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Raven Durben

*Mount Vernon Nazarene University*

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Raven Durben

Dr. Wiley

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Modernism to Postmodernism: Jack Gladney's Transition in *White Noise*

The novel *White Noise* by Don DeLillo focuses on death, primarily through the perspective of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies. Through his interactions with his colleague Murray and stepson Wilder, postmodern characters to rival Jack's modernism, Jack is able to grow as a character and transition from being representative of modernism to that of postmodernism. Jack takes issue with finding "white noise" to mask out the continual thought of death, something he struggles to repress, and his narrative is evident of this, too. His identity, for a majority of the novel, is found in his death, but because of the influences of Wilder and Murray, there is hope for that to be changed as Jack and his family look out into the postmodern sunset.

For a majority of the novel, Jack is a modernist man living in a postmodern world. modernism can be described as being "concern[ed with] the role reason, or rationality, or scientific reasoning, play in guiding our understanding of the human condition and...nature itself" (Drake). While in his modernist state, he fears death. To cope with his fear, he attempts to define its nature and scientific purpose by posing philosophical questions to himself so that he may come to some sort of rational conclusion: "Is this what it's like, abrupt, peremptory? Shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface understood?" (DeLillo 18). In these instances, he never comes to a conclusion. If anything, it only increases his fear. This is what Jack wishes death and believes death should be

like—if it has to be at all—and this falls into the transcendental modernist thought. Death is a concept outside of the human realm of control and deeper understanding, and Jack's contemplation of it in these moments removes the inevitability and reality of death for him. The more scientific part of him, although still connected to the transcendental, he later ponders: "Is death odd-numbered? Are there life-enhancing numbers, other numbers charged with menace?" (DeLillo 47). Death is just death, and Jack's attempts to define it fail and push it farther away from him and push him farther away from postmodernism. Jack cannot do the transition on his own, and Murray and Wilder help move him forward.

Where Jack fails to identify and come to terms with death, Murray provides the rational, postmodernist understanding of death. "[Postmodernism] can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition... and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress .... postmodernism is a continuation of modern thinking in another mode" ("Postmodernism"). Murray helps Jack progress through the novel, a few instances being the Hitler vs. Elvis debate, when Jack is told by SIMUVAC he is going to die from his exposure, and Murray's final confrontation outside the supermarket. What makes Murray a helpful character in Jack's moving forward is that he is able to get Jack thinking in this process. While debating with Murray on whose celebrity had more of an impactful experience with death, Jack claims that he is okay with death in this context. Jack says, "Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it. I was on top of it" (DeLillo 74). The only reason Jack was rational with death in this situation is because he knew everything about it. It was immutable, it was fact, it was something he doesn't have to anticipate or have cause for anxiety because it already happened, and there was no changing it in any transcendental form. For Hitler, the cases that came up regarding

death, were already facts in his narrative; this is unlike Jack, who is still alive and death is still impending, but Jack believes if he studies and teaches Hitler, that will remove him from the possibility of dying. In chapter thirty-three, when Wilder leads him to the backyard where a mysterious figure is sitting in a lawn chair, he carries out *Mein Kampf* with him, as if it would protect him from the potential threat of the man. It turns out to be his father-in-law, but this proves that when faced in a life-threatening situation, he relies on Hitler to protect him, as if he wards off death.

Murray, as a character, is the more rational foil to Jack's irrationality. "Unlike Murray Siskind, the quintessential postmodernist, Jack yearns for stable and transcendent meaning, hence his academic reliance on the magic of language and his occupation as Chair of Hitler Studies" (Barrett 103). Murray has a grip on death that Jack doesn't and understands death and its metaphysical and inevitable existence in the realistic world because he isn't trying to define it as a transcendental entity. He is the character that, in discussion of death, seems to have an answer or understanding of the concept of it. In chapter nine while the family is at the supermarket, before the air toxic event, Murray says, "Dying is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere" (DeLillo 38). What Murray is implying here is that although death cannot be physically seen or known, it's always occurring and present. As a postmodern representative, he is within the same realm of thinking as Jack, but, instead of considering the spiritual, vast nature of the subject at hand, he uses reason to understand the fluidity of it (Drake).

Inevitably, Jack is told he is going to die. Eventually. They're not sure how, but he was exposed, and they're still doing research on it, but he probably has about thirty years. He is telling Murray what the SIMUVAC man had told him, and Murray responds: "This is the nature

of modern death.... It has a life independent of us.... We study it objectively. We can predict its appearance, trace its path in the body...we've never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes'" (DeLillo 144). Murray is saying here that death is out of a person's control and that there is so much to death that has yet to be determined. Normally, this isn't something Jack would want to hear, but he is comforted by Murray's intelligence on the matter. The reason Jack chose to study and teach Hitler's life/aesthetic is because he believed that Hitler is "larger than death" and that he would be protected by Hitler (DeLillo 274). This perspective on death that Jack has is modernist because he is rationalizing that if he does certain things such as dressing nicely for church (DeLillo 27) or teaching Hitler, things that are related to transcendental matters, he will be protected from death. Murray finally says to Jack, "You don't know how to repress. We're all away there's no escape from death. How do we deal with this crushing knowledge? We repress, we disguise, we bury, we exclude" (DeLillo 275). Jack's problem with death is that he avoided it rather than confronted or acknowledged it. Instead of recognizing death for what it was and will be, he filled his life with "white noise," such as shopping, teaching Hitler studies, his family's narrative, etc. These things distract and "remove" him from death. Murray's honesty with him and his ability to get him to think in the postmodern way is the cause for his move to postmodernism, and Wilder is the final push that Jack needs.

