The Formation of Identity through Death in DeLillo’s *White Noise*

Don DeLillo in his novel *White Noise*, takes the view of identity to a new level using an interesting story telling technique to show off his themes and goals. A key component of his story telling is the characters. A seemingly plotless novel works through the mundane lives of characters such as Jack, Babette, and their children from previous marriages. Yet, DeLillo takes the challenge of creating the characters’ identities to new heights as he intertwines them deeply with the themes of the novel. DeLillo uses the obsession of consumer goods, the ever present hum of consumer life that they call “white noise,” the reactions to the crisis in the town, and, the most prevalent of the themes, the relationship with death. DeLillo is able to take what seems to be a mundane family in a mundane town and turn it into an entertaining satire. Looking into this notion of the mundane will help to gain a new perspective on the themes of the novel.

DeLillo’s unique writing style sparks an interest for many critics. Annjeanette Wiese looks deeply into the way in which the writing style helps to emphasize the idea of identity.

I argue that *White Noise* communicates the often unnoticed impact of narrative on identity formation, thus highlighting how this particular manner of shaping experience affects our cultural imagination and self-awareness at a time in which narrative structure is often repudiated by the consumer-oriented and media-informed content of our lives (Wiese 3).

While DeLillo often satirizes the consumerism within the novel, it is not the only portion of the characters’ identities that he focuses on. Wiese sees this as a refreshing development in his writing style. She continues to discuss this topic by saying that, “By means of this juxtaposition,
White Noise examines not just the narratives that underlie individual, social, and cultural identity formations, but also the way that narrative as an organizational apparatus shapes such formations” (Wiese 3). DeLillo molds his story around his characters and their interactions with major plot events. The “airborne toxic event” may be the major event within the novel, but it is not focused on as such. Many of the characters find it to be just another day-in-the-life as a human.

DeLillo forms the human experience through his characters, every mundane detail in tact. “DeLillo presents a world mired in simulation, hyperreality, consumerism, and often meaningless information and theory” (Wiese 3). Often the inclusion of such activities of characters -- such as family dinners, watching TV together, and meaningless conversations in the car -- would derail the plot of the story. The reader might be pulled from the tension of the story by this type of exposition in other novels, but in DeLillo’s it acts as the main focus of his message. DeLillo brings the story to life by bringing up activities and conversations that relate to the everyday suburban life. He shows us “a place we can all recognize, and yet nowhere specific, in which characters can self-consciously develop and storied events can occur” (Wiese 4). The characters are so intricately designed to mimic everyday life that they seem to propel themselves through the story. This leads to the assumption that the characters depend on DeLillo’s narration to give them life. Without the inserts of witty banter throughout the novel, a better sense of the characters could not be reached. The best example of this is through Jack, his main character who also acts as the narrator of the events.

Jack describes himself in the beginning of the novel by stating “I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North
America in March of 1968.” (DeLillo 4). Already the reader is intrigued by the actions of this character. What kind of character specifically designs an entire department around Hitler? Besides the fact that he is the chairman of a very unique department, he goes further to bring Hitler into the forefront of his life.

So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn’t want me to grow (DeLillo 17).

Jack is searching for an identity to grow into. Whether this is from his lack of identity after being forced into the mundane acts within the suburbs as the typical average adult, or as some offshoot of his personality that is hidden deep within. No matter how the reader interprets it we are aware that this is not the true identity of Jack. He even disputes this himself expressing “I am the false character that follows my name around” (DeLillo 17). After going so far as to change his name in order to match his more aggressive area of study, it is clear that Jack is attempting to put on an identity that is not natural for him.

Jack is a fake through and through, not even knowing German after his many years as a Hitler professor. During the convention that his college holds he comes face-to-face with this reality. “Even in my black gown and dark glasses, with my name in Nazi typeface over my heart, I felt feeble in their presence, death-prone, listening to them produce their guttural sounds, their words, their heavy metal” (DeLillo 274). He is both jealous of their German speaking abilities, but also terrified that he will be seen as a fake. By hiding in his office many times during the conference, it confirms our suspicions that Jack truly does not understand his own identity. For
the reader, however, it is clear to us that Jack’s identity is widely intertwined with the idea of consumerism and “white noise.”

