White Noise Essay, Research Paper

It is a universal and woeful reality that every living thing must die eventually. What places us, humans, apart from any animal, insect or living thing on this planet is our awareness of our inevitable demise. Death is something dreadful, no one knows when it could happen or how to gain control of it. When it comes it takes away one’s life immediately. The mystery surrounding death leads to fear of the unknown. It is practically impossible for men to see what actually happens beyond their grave. No one knows the truth of death until he/she actually dies. This fear is something we humans have and other living things don’t. The realization of death fixes us a level above them all, but can also be thought of in another perspective that we are a level lower instead. Abundant amounts of explorers jeopardized their life in search of the so-called “fountain of life”. The reason of this can be explained by the fear of death. As death is such a mysterious and frightful matter, in Don Delillo’s White Noise, he agrees that “[at] some level everyone fears death” (p. 197) and this powerful fear can easily influence a person’s behaviour and actions.

The depiction of how a man can fear death can be found in the protagonist of the novel, Jack Gladney. In the conversation between Murray and Jack in their long stroll outside the college, DeLillo suggests his views on the issue of death. “Do you think your death is premature?” Murray says. “Every death is premature” Jack answers (pg.283). Here, DeLillo is trying to explain that man is afraid that death will arrive too soon. Jack thinks that death at any age is premature and he argues that everybody alive believes in the same notion. This excerpt proves this. “Are you crazy? Of course. That’s an elitist idea. Would you ask a man who bags groceries if he fears death not because it is death but because there are still some interesting groceries he would like to bag?” (pg.284). He is always apprehensive about death. He almost wishes that death does not exist at all because he believes “death is what makes life incomplete” (pg. 284). Jack comprehends that a majority of man will never choose to leave Earth because they are unwilling or reluctant to part with the affairs of the world and his own surroundings. “The deepest regret is death. The only thing to face is death. This is all I think about. There’s only one issue here. I want to live.” (Pg.283). Furthermore, “it’s bad enough to fear the unknown. Faced with the unknown, we can pretend it isn’t there. Exact dates would drive many to suicide, if only to beat the system,” Jack says (pg.285). Jack despises knowing when he will die or if he will ever die. Jack’s hysteria on death is proportionally greater to normal people simply because he already knows he is diagnosed with an incurable illness. Therefore, it is obvious that knowing the date will destroy his life from the time when he discovers the exact of his death because it would be a mad countdown till his death. How can anyone live normally if your doctor tells you that you will not live past this week? By utilizing Jack’s situation, DeLillo illustrates to us, the readers, that the continuous pondering of such a negative issue like death will only contribute to a pessimistic view of life. As Murray explains “It’s only your fear that makes you act this way” (Pg.287). The combination of both Murray’s claim “to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up.” (Pg.290) and his overwhelming fear of his death lead to Jack’s actions in chapter 39 when he attempted murder on Willie Mink. Moreover, Murray questions, “Are you a killer or a dier, Jack?” (pg.292). Jack admits that he is a dier. Nevertheless, Jack hopes that he can be like “Hitler and his works” (pg.287). Jack wishes that he could use Hitler to grow strength in himself and perhaps become a killer so that he can escape death. Although a possible reason for this assassination can be originated from his rage from this man’s underground relationship with his wife, the main point DeLillo is trying to interpret is Jack’s desperate attempt in saving his own death from happening by causing another’s.

Babette, wife of Jack, is also a prime example of a person in life that suffers from her frequent fear of death. Both Jack and Babette fear death very much but their denial of this is very visible in chapter 20 when they had a long discussion in their bed. Both of them had informed the other that if it is their choice that they want to die first as if they are not afraid of death at all.”[Babette] says she wants to die first because she would feel unbearably lonely and sad without [Jack], especially if the children were grown and living elsewhere” (pg.100). Jack also tells her more or less the same thing and they would argue whose death leaves a bigger hole in the other’s life. By saying this, both of them want hope that they will at least seem to have no fear of death and thus can try to believe in it and avoid the fear. Unfortunately, this has not worked at all. Both of them have never felt less frightened from death even when they pretend they didn’t. Babette says, “I do want to die first, . But that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid. I’m terribly afraid. I’m afraid all the time” (pg.198). Her fear of death is further demonstrated when Babette by chance discovers an article about fear of death and she decides to go to the firm and experiment on the tests. Her fear has such a great impact that she is willing to try a medicine, called Dylar, which has not been tested on humans before. Even when the firm manufacturing the drug finds the drug too risky, she still goes on with Mr. Gray, later known is Willie Mink, and cheats on Jack in order to get her hands on any means of avoiding her fear of death.

DeLillo also portrays many of the other characters in the novel as people who fears death greatly, no matter their age or background. In the chapters near the middle of the novel, starting from 21, DeLillo uses the scenario of the toxication accident to explain his perspectives of how people are na ve about death. After the accident, the people begin to have simulations of evacuation which are organized by the SIMUVAC. They think that “[the] more [they] rehearse disaster, the safer [they]‘ll be from the real thing” (pg.205). Hilariously, the people, which includes Jack’s children and his wife Babette, think “[the] more [they] practice something, the less likely it is to actually happen” (pg.207). So they think that if they practice having disasters more, the chance of getting them will be minimized. This point is frankly ridiculous because there is no proof that the more you practice something, the less likely it will occur. When disasters come, they just come regardless of the number of rehearsals people have had. This again proves how the fear of death may cause people to lose their common sense and conduct actions that are beyond belief.

Finally, DeLillo cleverly clarifies his stance on the fear of death by constructing the character of Orest Mercator. Orest is shaped as the only character that is not only willing to face, but also challenge death, which is the complete contrary to all others. “He’s (Orest) training to break the world endurance record for sitting in a cage full of poisonous snakes, for the Guinness Book of Record”(pg.182). Orest ’s wish to have his name in the Guinness book is shattered because there are not enough snakes to break the record. Not only is there no record for him, he also gets bitten by snakes, and therefore “Orest got bit for nothing”(pg.298). DeLillo manipulates Orest as a simile to exhibit that those who are not afraid and choose to challenge death will end up the same way as Orest, getting injured or killed for no reason. I am convinced Orest is a method DeLillo uses to explain that challenging the Grim Reaper is just foolish.

No matter if a person is rich or poor, smart or foolish, he/she will sooner or later leave this world because of death. As no one can experience death until he/she dies, everyone fears it at some stage. For the most part, man fears death because he does not understand what death is, how it feels and if it is really the end of thought. On top of that, death is a stage of life, it does not mean the end of life – there may be a place where everyone goes when they are dead just as people go from teenagers to adulthood. Simply denying this fact is not the right route to take. DeLillo, through this novel, is trying to send a message to his readers that facing death is the best solution to its fear. Death is something beyond our control and so it is not a thing that we should worry that much about. Taking medication, and of course, killing others will not prevent death. Thinking and being afraid of death is an ordinary thing for a man to ponder about but too much can lead to more negatives than positives. Furthermore, taking a step to an unknown world can be extremely challenging for man. That is why they fear death so much. Why worry about something you cannot prevent? His fear of death does not prolong his life; in fact, it may shorten his life. In the end, man must face death for all men are mortal.