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Reality, Skewed

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Recent American Fiction class. After graduation, Kate would like to pursue a career in publishing

Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* explores basic human connections and illustrates how they shift when viewed through the lens of post-modernity. The protagonist, Jack Gladney, tries to validate and substantiate his own existence through the connections he forges not only with his job and studies but also with his family, attempting to find meaning in the way his relatives interact with each other and their post modern world, where it is "no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between a generality embedded in life and a generality represented in representations of life" (Frow 420). In this fracturing, consumer-driven, postmodern world, what is "real" is hard to determine and therefore Gladney has nowhere universal to turn in order to assuage his fear of death. Although this fear is certainly not new or unique, the means with which he deals with it are altered because of the postmodern society in which he lives. However, the novel also shows that these social constructs are, ultimately, inadequate in shielding him from the fear and reality of his own death, and illustrates how it is perhaps even detrimental to place too much faith in the security of these connections.

One of the more obvious ways that Gladney tries to manipulate his reality to protect himself from the fear of death is to construct and hide behind a scholarly persona. He describes in detail the way he carved out a niche at the college in which he teaches by literally inventing his area of learning (Hitler studies). Because he was the first to think of it, Gladney is generally considered to be an expert on the subject by his fellow academics. Thus, Gladney's scholarly authority takes second place to the appearance of his authority, where he makes sure to dress and act the part of a professor. He states, "The chancellor had advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J.A.K Gladney...The glasses with the thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea" (DeLillo 17). This deliberate manipulation of his own appearance, the conscientious effort to embody what academia looks like, allows him a small feeling of security. States one of Gladney's colleagues on his successes because of this effort, "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler... Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction...He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler"(11). In this way, the culture's focus on representations of reality, as opposed to reality itself, allow Gladney to become well known in the scholarly community.

Although he feels rather uncomfortable in this role, Gladney continues to try and perpetuate it because Gladney likes being associated with a historical figure so much larger than death. He states, "Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward" (17). By hiding behind one as 'large' as Hitler, Gladney is able to temporarily shake off the feeling of the inevitability of his own death. DeLillo himself states in an interview that, "The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself" (Matters of Fact and Fiction). This suggests that Gladney believes that by being somehow associated with this infamous figure, he will in turn lose himself in the notoriety that is Hitler.

However, it is clear that his position is not a long term solution to Gladney's underlying fear of death. He constantly worries about the fragility of his position, stating, "I had long tried to conceal the fact I did not know German...I was living...on the edge of a landscape of vast shame" (DeLillo 31). Gladney knows that his place in academia is perched precariously; it was gained only from the advantage of being first and not from any special skill or set of experiences. Therefore, it is possible to see how Gladney's fears for his reputation rather ironically mirror his fears of death. Consider the frailty of his situation: by striving to hide in the shadow of such an infamous figure, Gladney only increases his own anxiety and dread over someone discovering him as a false authority. This parallel illustrates how Gladney's fear of death transforms his position of authority and makes his appearance and appeal more important than the actual position of knowledge, brought about by post modern culture's reverence of representations, rather than the actual subject.

After realizing that his job as a professor does not provide him with sufficient cover from the fear of death, Gladney turns to his family as a means of protecting himself, and although he is successful for a short while, his family connections are ultimately not enough to adequately provide a complete haven from his ever-present anxiety. However, Gladney draws comfort from gleaning the domesticity that his family represents for as long as he can. For example, in his search, he (somewhat ridiculously) marries four different women, finally settling down with the reliable, down-to-earth Babette, stating "Babette, whatever she is doing, makes me feel sweetly rewarded...I watch her all the time doing things in measured sequence, skillfully, with seeming ease, unlike my former wives, who had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world" (6). Gladney seems to be just as in love with Babette's normalcy and reliability as he is with her as a person, hoping to use Babette's earthy stability to stave off any uneasy feelings he has about his own existence. In this way, it is possible to see the way the concept of marriage is

slightly skewed in the novel's postmodern setting; matrimony, and the belief in the comfortable reality that matrimony represents, functions not only as a way to stabilize Gladney's life, but also provides a cover for him to hide behind.

Although Gladney may think he is sheltering himself from the reality of his own eventual death, he is in fact ultimately making the situation worse. Babette, the reader finds out, also has a terrible fear of dying, which serves to negate the stability she provides for Gladney. The realization that Babette, too, suffers from the same anxiety as he, shatters Gladney's illusions about the comforts of marriage. He tells her before learning the truth about her condition, "I've never seen you like this. This is the whole point of Babette. She's a joyous person. She doesn't succumb to gloom or self-pity" (191). This assertion highlights the fact that Gladney at first is unable to even accept that Babette might have hidden depths to her. It is as if, after learning of his wife's anxieties, Gladney realizes that both the fear of death and, in turn, death itself is unavoidable. This is difficult for him to come to terms with, as it negates his former attempts at trying to ignore his fear and taking comfort from his wife's apparent pragmatism. Tom LeClair, a literary scholar, illustrates the destructiveness of this habit: "attempting to shelter and be sheltered from awareness in their alliance, the Gladneys bring closer to actuality what they fear most" (LeClair 396). This ineffectiveness brings to light a universal truth: that with higher consciousness comes self-awareness, and in turn, the knowledge of the ending of the self is inescapable. By using marriage as a cover to hide behind, the Gladneys are only postponing the inevitable, the realization that their marriage and the comforting normality that it represents will ultimately fail to protect them from the death they so fear. In a culture where representations of life are almost more tangible than life itself, it is impossible to know where to turn to find meaningful answers.

