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CONSUMERIST CULTURE AND MORALITY IN DON DELILLO'S WHITE NOISE: A MODERNIST ANALYSIS THROUGH JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S THEORY

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Abstract

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The paper attempts to investigate the depiction of consumerist culture and its close relationship with mortality concerning White Noise by Don DeLillo. Through the employment of a post-modernist lens and Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, simulation as well as simulacrum, an attempt will be made to explore how the character's perception of reality, as well as death, are shaped throughout the novel. The present exploration will deal with the intricacies of current trends and their subsequent impacts on modern man while dealing with the uprising consumer culture through the integration of Baudrillard's theory. Also, the struggles of the characters will be examined in terms of their construction of reality in the face of excessive symbols and unchecked repetition of simulacra. The character's disorientated view of reality blurs the line between what is real and otherwise thereby creating the ultimate hyper-real existence. Notable events for instance the airborne toxic event and the most photographed barn in America will be analyzed to highlight the pervasiveness of simulacra, producing a community that struggles with the notions of existence and mortality. The paper will highlight the modern man's fixation on excessive consumption by the investigation of notable themes, characters as well as the writing technique present within the novel.

Keywords: Consumerist, Culture, Mortality, Simulacrum, Postmodernism.

Introduction

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a noteworthy work that is known for the employment of black humor, conceptual richness, and an acute criticism of modern life. It sketches the life of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies along with his family as they find their way amid the intricacies of media saturation, consumer culture as well as the eminent fear of death. The family stands as a representative of American society and how they deal with present-day angst and absurdities. Jean Baudrillard's notions became the pillars of postmodernist theorization owing to his concepts of hyper-reality and simulation. (Amna, Mubasher, Hafza, 2024), A key notion about his theory is the concept of simulacrum which refers to the notion of a copy without an original. He argues that this has influenced present-day practices as well as and has greatly impacted profound human experiences. Baudrillard's work contends that modern society is distinguished by an influx of signs, images, and symbols that defy traditional conceptions of truth. These act as a catalyst to further puzzle the variance between the simulated image and the truth.

Problem Statement

In the fictional world presented by Don DeLillo in *White Noise*, the omnipresence of consumerist culture coupled with the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction paves the way for skepticism. The characters find themselves entangled in a world teeming with media forms and an endless array of goods which paves the way for the loss of originality. The present study aims to seek an understanding as to how the novel reflects the influence of a consumerist culture on the characters and the community at large while utilizing the lens of Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality and simulacra.

Research Objectives

1.To investigate the portrayal of hyper-reality and simulation in Don Dalileo's White Noise.

2.To explore the shaping of identities and the choices partaken by the characters in White Noise

Research Questions

1. How does Don DeLillo's *White Noise* portray Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality and simulation?
2. How does consumerist culture shape the identities and moral choices of the characters in *White Noise*?

Significance of the Study

The present research has significance as it explores the intricacies between consumerist culture and the blurring of boundaries between reality and simulation. By the investigation of *White Noise* through the theoretical framework of Baudrillard, the present study invites an understanding of how consumer culture shapes the notions of truth and morality.

Research Methodology

The present study endeavors to examine ways through which consumerist culture is presented and its interchange with the notion of mortality in *White Noise* through the scope of Jean Baudrillard's theory. By examining Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and simulation, it also attempts to interpret the ways through which the character's life is influenced in terms of their attitude towards reality and death aided by an examination of the notable themes and writing techniques. The methodology that will be utilized will be qualitative and it will incorporate close textual analysis, assisted by varying scholarly views about *White Noise* and Baudrillard's framework.