Sol Yurick, in a review for the Philadelphia Inquirer, expresses his amusement with the themes that make up Jack’s identity. Most of his review muses on the idea behind the title. He takes the narrative themes as a supporting point of “white noise.” “White noise is a susurration, a fusion of signals and messages, a leveling of sounds into one all-sound -- its individual components become indistinguishable” (Yurick 366). The mundane sounds that go ignored for the most part in the novel play the utmost importance within the novel. Jack constantly informs us of simple sentences that he hears from the TV, which always seems to be on in the house, or the radio. There are even times when his daughter murmurs names of brands in her sleep. What Yurick finds most interesting is the way of speaking that each character uses. “In fact, everyone in White Noise speaks the same way. The wonder of DeLillo’s art is that it is not boring or monotonous but very funny in a mordant way. White noise, black humor” (Yurick 366). From the Heimlich’s banter on information in hopes to out-do his father, to the daughter’s concern for Babette, everyone in the family engages in the same banter. All of this culminates into the hum of “white noise.” “White noise prevents us from seeing certain horrifying commonplaces of this modern age” (Yurick 368). The novel opens our eyes to what could be covered by the usual noises we have come so used to blocking out of our conscious. Yet the novel takes a dark turn with this idea. Babette and Jack discuss death one night leading to the concluding questions of “What if death is nothing but sound?...Electric noise...You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful...Uniform, white.” (DeLillo 198). The title takes a more sinister view of this mundane hum
of life. Yet, Jack’s obsession with the idea of death leads us to believe that this might be an
entirely accurate feeling of unease towards that hum.

John Frow views this hum as a look into the “typicality” that resides within the novel. Frow views the novel as a look into the middle-class suburban lifestyle and how it is simply mimicking that which came before it. There is a suggestion that the adults within the novel are living up to a standard set by those adults that came before them. It takes the very real lifestyle that was common at the time and spins it to an utterly ridiculous copy, one in which there is a Hitler department, and classes on eating and posture. While these instances are not so outside of the realm of the possible as to alienate us from the characters, the reader can see the irony more easily due to the overdramatized satire.

The world of White Noise is a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real -- although it is true that they always have the appearance both of preceding another reality (as a model to be followed) and of following it (as copy). But this appearance must itself be taken seriously (Frow 424).

The appearance of this world mirrors ours in a strange and cynical way. The satire must be taken as utterly ridiculous, but also as a warning that this could be what we may fall into if we are not careful.

One of these aspects we must watch out for is what critic Laura Barrett calls “the individual versus the community” (Barrett 101). Much of Jack’s identity is what is built up by keeping up appearances within the community. As a professor he is obviously subject to public scrutiny, especially within the surrounding town. He is meant to be an academic, an intellectual of sorts. Yet, Jack gives into the identity that is cloned throughout the town. A good example of
this is within the mall. When Jack is irked by a comment after a run in with somebody in a store, he gives in to the consumer driven retail therapy. Led by his daughters, he goes on a spending spree on not only himself, but also on the rest of his family.

Far from its roots in Protestantism and the western, White Noise presents a world in which individuality is replaced by media role models and God is replaced by an ATM. The loss of self and spirituality is sorely felt by Jack, a character who attempts, often parodically, to infuse his mundane and superficial life with some grander meaning (Barrett 101).

Although Jack attempts to give his life meaning, through his Hitler studies and garb as a professor, he gives in to the more superficial aspects multiple times within the novel. He is fascinated by the crash scenes on the TV, showing his interest in the news as an entertainment rather than an information source. “Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo 64). When faced with a crisis situation of their own, the family seems to take it more as a hiccup in their daily routine rather than a life-changing event. They seem more interested in the idea of death rather than the event that could cause it.

