

## To Fear Life Itself

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white” (DeLillo 198).

*White Noise* by Don DeLillo is a book about mental health, about the looming threat of capitalism, about media coverage, about crazy catastrophes – the list goes on and on. Most importantly though, the book is about fear. Jack Gladney is a professor of Hitler studies, a focus he invented due to his extreme interest in Hitler and German affairs. He and his wife Babette share a mutual fear of death, which is a focal point throughout the book as they attempt to combat this fear. Jack’s fear of death is comprised of three other fears – being alone, not having control, and becoming insignificant – which all reinforce the primary fear of death. Jack attempts to use academia, technology, and consumerism as distractions to ‘cure’ his fears, but this ‘cure’ becomes an addiction and subsequently only worsens his fears. Jack’s distractions embody the white noise of day-to-day life, and death represents a foreign, unknown white noise. White noise in both life and death cannot be at odds with one another; to no longer fear death is to accept the white noise of the mundane.

“As Gilgamesh’s powerful 4000-year-old lament suggests, the dread of death has appeared since humans first started recording their history” (Becker). Death is a frequent topic in *White Noise*, frequently initiated in discussion by the narrator. Jack’s ever-growing fear of death escalates throughout the book, sending him into “death sweat[s]” leaving him “defenseless against [his] own racking fears” (DeLillo 47). These overwhelming physical reactions to his fears are often followed by a series of dramatic rapid-fire questions – “Is death odd-numbered? Are these life-enhancing numbers, other numbers charged with menace?” – that illustrate the

emotional depth of his anxious racing thoughts. Jack's fear of death impacts him both physically and mentally, and that impact is only intensified throughout the novel as his fear causes him to spiral.

In a heated conversation with Babette, Jack claims that he is "the one in this family who is obsessed by death" (197), in an attempt to shut down his wife's fears. He tells her he has "no body" and is "only a mind or a self, alone in a vast space" (198). His depiction of himself displays his psychological displacement of identity and lost sense of self. In a later conversation with Winnie Richards, a coworker, Jack claims that "fear is self-awareness raised to a higher level" (229); this clarifies that Jack believes his fear of death is well-founded and substantive because of its classification as "self-awareness." When Babette shares her like-minded fear of being "afraid to die" (196) and how it "haunts" her, however, Jack dismisses her fear as being too "vague" because "everyone fears death" (197) since it is "a human condition." These frequent contradictions regarding his views on death highlight how his mind is in a constant battle with itself trying to determine what is true and what is not.

Distinguishing fear of dying and fear of death into two separate categories allows us to put Jack and Babette's fear into perspective. For people in the process of dying, there is a "fear of pain, loss of capabilities and other suffering," but those who are not ill can still "be possessed by this fear" (Menzie's 250). Neither character is physically ill, and they never mention different methods of how they could die. Therefore, their fear is of death, not dying. Since their fear does not stem from illness, then it likely comes from the thought of the "isolation that sometimes comes with death." Jack and Babette's mutual fear of death places a sharp divide within their relationship as they not only fear death but also fear being alone, separated from each other.

Jack repeatedly questions, “Who will die first?” (DeLillo 15, 30, 100) throughout the novel in reference to his frequent conversations with Babette about how they both want to be the one to die first. Babette claims how “she would feel unbearably lonely and sad” (100) if Jack were to die first. Jack, although usually not agreeing nor disagreeing with Babette in these conversations, does not want to die first. He claims that “given a choice between loneliness and death, it would take [him] a fraction of a second to decide. But [he doesn’t] want to be alone either.” There is a key difference between Jack’s and Babette’s respective fears. Jack is afraid of death itself; Babette is just afraid of being left alone. This difference divides Jack and Babette because neither can fully comprehend the other’s fear, leaving both of them helpless in aiding the other.