Literature review

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has invited scholars to investigate the novel from varying contexts, focusing on an array of literary theories as well as cultural criticism to bring forth its thematic novelties. (Rai, Syed, 2023), Thus, the novel remains a foundational work in terms of postmodern literature, inviting an in-depth investigation of consumerist culture and

its intertwining relationship with mortality. It's imperative to situate *White Noise* in terms of the larger landscape of postmodern literature before its exploration. The novel has been situated in the postmodern condition as symbolic by critics such as Fredric Jameson. This is owing to its disjointed perception of reality and the pervasiveness of consumerist culture (Jameson, 1991). Various academics have delved into the representation of consumerist culture with regards to *White Noise* denoting its vast importance as the novel's key subject matter. In her key essay "Apocalyptic Consumption: DeLillo's White Noise" the researcher investigates the ways consumerism acts as a means of exercising control, blinding characters to the actual concerns of mortality (Willis, 2004). The notion of mortality has influenced numerous scholars to examine how the characters in *White Noise* face the unavoidability of death within a society that indulges in consumerism. For instance, in *Death in DeLillo's White Noise*, Joseph Dewey highlights how the character's dread of death is heightened by consumerist culture (Dewey, 2009). Cowart (2003) argues that Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality is highlighted within *White Noise* in terms of the eminent domination of mass media as well as the constant desire to acquire consumer commodities which subsequently result in the perversion of reality. Cowart sheds light upon the novel's portrayal of media representations as well as materialistic consumption. He contends that this results in a disjointed and shallow understanding of truths. The discussion surrounding the portrayal of consumerist trends in *White Noise* is a notable subject that has been delved into in detail as far as the scholarship surrounding the novel is concerned. Wilcox (1991) reiterates how the commodities surround and shape the identities of the characters present within the novel about adverts and consumer goods. Wilcox further contends that the community presented in the novel is one where an

individual's self-esteem is heavily influenced by consumerist consumption. (Soomro, Shayan, 2023), Impermanency of life is a key motif within the novel which is depicted through the character's imminent fear of death and their subsequent quest to appease this fright by indulging in shopping or b the excessive use of technology. Nel (1999) argues that death has been portrayed as the "ultimate white noise" which redirects the course of the character's lives in terms of their inability to face it. Jack Gladney's acute fixation on his declining health and his desire to overcome his pervasive fear of death through the consumption of Dylar drugs serves as an example of this notion. Houser (2014) presents a direct relationship between the perception of life and death to that of modern-day angst concerning ecological as well as scientific threats. The Airborne Toxic Event in the novel, she contends, stands as a symbol for the inevitable prevalence of the fear of death which is further intensified by the omnipresence of scientific and environmental crises. This notion supports Baudrillard's presentation of the contemporary era which remains inundated with the omnipresence of countless symbols as well as simulations that subsequently produce an alternative hyperreality. (Aslam, Khan, et. al. 2023), The alternative hyperreality presented in the novel pave's way for the distortion and misrepresentation of the grand narratives such as that of life and death. The pivotal role that is played by technology as well as mass media in the production of a hyper-real alternative reality within the context of the novel has been investigated by LeClair (1987). He maintains that DeLillo's *White Noise* establishes ways in which mass media, about that of television and radio, create the truth for the characters in the novel. This supports Baudrillard's claim that media not only constructs reality but also provides an alternative reflection of it. Ultimately, the scholarship addressing *White Noise* stands as a mark to attest its worth as

postmodern literature thereby lending a criticism of consumerism. Critics have explored the text's richness of motifs by employing Baudrillard's theory to gauge how it has transformed and shaped the modern world.

Analysis and Discussion

A common feature of Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality is that of the indistinct boundaries between the real experiences and the simulated experiences. The barrage of media and the provision of endless products deeply penetrate the lives of the characters in *White Noise*. It also contributes majorly to influencing their wants and needs as well as how they interact with each other. The consistent and deliberate naming of various brands, advertisements, and technological jargon can be found in ample amounts throughout *White Noise*, which is reflective of the pervasiveness of consumerism in the modern world. (Uddin, Anwar, 2024), The consumerist culture as represented in the novel in the shape of hyper-reality not only influences but also twists the experiences of the characters. This hyper-real environment is symbolized in the novel through the supermarket, wherein the characters find themselves surrounded by endless products. The never-ending array of goods is stacked to distract the marketers and bewitch them, creating a hyperreal experience that appears to be truer than the actual world. This is particularly true in the case of Jack Gladney. He notes, "The supermarket shelves have been stocked with generic products, the plain white packages with simple labels in black lettering. A return to a state of nature, free of superfluous decoration, it is the first visible sign of a return to simpler values". This instance exemplifies the production of a hyper-real world manipulated by consumerist culture thereby creating a simulated experience. The façade of simplicity attributed to the packaging of the products in the market shadows the intricate workings of a consumerist culture. Further, Jack ponders on

