must believe since she is indeed a nun, "When we see a nun, it cheers us up. It's cute and amusing, being reminded that someone believes in angels, in saints, all the traditional things" (303). The nun admits to Jack that he is right, which is why she is a nun: "The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe. But show me a saint. Give me one hair from the body of a saint" (303). As Jack points out, the nuns don't wear dresses like the more contemporary nuns but still wear the traditional black habits, something he takes as a sure indication that they must believe, although it isn't the case. DeLillo presents us with possibly the oldest tradition of

Western society, religion, and more specifically the Catholic Church, which precedes all other Christian denominations. By suggesting that even those who have taken life-long vows of representations of the church do not even believe in its teachings of an everlasting life than these teachings are not going to be something Jack is able to believe and trust in for himself. The nuns admit that they don't believe in the religion they represent, yet we are given no indication they too suffer this crisis that Jack does. While they don't actually have faith, they claim to for the sake of others: "It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here" (303). The nuns have established their own sort of meaning in their lives in their service to others. They pretend to have faith, which they believe holds the world together, and they dedicate their days to caring after the sick and injured at their clinic. They have created meaning for themselves with their service to others by caring for the sick and injured and giving the world "hope." I argue a self-created form of meaning, is the only meaning found in the novel.

While the Jehovah's Witness man clearly follows in his faith, which is "matter-of-fact to him, self-evident, reasonable, imminent, true," Jack takes faith to be a "self-delusion" (132). Be that as it may, DeLillo doesn't appear to indicate what the ultimate "truth" is. He gives examples of the "truths" of particular characters but provides little of an actual, overarching idea of truth except in the case of death. Death is the only universal truth present in the novel. None of Jack's strategies are able to provide him with the meaning he needs to escape his fear. As for Heinrich's disengagement, DeLillo suggests that we are more than the sums of our brain chemistry. This is precisely why Dylar doesn't work—there is more complexity to the human condition than simply

synapses and chemicals. Orest's theory of reckless defiance as discussed by Dewey also fails. Forced to go underground due to the inhumanness of his act, Orest finds himself in a hotel room to perform his death-defying attempt. The man bringing the snakes only shows up with three non-venomous snakes, rather than the agreed upon twenty seven venomous ones, and Orest is bitten in less than four minutes, proving the failure in his attempt to master death. Even Wilder's lack of involvement in the world of knowledge and language must end as he grows older and is forced to participate in the world. Murray's suggestion of killing to earn "life-points" also proves not to work when Jack finds himself also shot after shooting Mink. This is also the case for Tommy Roy Foster, the serial killer Heinrich plays cards with who was granted no fame but a life in prison for his murders, certainly not the type of "life-points" Murray was imagining. Jack also rejects the idea of science as a way to prevent death by acknowledging the failure of Dylar: "Babette had said Dylar was fool's gold. She was right, Winnie Richards was right, Denise was right. They are my friends and they are right" (247). He also gives up on his faith in technology by refusing to open the results of his tests from the sophisticated machines or answering the phone calls of his doctor who is "eager to see how my death is progressing" (309). Neither Jack nor Babette are moved by the words of the Jehovah's Witness couple or by Babette's use of religion in her posture classes. Even after immediately being diagnosed with his death sentence Jack only finds minor comforts in spirituality, rather than alleviation for his fear. Jack's final hope of relying on faith to cope with his fear is with the nuns in the clinic in Germantown. If anyone in the novel should be able to offer a clear response to the immediacy of death, it ought to be them. But instead, they claim to not believe themselves, ultimately ruling out religion as a

means of escaping death. However, the novel fails to provide any kind of comforting substitution.

What then does *White Noise* suggest about death, if it cannot be escaped by science, medicine, consumer society, or religion? It is a novel that suggests that death is not something that can be completely ignored, nor does it require an overwhelming, intense fear. The start of the final chapter describes a day in which Wilder rides his tricycle across a highway and narrowly escapes death. This scene implies that death cannot totally be ignored by anyone. One cannot live purely in the moment; you must be aware of death and live with limits because not doing so could bring grave consequences. Wilder could have easily been killed crossing the highway by not being aware of his own mortality. The same thing also applies to Orest who would have been bitten by a venomous snake had the provider of the snakes actually brought venomous ones. DeLillo includes this scene with Wilder as a cautionary tale of what total ignorance of mortality can potentially bring. In order to protect what life one does have they must have an awareness of death. DeLillo also drives home this point with the character of Winnie Richards, known across the campus for her brilliance, who claims that "it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death" (DeLillo 217).