Within Jack’s fear of death and loneliness there also resides a fear of having no control or power over his death. This fear often presents itself when he interacts with doctors or other professionals that have authority over him. There is an overarching theme within the book of technology’s control over our thoughts, beliefs, and perception of ‘truth.’ When the authoritative figures have access to technology, Jack treats their information as objective fact. The man evaluating his exposure to Nyodene D. tells Jack, “You are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that” (141). This comment about how Jack cannot escape a computer’s interpretation of his health statistics plants itself as an objective fact within Jack’s mind; he believes he is going to die because the SIMUVAC employee told him so. “That little breath of Nyodene has planted a death in my body. It is now official, according to the computer. I’ve got death inside me” (150). Jack’s perceived lack of control over his death is a significant contributor to the intensity of his fear of death because it reduces his humanity and identity into a set of data on a screen.

The final aspect of Jack's existential dread is his fear of insignificance. Jack built his professional status upon Hitler studies, a formerly nonexistent degree. Hitler is a well-known figure defined by his powerful, commanding presence and impact on the world. Hitler stated, "I shall become the greatest man in history. I have to gain immortality even if the whole German nation perishes in the process" (Waite). Jack, in search of having this same significance and influence, develops an obsession with Hitler and Germany. "There's something about German names, the German language, German *things*. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course," (DeLillo 63) Jack says to his daughter, Denise. Jack's obsession with Hitler contributes to his underlying fear of not living a memorable, significant life.

Jack's fear of loneliness, no control, and insignificance all relate back to the core of it all: his fear of death. This fear permeates his everyday life and forces him to react both physically and mentally. To cope with this persistent fear, Jack attempts to distract himself by homing in on the white noise around him. White noise, in regard to the book's title, refers to the incessant 'noise' of day-to-day life. Jack narrates how he "realized the [supermarket] was awash in noise... And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension" (36). Here, the 'noise' is presented as both literal noise (the general sounds one hears in a supermarket) and figurative noise. White noise. Noise that is almost palpable. This 'noise' takes on several forms throughout the novel, notably as academia, technology, and consumerism. In an attempt to 'cure' his fears, Jack tries to diminish the effects of the white noise within his life.

Jack is known as J. A. K. Gladney, a name curated in hopes to be "taken seriously as a Hitler innovator" (16) in the professional realm. While he does achieve success within his field,

he does not achieve satisfaction. He loses his sense of identity, defining himself as “the false character that follows the name [J. A. K. Gladney] around” (17). In public, when presenting as himself rather than his academic persona, he is not always recognized. Eric Massingale, a coworker, comments how he has “never seen [Jack] off campus,” (82) that he “look[s] different without [his] glasses and gown” and is “a different person altogether (83). He continues, calling Jack “a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy.” This interaction causes Jack to leave quickly, uncomfortable after this public declaration of his mediocrity outside of his professional attire. Later in the novel, when speaking with the SIMUVAC personnel, Jack narrates how he “wanted [his] academic gown and dark glasses” (142). These three instances all highlight Jack’s fear of insignificance. He does not feel important unless he is in an academic setting because his profession revolves around his knowledge of Hitler.

Jack’s obsession with Hitler serves as a way to protect himself; if he is knowledgeable of a famously powerful figure, then he himself must hold some sort of power as well. Murray, Jack’s highly philosophical coworker, tells him, “Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you” (287). Murray confronts Jack about the true meaning of his Hitler obsession to help him understand his subconscious desire to control his own death. The power Jack holds within his academic profession is merely a reflection of his idolization of Hitler’s power. Jack’s obsession with Hitler, therefore, is a self-inflicted distraction meant to counteract his own fear of insignificance by correlating his worth to the control in which Hitler held.

Media, as useful as it may be, has its downsides. Radio and television, along with newspapers and magazines, all have one thing in common: information. This information should, ideally, serve to inform. However, it is much more likely to be scripted with intentions to

persuade. “Persuasion is characterized as simply human communication designed to influence the beliefs and attitudes of others” (Simons 21). Radio and television provide human communication, albeit one-sided, that can persuade listeners into believing information. During the airborne toxic event catastrophe, Denise and Steffie develop symptoms as they overhear the latest developments shared on the radio. Jack questions whether Steffie is “so open to suggestion that she would develop every symptom as it was announced” (DeLillo 126). This example illustrates the true power of persuasion on a person’s mind; the daughters experience a placebo effect because they placed their full belief in the radio’s information being factual.