the overflow of endless goods present in the supermarket which often complicates the lives of the characters, stating, "There's a sense of scarcity that comes with excessive choice. With so many things to choose from, there's a fear of not choosing the right thing, or of missing out on something better" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 32). There remains a commodification of the character's identity as well as their shared communal experience negotiated by consumerist culture within the world of *White Noise*. A direct relationship can be viewed between their understanding of their self-esteem and socioeconomic status and how they indulge in shopping and consumption. For instance, Baba resorts to shopping and gathering products to increase her sense of self-worth and tie it to her ability to purchase. In the same vein, Jack regards himself solely on his capacity to consume as a consumer, "I shop therefore I am" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 15). The persistent significance tied to the ability to consume to attain self-worth is reflective of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, wherein the simulated encounter surpasses legitimate human experiences. The family unit is impacted by the hyper-real atmosphere that surrounds their life in terms of their relationships with each other. Their interactions are embedded with notions of mass media and consumerism to the extent that it eventually paves the way for the formation of their identities. Even their familial roles are determined by mass media as well as the accumulation of endless products. As Jack remarks, "Babette and I and the kids all take Dylar because we want to be healthy and happy. What is more American, more consumer-driven than that?" (DeLillo, 1985). This underscores how the most harrowing event in an individual's life, that of death, has been commodified in the novel, taking shape in the form of the Dylar drug which presumably eases the terror attributed to death. This aligns with Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality which substitutes genuine events

into hyperreal simulations. The consumerist culture present in *White Noise* stands as a source of diversion from the apprehensions of the characters which mainly remains in terms of their pervasive fear of death. This is ensured by a consistent flow of products and the white noise coming from the media which disables their feelings of acute awareness in terms of life, harboring a sense of solace within a doubtful existence. Nonetheless, in the face of an omnipresent threat of death, this façade of temporary control breaks. As Jack ponders, "What if death is nothing but sound and fury, signifying the nothingness that follows this life?" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 226). This instance of extensional angst brings forth the total uselessness of the consumerist culture in combating the fear of death, thereby reinforcing how helpless the characters feel as the fear looms broadly over them. In the context of *White Noise*, Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality is rallied and achieved by the blurring of the fine boundary between what is real and what is simulated. According to Baudrillard, "In the postmodern era, reality is experienced as a simulation, a hyper-real copy without an original referent" (Baudrillard, 1981). The inhabitants of the fictional city live in a world that is flooded with an array of images and symbols that facilitate their understanding and reinforce their perception of the truth. This hyperreal mode of reality can be viewed in the way the characters engage with products and media, which both denote as a form of simulacra that lends itself as a substitute for actual genuine experiences. Within the fictional world of *White Noise*, alternative substitutes are presented for authentic emotions aided by indulging in the consumer culture which provides a simulation of genuine human experiences. This is evident by the character's excessive consumption of TV and radio, resorting to quick food and taking medicines which they believe offers them a transient solution from their deep existential qualms. However, they all fail to

