White Noise Essay, Research Paper

White Noise: The Heat of Numbers in Our Daily Lives

Numbers run our daily lives. It has become a fact in our society. In the case of White Noise by Don DeLillo this is shown to be true. Jack Gladney’s fear of death has hidden itself within everyday life. Within the book Jack builds a life full of tangibility while acquiring little factual knowledge. He hopes that throwing himself into his Hitler Studies will give him a contented understanding of his existence. The two important revelations of the discovery of Dylar and the knowledge that his death is truly eminent have an impact so deep that he responds with drastic measures.

Throughout the story one can find that the human need for tangible belongings, something to prove their existence. The first true showing of need for tangible grasping is when Jack is taking German lessons from Howard Dunlop, one of Murray Siskind’s neighbors. As the conversation between Jack and Howard continues we find that among other things Howard teaches meteorology. He found comfort in this subject after his mother’s death. He states, “I realized weather was something I’d been looking for all my life. It brought me a sense of peace and security I’d never experience (55).” The weather is something that is universally tangible in the sense that one can feel its effects. Heinrich may disagree much like he did on page 24. Howard became more sociable because of the discussion of the weather. Jack’s focus on Hitler also dwells on the idea of tangible objects. On page 63 he states that, “Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, and safer. It’s in this area that my obsessions dwell.” One of the bigger points to my argument comes in chapter 17. A comment from a colleague (”You look so harmless”) compels Jack to go on a shopping spree. In attaining more valuables Jack finds comfort in his possessions (83-4).

There is miscommunication all over the story. From rumors about men in Mylex suits to rumors about dead deer at the Kung Fu Palace. Even the main character himself says that his family is “the cradle of the world’s misinformation.” He also states that, “Not to know is a weapon of survival (80-2).” All this comes into conjunction with an earlier statement on page 15 when he is talking about the question of who will die first. He reasons that, “The question of dying becomes a wise reminder. It cures us of our innocence of the future. Simple things are doomed, or is that a superstitions?” Not having the full knowledge represents innocence. Misinformation keeps us from having a clear understanding of all facts. The characters want this because they cannot handle clear and simple things because it leads to doom. They want to complicate in order to survive. They misunderstand for a reason. This may be a lot to take in, but I’ll sum this all up later.

Disbelief also contributes to misunderstanding of factual knowledge. During the “Airborne Toxic Event,” we are shown the greatest examples of this. When the authorities change the name of the “feathery plume” to a “black billowing cloud” Jack thinks that the authorities are being more realistic about the situation (113). On the next page, he shows his disbelief when he says that, “These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas (114).” This goes against an earlier statement on page 6 when Babette gets no argument from her statement that, “I have trouble imagining death at an income level. These last two statements are contradictory. Jack absolutely associates income level with undesirable situations. Even the announcement “Evacuate all places of residence. Cloud of deadly chemicals, cloud of deadly chemicals,” doesn’t realistically hit them that this is an emergency. Babette that she’s sure there’s plenty of time or else they would have told them “to hurry (119).”

It’s so much easier to have one’s life run by numbers. Jack describes his daughter’s friends as “a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness (41).” The characters themselves know that they are just numbers. On page 49 Babette says there is a difference between her husband’s age of fifty and fifty-one. “One is even, one is odd.” As jack reads the obituary section of the newspaper (99) he notes the age of the people. “Four years to go. Nine more years. Two years and I’m dead.” The characters are run by one complete system. If you are not a number, then you don’t exist.

Jack relies on the numbers, just as most of us do in everyday lives. You can’t open a bank account without an ID with your social security number on it. You go through college as a number. We all rely on numbers. As Jack relies on his numbers he is first happy that the system of numbers were in agreement on page 46 as he checks his bank balance. As the paragraph goes, “I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not at all, had been authenticated and confirmed.” He values his numbered order, as we all might. Later, the numbers start getting out of “harmony.” With the SIMUVAC technician (140), his own doctor (260) and with a specialist (279) he is told that they are getting bracketed numbers with stars of some type. His world starts to collapse as the numbers start getting out of harmony.

Early in the story Jack says, “Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands (6).” Murray speaks of the heat of city life (10). In the city, we are less known. We are just numbers. The numbers is the heat of the city. The advancement of society has given us the numbers that track us along with the urban society. The numbers and the heat of the city are the same thing.

Some people see all too well that they are just numbers. Murray says to Babette that, “Men shout as they die, to be noticed, remembered for a second or two.” That’s why the convict that Heinrich is playing chess with killed six people. The TV told him to do it. He did it to be remembered. “Time was running out on him,” as Heinrich said.

Sometimes we see that the best way to be remembered is to buy a lot of belongings. That’s why shopping sprees (like the one Jack took) makes us feel better. It gives some proof of our existence. We cannot talk about existence without eventually talking about death. We don’t want too much factual knowledge because it leads to death. We do not want to understand unless we can understand death. We do not want too many facts about anything else at all because we are scared that it will lead to the dread of death. The Dread, not death, is so unbearable unless we can understand death. That is why we look to religion later in life. The faith is comforting. We feel we have the understanding of death. The dread of death that we felt is relieved. People want to know information only if it can lead to contented understanding of death. Otherwise, we give ourselves to this maze of numbers without question. Without thinking too much, it eases our minds from the Dread of death.