Heinrich, always inquisitive, examines this unfaltering faith in radio and television. “What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer... But nobody actually knows anything” (149). Alfonse, Jack’s colleague, had previously told Jack, “The flow is constant. Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes” (66). Both Heinrich and Alfonse are touching on the same idea that information from technology is an ever-present white noise in the background of everyday life. This information is never-ending yet always changing, which can affect our ability to distinguish truth from fiction.

Not only do the characters feel bombarded with constant new information spouted at them from various sources, but DeLillo also recreates this experience for the reader. Throughout the novel, DeLillo includes random interjections from televisions and radios that have nothing to do with the plot surrounding these lines. One example is, “A radio said: ‘Hog futures have declined in sympathy, adding bearishness to that market’” (149). This line holds no meaning or value to the reader and interrupts the reading, just like how the characters must adapt to the constant flow of information surrounding them and filter important from unimportant, fact from

fiction. These interjections are the reader's white noise, their distractions, just like how radio and television are distractions for the Gladney family.

Consumerism, unlike media and technology, is not as frequently mentioned directly within *White Noise*. However, it is just as much of a driving force within Jack's life. The supermarket is a recurring setting, including in the final scene of the novel. Murray tells Jack, "Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think" (38). Shopping at a supermarket is mundane, an expected act in the modern age of ever-present consumerism; dying is the opposite. Murray connects these two opposing experiences to highlight how participating in consumer culture is equivalent to dying, losing one's identity. Consumerism "contribute[s] to the commodification process at the individual level" (Mathur and Rattle 126). According to this concept, buying more things equates to losing more of your true sense of self.

This idea is reflected in Jack's choice to start "throwing things away" (DeLillo 222) in order to regain his sense of identity again. When getting rid of things, he felt "an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality" (262). He found himself in a "vengeful near savage state," bearing "a personal grudge against these things" (294). He claims "they'd put [him] in this fix. They'd dragged [him] down, made escape impossible." After ridding himself of a variety of belongings, ranging from "candle stubs" to "diplomas, certificates, awards, and citations," he waited "for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around [him]" (262). Jack's looming fear of death became so suffocating that he felt the only way he could declutter his mind was by decluttering his home. This decluttering would have, following the logic of consumerism causing individual commodification, allowed him to regain his sense of self. However, this concept is undermined by Jack regaining his sense of self after shooting Willie Mink, not after ridding himself of various belongings.

DeLillo utilizes irony by placing the final scene of the novel in a supermarket, placing Jack right back where he began: surrounded by white noise. This time, however, he is self-aware of the realities of the world around him. The store was rearranged, sending shoppers into a panic that they could not find what they normally knew the exact location of. "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" (326). By saying that the terminals can do this "infallibly" shows that he still believes that technology knows more than any person will ever be able to know. He continues, "Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead." These final few lines of the book emphasize how the media exerts control over nearly everything in people's lives. However, unlike the start of the book, it is no longer viewed as something inherently negative. DeLillo included this final paragraph to emphasize that nothing around Jack has changed except his mindset; he embraces the white noise as part of his reality, altering the purpose of the white noise.

Jack's distractions of academia, technology, and consumerism are the white noise in the background of his life. His fears overshadow his perspective on these distractions, painting them as negative, filled with loneliness, no control, and insignificance. Babbette imagines death as "nothing but sound... You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful," to which Jack describes as "uniform, white" (198). The couple are describing death as white noise. However, their lives are already filled with white noise. By the end of the novel, Jack is able to live peacefully within a world filled with white noise without a nagging fear of death. This fear of death was, for the most part, eliminated after his attempted murder of Willie Mink. By coming to



terms with death, Jack was able to come to terms with white noise since the two are equivalent. Therefore, by accepting his inevitable fate of death, he is able to accept the presence of white noise as an inescapable constant within his life.

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