cater to their deep emotional and humanistic desires. Following Baudrillard's theory, these imitations maintain an ongoing cycle of consumption backed by desires which all in all strengthen the hyper-real situation that modern society finds itself entangled in. In *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, the consumer culture acts as an illusion of control over a character's life and destiny, masking the underlying chaos and insecurity tied to human existence. Through the different material possessions and consumer experiences, the characters attain agency in a world full of flux and unpredictability. However, Baudrillard believes that consumerism simply reinforces the domination of capitalism and commodification of desires. (Zibin, Solopova, 2024), The most important theme of the novel is anxiety, as the characters come to terms with their mortality in the face of consumer culture. The presence of commodities and media act as a distraction from the reality of death, as they offer fabricated promises of immortality through consumption. However, this belief is destroyed when the characters of this novel get to know the reality of their mortality, especially during the airborne toxic event and Jack's realization of his mortality. To attain immortality, the characters in *White Noise* are lost in consumerism, as they seek to attain mortality by the buildup of worldly possessions. They further engage in various activities to change their status in the hyperreal world. Jack's wife Babette's obsession with shopping haul and cosmetic surgery sheds light upon her desire to stop her aging process to maintain a young appearance. Likewise, Jack's academic decisions are driven by the fear of death and a yearning for intellectual immortality. However, according to Baudrillard, the attempts to cheat death by engaging in consumerism are futile, as it only continues the cycle of desire and displeasure present in consumer culture. Death itself becomes a simulacrum in *White Noise*, which is a copy without an original. The airborne toxic

event, which placed the lives of the characters in danger, is depicted through the lens of the media. It is responsible for ultimately transforming it from a real threat to a simulated one. As Baudrillard states, "In the hyperreal world, death is no longer a moment of truth but the mere simulation of mortality" (Baudrillard, 1994). The simulation enables the characters to take a step away from the reality of death, alienating them from real human emotions as well as experiences. The protagonist of the novel 'Jack' and his wife 'Babette' are the true examples and the most influenced ones from the consumer culture. (Alonso Ferriero, Zablaza, et. al. 2024), This is because their identities and surroundings are defined by their consumption habits. Jack, a university professor of Hitler studies, also finds himself drowned in consumerism, as he struggles between his academic demands and his role as a consumer. Babette, on the other hand, finds peace in shopping and material possessions and uses it as a means of negating her existential crisis. Jack and Babette's marriage becomes a sort of consumerist relationship. As they drift further apart, they continue to consume goods and acquire material possessions. Thus, their marriage suffers from distractions in the form of media and consumerist habits. Wilder and Steffie, the children in *White Noise*, have been raised in an environment that is shaped by consumer culture and media saturation. The lens of television, advertisement, and popular culture shapes their perspective of reality, which eventually results in the blurring of the lines between simulated and real. Because of this, the children also struggle "to distinguish between the real human experiences and the experiences offered by consumerism, leading to a sense of disorientation. Further, the novel's investigation of media saturation corresponds with Baudrillard's claim media isn't merely a reflection of reality, but rather a construction of reality. A chief turning point in the novel, The Airborne Toxic Event, stands as

an example of this notion. Within a hyperreal world, Baudrillard argues that all experiences become a part of the simulation. This includes death, as its depiction is transformed into an exhibition powered by endless signs and ambiguous media forms. The Airborne Toxic Event demonstrates this simulation as the event's authenticity is shrouded with uncertainty owing to its questionable coverage in the media thereby introducing a feeling of objectivity. As the characters face this growing uncertainty, they ponder how, "The radio said a black billowing cloud of lethal gas was making its way across the countryside, spreading death and destruction. But it also said the cloud was a feathery plume, the size of a medium-sized sailing vessel, and that it was dispersing harmlessly in the wind" (DeLillo, 1985). In this scenario, there remains a contradiction between the various news reports which leads to the creation of a simulated situation. It is hard to discern the truth from the simulation. This is because the actual damage that the Airborne Toxic event is capable of cannot be gauged because of multiple media representations. It also leads to further complications within the world presented in the novel, in terms of the character's vision of mortality. A sense of dread prevails in the lives of the characters when faced with the Airborne Toxic Event owing to its representation on the radio and television, although the actual truth surrounding the event remains vague. This absolute reliance upon the media to produce individual truths as well as communal reality is noted by Jack. As Jack claims, "For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set" (*White Noise*, 66). There are characters present in the novel, for instance, 'Murray Siskind' and 'Heinrich' who are portrayed as outsiders that portray a critique of consumer culture and its influence on modern society. Murray, who is also a professor at the university with Jack, is a person who sees through the charm and