However, even after the two learn the truth about one another, Jack Gladney and Babette continuously try to plunge themselves in domesticity and human connection to assuage their fear of death. They essentially use their children as a shield against the reality they are trying to avoid; their infant child Wilder, who does not speak, serves as a comfort for both of them. Babette even states in the novel how there are "two things I want most in the world. Jack not to die first. And Wilder to stay the way he is forever" (DeLillo 236). By having Wilder always be innocent and unaware of the suppression of the fear of death, the Gladneys feel that they themselves are protected from the onslaught of death itself as well. This is illustrated by Gladney's reaction to Wilder when, one afternoon, he begins wailing inconsolably, "This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony. I began to think he had

disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility”(74). With this sentence, it becomes clear that Gladney wants to lose himself in Wilder’s crying because it would almost become a type of spiritual connection, and by trying to connect with other humans he would be trying to evade the fear of death. In this way, even though the child’s cry is wordless, it is still fraught with meaning for Gladney; it is ultimately an example of the way Wilder is able to help Gladney feel better about his own reality.

After Wilder stops crying, the family treats the small boy with the utmost careful respect. Scholar Cornel Bonca states about Wilder’s crying episode that, “Wilder has come back ... And the religious language Gladney employs evokes his exalted feeling that sharing his death-terror with his son is a primordial human moment” (The Natural of the Species). It is this connection with Wilder that makes Gladney feel a bit better about his own existence. That Wilder was able to express himself so thoroughly through his crying, and that Gladney was able to share in that experience, is comforting. Unfortunately, once Wilder has finished wailing, Gladney has to come back to his own individual reality. Thus both he and Babette desire for Wilder to stay the way he is forever: unabashedly curious about the world, and unashamed to sincerely explore his own emotions.

Gladney holds this same view for his older children, as illustrated by the attention he pays to their interaction with the world around them, and he is continually amazed by the way they live their lives in a media-saturated culture. Although this fact is disputed by essayist Tom LeClair, who states that, “when the children’s knowledge and questions penetrate their parents closed environment, the kids become a threat...the Gladney children are also the primary channel by which the other danger- the electronic media- enter the parent’s safe domesticity” (LeClair 396), there is almost no textual evidence to support that Gladney and Babette are afraid of their children. On the contrary, when Gladney hears his young daughter, the fearful Steffie, murmur the phrase “Toyota Celica” in her sleep the night after an Airborne Toxic Event forces the family from their home he states, “She was only repeating some TV voice...universally pronounceable. Part of every child’s brain noise..., the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. I depend on my children for that” (DeLillo 155). Instead of being filled with fear that his children are so immersed in media culture that they are muttering brand names in their sleep, he is hit with the realization that this, the repetition of universal advertised names, is a way of connecting to other human beings in the world. Cornel Bonca states, “this whirling bit of language [is] so pervasive worldwide that it can

serve as common coin in Sri Lanka or Schenectady, Rio de Janeiro or Reykjavik - let it soothe your fears...”(Bonca, The Natural of the Species). Gladney realizes that globalization and corporate takeover, the way of life in which the Gladney children are growing up, create new ways to channel humanity, and Steffie’s murmur is one example of this: she is simply reciting global names and brands that connect everyone. Gladney hears this and, rather comically, takes almost religious comfort for a few moments in the product name and in his daughter’s own immersion in this corporate-run culture.

In the long term, however, the reader can also see how impossible it is to sustain any type of reassurance from this trust in corporate names. Gladney is again reminded of his own mortality after being told he was exposed to the toxins present in the Airborne Toxic Event, and struggles to come to terms with this; the momentary comfort that corporate culture induced is no longer adequate. He talks about the panic he experiences, saying “We have these deep terrible lingering fears...the feelings are deep and real” (DeLillo 198). Although Gladney is momentarily lulled into feeling reassured by advertisements and brand names, this trust in these advertisements’ normality and what they represent is not a long term solution to his anxiety. The novel, therefore, asserts how Gladney’s use of his children and trust in corporate culture are ineffective safeguards against his fear of mortality.

In all, it is striking to note how much time Gladney spends in the novel explaining the reality he has constructed for himself. He describes the scholarly persona he crafted, constantly worrying about the fragility of his façade, while simultaneously taking steps to prevent others from seeing through the slightly ridiculous image he built for himself. He surrounds himself with his family, immersed in their domesticity, watching his children interact with each other and society. He takes comfort in them and uses them to forget his own mortality. However, this is rather thin cover, and in this way, it is possible to discern an overriding theme prevalent in the work: that is, the very nature of family and work is transformed for Gladney living in postmodern society. He has to craft his own reality in order to protect himself from his fear of death and although they are temporary solutions, these safeguards have the tendency to disintegrate in the long-term.

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