White Noise Essay, Research Paper

Thanks to everyone who voted for WHITE NOISE as October’s Book-of-the- Month. WHITE NOISE is probably Don DeLillo’s most popular novel, largely because most readers see it as DeLillo’s warmest and most human book. In this story, the ideas that seem to captivate DeLillo are fleshed out in real life in a way that none of his other books quite achieves. Of course, there are a few stubborn souls (like me) who still feel THE NAMES, or one of his other books is better. But I think everyone agrees, WHITE NOISE is a winner. It won DeLillo the National Book Award in 1985, and it also won a larger reading audience for a great American writer.

DeLillo has said that Ernest Becker’s THE DENIAL OF DEATH was a book that influenced him at the time he wrote WHITE NOISE. There’s certainly no denying that death, and the many things we do to avoid facing it, is a major focus of DeLillo’s novel. Becker’s book, which won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1974, has as it’s thesis the assertion that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.” Becker’s point is that this is \*the\* driving force in the human psyche today…which I think is overstating the matter a bit…but it certainly is a reality that all of us face in some way, sooner or later.

As I looked through Becker’s book last month, I was surprised to discover that it’s actually an exposition of the work of Otto Rank. Rank was the third of the three famous defectors from Freud’s inner psychoanalytic circle early this century (the others being Alder and Jung), and he’s known in the literary world to a certain extent because of his intimate involvement with Anais Nin. Like Jung, Rank developed a psychology of mythology and religion…and, in particular, Rank’s emphasis was “The Hero” motif. This is what Jung called “the puer aeternus” (or the female “puella”)—the eternal youth…who never ages…who never dies…to whom death is nothing. In psychology, this idea is linked closely with that of narcissism, which is considered prevalent in society today. Just look at all the things we do to avoid the appearance of aging!

Jack Gladney is, at best, an unlikely Hero, I think. The extreme superficiality of his life is astounding. Everything is meant to \*seem\* significant…Hitler studies, the robes and sunglasses, the most photographed barn in America. Like so much of what we see and hear nowadays…what it’s about is \*sounding\* like it’s about something important. Everything is sense impression. Never mind what a word really means…if it \*sounds\* solid and strong, then that’s reason enough to use it. In this way we escape from nature. We create lives that “protect” us from the things that are “out there” somewhere. “I’m not just a college professor,” says Jack. “I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are.”

Michael Valdez Moses addresses this issue in his essay “Lust Removed From Nature” (in Frank Lentricchia’s NEW ESSAYS ON WHITE NOISE). Following Heidegger (another influence on DeLillo), Valdez Moses discusses the way technology is changing the inner experience of human beings. And in WHITE NOISE DeLillo shows us how this is done. Waves and radiation. Television serves as kind of new collective unconscious, creating a new inner frame of reference. Consider this line from William Gibson’s NEUROMANCER: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.” What color? Jack Gladney says at one point, “His skin was a color that I want to call flesh-toned.” Stephie murmurs, “Toyota Celica,” in her sleep. The TV is now a member of the family. We are moving toward a postmodern mentality.

One of DeLillo’s refrains (leitmotifs even) that still haunts me is the question of “who will die first?”–Jack speaking of himself or his wife: who will leave the other to die last? to die alone? It’s as if Jack is more afraid of this that he is the idea of his own death.

Thesis: Jack Gladney’s obsession with death illustrates the postmodern attitude that many Americans hold. Furthermore, his world is surrounded with tabloids and a national media that feeds on destroying lives. This feeling of instant gratification along with over consumption, fills the Gladney household with a warped sense on middle class values. As a hole, they can not handle their emotions and have difficulty thinking for themselves. The Gladney family represents the typical dysfunctional family of the post-1970’s era. Join me as I browse through the postmodern novel, White Noise. Http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~mcnicholas/E309-Spring98/assign3/Lerner/wnmain.htm

Jack and Babette has an unbelievable obsession with death and their thoughts haunt their minds to an unhealthy style of living. “What if death is nothing but sound? Electrical Noise. You hear it forever. Sound all around. How Awful. Uniform, white (198.)” But I feel that the description above represents life in a postmodern world more realistically. Not death.

‘The drug specifically interacts with neurotransmitters in the brain that are related to the fear of death (200.)” Babette describes the effect of her Dylar medication. The obsession with death virtually runs every aspect of Mr. & Mrs. Gladney’s lives. The majority of grown adults have a basic fear of death but usually came to peace with themselves over time. However, Jack and Babette are looking for an instant solution 24-hours-a-day. Instead of facing reality, they create an alternative lifestyle and remain plagued in a spiral of depression.

“A person has to be told he is going to die before he can live life to the fullest(285.)” Under normal circumstances I find this true. However, in White Noise that only becomes a reality in the last chapter. After Mr. Gray’s shooting, Jack begins an evolution towards a more feasible reality. Babette finally concludes that ‘it may not matter how strong or weak Dylar is. If I think it will help me, it will help me(251.)’ We are seeing the placebo effect of mediation. As a reader, I infer that the Gladney household will come to respect the healthy days they have now instead of dwelling on what will not exist in the future. In the last chapter, I would introduce that Jack has had a catharsis and come of of his bubble of troubles.

http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~mcnicholas/E309-Spring98/assign3/Lerner/fear.htmx

“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.” (326)

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