The final scene of the novel brings us back into the supermarket, where Jack discovers that the shelves and aisles have suddenly been re-arranged one day without warning. While for the majority of the novel Jack struggles to find meaning in the postmodern world he is living in, the final scene positions him again in the midst of it, seemingly comfortable despite the chaos in the aisles, referring to the slow moving checkout line as "satisfying" (310). Over the course of the novel Jack appears to have

grown more comfortable with postmodern society, slowly realizing all of the escapes he seeks dead-end in one way or another. I believe he accepts his status as a "die-er", as Murray may put it. While he hasn't found great spiritual fulfillment like Murray, his crisis seems to have toned down by the conclusion of the novel. He describes the panic of others, rather than describing his own panic. Certainly the novel isn't arguing that consumerism is the great zenith of meaning, but Jack appears to have given in to its attempts to distract him from his eventual death, accepting the fact that there is no escape from death. He occupies the kind of acceptance that we see the children in the novel possessing. A type of acceptance that suggests death isn't something to harbor an overwhelming fear of, a fear that hinders what life we do have. Conventionally, children are clearly the ones expected to gain knowledge and insight from their parents, but in *White Noise* it is the adults learning from their children. There isn't any point in trying to completely evade death, but accept it. Live within its means. As Murray claims,

> —Once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die and then go on to experience uterine rebirth or Judeo-Christian afterlife, or out-of-body experience or on a UFO or whatever we wish to call it . . . . We don't have to cling to life artificially, or death for that matter. We simply walk towards the sliding doors. (DeLillo 38)

The conclusion of the novel has resulted in much criticism. I align myself most closely with the criticism of Mark Osteen, who asks, "Is Jack—and by proxy, DeLillo—resigned to the reduction of religion to tabloid tales, to late capitalism's distortion of familial and community bonds? Is he dourly exposing the pathetic delusions of contemporary Americans?" (190) He answers, "Certainly the absence of authorial

comment here signifies DeLillo's recognition of his own imbrication in white noise: he admits that there is no privileged position—or at best a fleeting and fluctuating one—from which to comment—" (191). I concur with Osteen that the conclusion of the novel is deeply ambivalent. DeLillo doesn't take a position in which he is able to answer the kinds of questions the novel probes so deeply, but leaves the answers up to the readers, forcing them to draw their own conclusions. While Jack is unable to find meaning in areas the other characters do, such as Murray in the supermarket, the nuns in their clinic and the Jehovah's Witnesses with their tracts, their forms of finding meaning each work for them.

Ultimately the novel suggests that a fear of death isn't something to be obsessed with, nor is it something to forgo completely. The process of death, whether natural or synthetic, is something everyone must experience, and the fear of it is "self-awareness raised to a higher level" (218). As Winnie Richards asserts, "Doesn't it [death] give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit" (217). DeLillo challenges the forms in which the characters in the novel find meaning by treating each one comically and seemingly mockingly. However, he doesn't place one form of creating meaning over the other. The Bible for the Jehovah's Witnesses doesn't appear to provide any more meaning than the supermarket does for Murray. The only character that DeLillo doesn't seem to mock is Winnie Richards who clearly understand that without death there would be no life. DeLillo uses the children of the novel, who don't fear death but accept its inevitability to suggest that such an over-whelming fear is unnecessary and that the world around them cannot be

changed. All we can do is wait together and enjoy the sunsets, the supermarket, television, watching children sleep. As Jack tells himself when he visits the Blacksmith Graveyard, "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to the plan" (97). Only paragraphs after Wilder's tricycle ride, DeLillo concludes the novel with the depiction of a visit to the supermarket, where the shelves and aisles have all been rearranged. Dewey suggests that the supermarket scene serves as a metaphor for life (Dewey 91). All of the shoppers are there together yet still alone searching through the aisles. Trying to remember where they had seen certain items, moving slowly towards the check-out which is a metaphor for death. Checking out is something unavoidable they all must do.

All of the shoppers that DeLillo depicts as lost and confused in the aisles are older people: "There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers" (309). It can be imagined that there are certainly also young people in the store, and it is confirmed when DeLillo states, "And this is where we wait together regardless of our age—" (310). However, the young are not depicted as confused or panicked. They aren't described at all, as if they've blended into the scene. As Dewey suggests, I agree that this closing paragraph is a metaphor for life, but I suggest that it is more so a metaphor for the postmodern life of the novel. One day everything is just different. There is no warning or apparent reason. Things have shifted, changed. It's the older generations this hits the hardest, considering they had the most time spent with things the older way. For them there is "A sense of wandering now, an aimless and haunted mood," but the youth blend into the chaos, embrace it, and carry on (310). The novel states in the closing paragraph, "But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are

equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly" (DeLillo 310). It doesn't matter what these older generations perceive about the world, or what they think they may perceive; this is the world now, full of uncertainty and unpredictability, a world that speaks "the language of waves and radiation." There is no path of escape, all one can do is create their own meaning within it.

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