Although not a verbal consultant like Murray, Wilder helps steer Jack into the postmodern direction via his innocence and his actions. Wilder is representative of the innocence and obliviousness to death that Jack and his wife wished they had still. In chapter sixteen, Wilder spends "nearly seven straight hours" crying for reasons unknown to the family (DeLillo 79). What calms him down is the radio, a form of technological white noise. The airborne toxic event hasn't even happened yet, and when it does, Wilder is the only one who remained calm (DeLillo

103). He was calm because he was unaware of the catastrophic event occurring, one where he and his family could potentially die because of a toxic cloud. Jack, on the other hand, is in denial of the possibility of catastrophe from this event and attempts to avoid the matter entirely. Heinrich and Denise make everyone pack up and go because they know what's at stake and don't want to die. As a child, one is oblivious to the harsh realities of life, and that includes death. And Jack admires and is often awestruck by Wilder's dis-concern for death. He envies the innocence that Wilder has, and often contemplates the intelligence or transcendence of Wilder.

“Wilder sat on a tall stool in front of the stove, watching water boil in a small enamel pot. He seemed fascinated by the process. I wondered if he'd uncovered some splendid connection between things he'd always thought of as separate. The kitchen is routinely rich in such moments, perhaps for me as much as him.” (DeLillo 202)

This is seemingly, and is really, a meaningless act on part of Wilder. Like the radio, Wilder is fascinated by something that can be considered white noise. It's not an intentional act of revelation or intrigue by Wilder by any means, but with Jack being Jack, he attempts to put transcendental meaning into Wilder.

Because Wilder is a child, he is disconnected from reality, and he is figuring life out one day at a time. He exhibits the childlike wonder and fascination with minute things, but Jack puts modernist revelations onto him by means of his own contemplations and attempts to understand life, too. Jack, in a discussion of who-fears-death-more with his wife, says this: “Baba, everyone fears death. Why should you be different? You yourself said earlier it is a human condition. There's no one who has lived past the age of seven who hasn't worried about dying” (DeLillo 187). Looking past the hypocrisy of Jack, they distinguish the age in which a child is likely to become aware of death, and that is why they both look to Wilder as enviable—he is three years

old and is unaware that death exists. This is seen in the final chapter of the novel. Wilder rode his tricycle across the highway. People tried to get Wilder to stop, but he moseyed on through with no concern for the oncoming traffic. He was risking his life and doesn't realize that riding across a road with cars going eighty miles per hour can kill you, and that's due to his obliviousness to death. It's not until he falls into a puddle that he begins and finds reason to cry. In his telling of this journey of Wilder's, Jack doesn't mention anything about the possibility of death, but rather, after they recover Wilder, they go and watch the postmodern sunset, as if the whole thing never happened. This exhibits Jack's progress from modernism to postmodernism: instead of trying to name death and place it somewhere it doesn't belong, he represses and moves forward, just as Murray told him to.

To conclude, Annjeanette Weise's essay "Rethinking Postmodern Narrativity" discusses the significance of Jack's story-telling in *White Noise*. Connected to death, Jack is also fearful of plot, of climax, and of the sublime. Jack says to this, "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots.... We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract we all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of plot" (DeLillo 26). Any exciting events, such as the airborne toxic event, could lead to death, and so his narrative is set up so that when anything exciting is going to happen, it is down-played, forgotten, or is quickly left behind with something else that is more "normal." Yet, Jack wants his life story to be epic. And there are instances where things in the end grow more exciting, such as his intent to murder Mink or Wilder's joy-ride on the freeway. Weise claims that: "his attempts to use narrative as a means of understanding not just the information that surrounds him but also himself, his identity in the media- and product-controlled environment, evinces an escape from the deconstructive impulse of postmodern theory and the open but ambiguous structure..." (22). His narration of his life

continuously contemplates the world around him, as he searches to understand the things bigger than him, such as death, and acting almost as a stream-of-consciousness, leads him to a place where he doesn't have to obtain the ultimate answer and from the theory that "truth exists independent of the human consciousness and can be known thru the application of reason" to the theory that "truth may exist independent of human consciousness but there is no objective means of nailing it down" (Drake). In other words, marking his transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Jack's transition into the postmodern is sudden and rather anticlimactic. Because of his conversations with Murray and the innocent influence of Wilder in his life, Jack stops looking at things as transcendent and full of complex meaning. His acceptance of the sublime, in this case the "drama" of the sunset (DeLillo 308), proves his acceptance of the transcendent, the undefined, and the impending. In regards to the sunset, Jack says, "What is there to say? The sunsets linger and so do we. The sky is under a spell, powerful and storied" (DeLillo 308). This is his application of what he's learned and shows he has learned how to repress the inevitable doom of death. Watching the sunsets has become his white noise, his way of looking forward into the postmodern world, with no need to define or protect himself from death. The sunsets provide hope for them as they move on with their narrative.



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