illusions of consumerism, viewing it as a social control that steals the realities of existence. Heinrich, who is Jack's teenage son from his previous marriage, also rejects the values of consumerist and existential questioning. With these characters, the writer of this novel, Don DeLillo, has challenged the reader to reconsider the morals and consequences of consumer culture in the contemporary world. There are many central motifs in *White Noise*, one of the most prominent ones being the Television. The television symbolizes the hyperreality of consumer culture and its ensuing impact on the character's perception of reality. (Soomro, Shayan. 2023), The presence of television screens and media images in the lives of the characters emphasizes Baudrillard's notion of simulation, as the lives of the characters become mediated by the display of television. In the novel, the Airborne Toxic Event serves as a metaphor for the uncertainty of human life and mortality in the modern consumerist society. As the characters get to know about the reality of their mortality, they are forced to reckon with the fleeting nature of existence and come to terms with the control that is exercised by the consumer culture. The toxic cloud, which appears all over the town, is an indication of the existential threats that lie beneath the surface of everyday life. This also challenges the character's complacency and makes them question their notions regarding their mortality. In *White Noise* the most recurring motif is "The Most Photographed Barn", as it represents the tension between reality and consumerist culture. As Jack states in the novel "We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and an apple orchard. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing "The most photographed barn in America". We counted five signs before we reached the site" (DeLillo, 1985, p.12). These lines from the novel highlight the artificiality of consumerist culture, as the most

photographed barn becomes a simulacrum of itself with endless representations. The theory of 'Hyperreality' provides an apt framework for deconstructing the truth claims of consumer culture *White Noise*. Don DeLillo's use of narrative technique as well as symbolism exposes the constructed nature of truth or reality in a hyper-real society. Through this depiction, the author challenges the readers to question their thoughts about identity, morality, and authenticity. Further, by the employment of irony, this novel attempts to analyze the problems of postmodern consumerist culture and its ensuing influence on the human condition. There is also an incorporation of dark humor as well as a satirical tone in this novel, which sheds light upon the contradictions and the double standards of consumerism. These narrative techniques prompt the readers to consider the uselessness of material pursuits and help them to find the real meaning in a hyperreal world. Finally, the novel 'White Noise' serves as a commentary on contemporary society and its obsession with consumerism which paves the way for existential anxieties and dire consequences. By using Baudrillard's theory with literary analysis, this research paper highlights the complexities of modern society and the condition of humans in the face of consumer culture. Further, by using Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality as a lens, the novel presents a criticism of the omnipresence of consumerism in the fictional world as well as its impacts on notions of truth. Also, the novel highlights how the consumerist culture produces an alternative reality, a hyper-real world that is responsible for twisting the events in the lives of the characters as it alters profound experiences into a mere simulation. Further, this research paper offers insights into which literature can engage and analyze the current problems with the culture of its time.

Conclusion

In this research paper, the consumerist culture and its relationship with mortality has been examined through *White Noise*, using Jean Baudrillard's theory as a theoretical framework. By closely analyzing the themes, characters, and narrative techniques of this novel, this research paper has concluded how consumerism shapes the thoughts or perceptions of the characters related to reality and death in the novel. Moreover, it underscores how the concept of hyperreality and simulacra introduced by the modernist theorist Baudrillard, provides a framework or lens for understanding these phenomena. The key findings of this research paper are the understanding of consumerist culture and its current consequences in modern society. *White Noise* invites its readers to rethink their attachments and relationships with consumerism and mortality, and how these things shape their daily lives. Furthermore, it can be useful for future research that would explore literature, cultural theory, and consumer culture, and examine how the works of fiction comment on the dynamics of consumerism.

Recommendations

The present study has delved into the consumerist culture and mortality in *White Noise* by incorporating the theoretical lens presented by Jean Baudrillard. The findings offer various recommendations. Firstly, it invites future exploration of the notion of media saturation and its relationship with reality. The advent of the latest means of technology such as social media paves the way for the creation of simulation which is directly linked to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra. Further, an interdisciplinary examination can be utilized by incorporating ideas sought from psychology or philosophy which will offer newer insights as to how they contribute to the notion of hyperreality.

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