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Utopian Literature

Mid-Term Essay on White Noise

Delillo's *White Noise* investigates themes of consumerism, fear of death, media influence and illusion as it explores the life of an eccentric college teacher with an unhinged fascination of death. The novel expands on the aforementioned characteristic dilemmas by giving the reader an immersive experience of the intellectual curiosity plaguing the lead character's mind. In *White Noise*, Delillo constructs an obscure version of reality for the reader that instigates one to question the author at every turn. The interplay of illusion and reality showcased by the myriad of metaphors embedded in seemingly mundane settings enrich the text with an intricate layer of aesthetic and academic appeal where the reader is constantly evaluating the conclusions formed at the turn of every page. Left to his own devices, the reader stumbles through the novel's exchanges and emerges with an enriched understanding of what exemplifies his reality in the world.

The enigma of the most photographed barn of America first introduces the reader to the interplay of illusion and hyperreality in *White Noise*. What is the barn? Does the barn even exist? What are the tourists capturing with their cameras? The barn, long gone (if even), is not the subject of interest. Instead, the tourists audit reality by capturing the essence of the tourists photographing the supposed barn and by attributing the existence of the signs to the existence of the barn itself. Surely, all roads must lead somewhere. But as it so happens, some roads in *White Noise* lead nowhere. The illusion of the barn comes to life because of the 'realness' of the physical manifestation of the observers – an ode to Delillo's aesthetic genius.

Through the introduction of 'Hitler Studies' as a revolutionary major field of research in the setting of *White Noise*, Delillo expands the horizons of believability and inclusivity in literature. Jack's insecurities and fear of death are masked by his supposed fascination with Hitler Studies. In Hitler, Jack supposedly sees himself for he acknowledges grim, narcissistic parallels between him and his idol. By projecting Jack's eccentric alter-ego in his work through Hitler Studies, Delillo engages the reader to perceive eccentricity through a lens of conformity. To find meaning in the abstract. To understand the meaningful through the meaningless. To understand reality through illusion.

Jack's fear of death is a prevalent theme of the novel - a connotation of which is the innumerably repeated dialogue between Jack, his wife and his subconsciousness: who will die first? What exactly is death in *White Noise*? Is it the erasure of consciousness? Is it the loss of a loved one? Is it the end to intellectual curiosity? Many types of death are explored in the narrative of the novel – the most remarkable of which comes in the form of 'loss of memory'. One is alive for as long as one can claim ownership of the circumstances of his or her life. The essence of memory itself is questioned though. Is memory an illusion of the past or is it a metaphysical manifestation of neuronal behavior? Delillo furthers his argument by touching on the representation of dreams and what they can be interpreted to mean, which begs the question: is life a dream itself? And by extension, is all reality an illusion? In his discussion of death, life, memory and dreams, Delillo's ability to manipulate the aesthetics of reality is second, only to mother nature.

In perhaps the most seemingly straightforward depiction of reality, illusion, chaos and order, Delillo's description of the setting of the supermarket speaks volumes on the current mindset of the characters and mirrors the intangible state of the room. The metaphor of the supermarket is an important one for the reader to understand in that it is a glossary of information on society. From the varied outfits of the shoppers reflecting their culture and status to the assortment of products on the shelves portraying the battle of the conscious and subconscious mind in the background, the supermarket represents an insightful glance into the heart of the reader. Delillo illustrates that the reader is connected to the environment. What one notices around oneself, what one interacts with in tangible reality, what one perceives as 'signs' and what patterns one sees while reading between the lines are all an assortment of what makes one's reality. There is no true reality. There is only perception and perspective. One can find reality in someone else's illusions – in this instance, the supermarket – and Delillo's unraveling of this idea vicariously through this metaphor has a resounding echo in *White Noise*'s linguistic appeal.

The airborne toxic event and the breakout of symptoms of inhalation of Nyodene D represent a significant undertone of *White Noise* which closely relates to the current COVID-19 pandemic: nonchalance and subsequent mass hysteria in the face of calamity. When the toxic cloud first appears in the air above the city, Jack's refusal to acknowledge the problem at hand proves to be disastrous as he eventually fails to outrun the cloud because he escaped too late and, subsequently, exposes himself to the toxin which spells out an impending death sentence for him. Delillo uses the chaos spread by Nyodene D as a model representation of his expectation of society responding to disasters in the current day and age. The over-reliance on media for information (often fake news), the debilitating nature of calamitous news, the schematic whiplash when one's life is thrown into disarray and the paralyzing cascading effect of inevitable doom is exquisitely translated in an engaging narrative of Nyodene D in *White Noise*. Delillo's ability to construct meaningful, relevant satire in a piece not withstanding similar thematic devices is only really understood through a thorough study of the underlying concepts behind the

seemingly unrelated and often, haphazard distribution of fable-like chapters in the novel – a linguistic work of art.

The theme of simulation and reality is ambiguous, yet inherent, to *Waves* and *Radiation* and *The Airborne Toxic Event*. However, the interplay of reality and illusion in the aftermath of the Nyodene D outbreak illustrates how thinly veiled the distinction between the two is. Modern day science and technology employs simulation to understand reality – a common practice in experimental research and quality assurance practices today. In *White Noise* though, the crew of SIMUVAC uses the toxic airborne event – a real occurrence – as a preparatory exercise for a simulation which confounds Jack and by extension, the reader. The inadvertent consequence of this circumstance is the realization that reality and simulation are not as discrete as they may seem. The physical manifestation of reality, or the illusion thereof, can qualify as a simulation for a future event.

Perhaps the most distinct interplay of illusion and reality is the presentation of *déjà vu* in the novel *White Noise*. In the aftermath of the airborne toxic event, the citizens afflicted by Nyodene D begin experiencing *Déjà vu*. The chemical analysis of the toxin Nyodene D, however, predicted no such symptoms. So why exactly were the affected citizens experiencing it? One hypothesis is premised on the belief that almost everyone has wondered about the circumstances of their death. How would I die? Where would I die? What would my loved ones say at my funeral? The mental recollection of these illusions is triggered by the threat of Nyodene D. The neural networks of the brain connected to the memory of simulated death fire in response to the stimulus of possibility of actual death and turns into a very real placebo. What then is *déjà vu*? Is it an illusion or is it reality? Delillo orchestrates a thematic sand trap for the reader to fall into which adds to the aesthetic appeal of the reading journey of *White Noise*.

Delillo saves the best for last. In his conclusion, Dylar introduces yet another ethical dilemma. An obscure, miraculous cure to the elusive fear of death, Dylar represents Noah's ark for the patients in the face of the great flood of death. The fear of death is crippling. Jack and his wife spent their entire marriage obsessing over it in secret. For them, Dylar is salvation. The reader is invited to interpret the Dylar's functionality for it tackled a disease that walks a fine line between illusion and reality. Is fear of death real? Is it a treatable condition? Another aspect the reader has to assess is the opportunity cost of the Dylar. Are the consequences of Dylar intake – muscular atrophy and mental reconditioning – worth the elimination of a hypothetical fear? The disease – an illusion for the reader – is treated as a reality by the characters which accentuates the interplay of illusion and reality in the novel.