Throughout the novel Jack has an interesting relationship with the concept of death. As a professor of Hitler studies, we can immediately assume that he has an interesting sense of what is interesting to him. It could be suggested that Jack doesn’t have an interest in Hitler as a man as much as he does with Hitler as the cause of death, as a killer. Jack’s obsession with death often sneaks into his daily life. DeLillo has Jack stress, almost subconsciously, in addressing one of his classes that
All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist
plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games. We edge nearer
death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as
those who are the targets of the plot (DeLillo 26).

The passage is a bit of irony from DeLillo as well, as much of the plot of *White Noise* focuses on
an event that has the side-effect of death. This focus “is the narratively reconstructed human
experience of life in relation to death that offers some power to the novel’s protagonist and
readers” (Wiese 7). The novel becomes more a commentary on life heading towards death, rather
than the mundane of our daily lives. White noise could be seen as the background noise of death
consuming us little by little; a constant presence which is always at the back of our minds as we
go about life. “The tension lies between the possible anonymity and meaninglessness of death in
a postmodern setting and the idea of death as the centralizing endpoint of a plot” (Wiese 10).

Jack’s death is what we view as the end of the plot of his life. Once it is secured that he will
indeed die, whether due to some outside force or the chemicals working within his body from the
airborne toxic event, does it seem that the plot is moving once again.

This obsession with death occurs early on in the novel. Babette and Jack constantly
discuss death wondering “Who will die first?” (DeLillo 30). “Who will die first?” (DeLillo 100).
This question seems to be a main focus point in their relationship, and often seems to be the only
thing aiding attachment between the two. Both claim that they could not handle life without the
other, allowing the fear of death to invade their thoughts. For Babette this proves to be too much,
and she turns to Dylar. Jack’s identity is not safe from this thought either. Jack notes, “When I
read obituaries I always note the age of the deceased. Automatically I relate this figure to my
own age” (DeLillo 99). He is constantly putting himself up against the background of death. Fear of death soon becomes the center of the plot as Jack notices changes within Babette’s attitudes. She claims that “No animal has this condition. This is a human condition. Animals fear many things, Mr Gray said. But their brains aren’t sophisticated enough to accommodate this particular state of mind” (DeLillo 195). Death, more particularly the fear of it, becomes an identifier of the human species. Yet Jack seems to have come to terms with his own pending death claiming that “Death is so vague. No one knows what it is, what it feels like or looks like. Maybe you just have a personal problem that surfaces in the form of a great universal subject” (DeLillo 196). He wishes to brush Babette’s fears away, hoping in turn to get rid of his own.

Jack wishes to look deeply into the idea of death, to rationalize it. This is greatly a way of making himself feel more comfortable. He has already been sentenced to death by the toxins in the air. “[H]e analyzes, he theorizes, and finally he seeks meaning as a counterforce to what he cannot reconcile between the theories he knows and the practices he lives” (Wiese 13). Death has become a very real part of his life, and consequently his identity. He has learned to look past death as a horrific matter that threatens to ruin everything he thought he knew about his life. Jack takes death in as a necessary part of life, and is able to get past his own fear. “Indeed, the novel’s most powerful mystery, death, supplies the very fabric of Jack’s salvation; his near-death experience allows him to move beyond his paralyzing fear of death” (Barrett 111). Jack is able to look past the worry that Babette will die before him and leave him alone. The question of “who will die first?” has been answered in his mind, giving him a bit of peace. Though Jack hides behind dark glasses and his academic robe, it is no longer hiding from death.
DeLillo focuses on his characters rather than an intricate plot line. “In a sense, *White Noise* doesn’t really have a plot: It is about the intrusion of plot into life, a stringing-together of random events into some kind of meaningful schema” (Yurick 368). While acting as a satire, the novel also works to assure us slightly that there is a plot within our lives. The meaning behind DeLillo’s novel rests not in the events that happened, but in the changes that occurred with the characters. Interesting character development is proven here as much more important than a drama filled plot line.
Works Cited


