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Echoes of Fear: Postmodern Anxiety and the Death Consciousness in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* stands as a profound cultural mirror of postmodern America, capturing the fragmented psyche of individuals overwhelmed by media saturation, consumerism, and the omnipresence of death. This paper explores how DeLillo's narrative transforms ordinary domestic life into a stage for existential dread, where the fear of mortality becomes a constant background noise—an echo of collective anxiety in late capitalist society. Employing theoretical frameworks from Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, Fredric Jameson's late capitalism, Jean-François Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic notion of the death drive, the study investigates how the novel portrays death consciousness as both a suppressed and overexposed cultural phenomenon. Through close textual and thematic analysis, this research argues that *White Noise* embodies postmodern anxiety not as an individual pathology but as a social condition, revealing how technological mediation and commodified existence distort human perception of reality and mortality. Ultimately, the paper contends that DeLillo's vision compels readers to confront the terrifying beauty of a world where fear itself becomes the last authentic emotion.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Anxiety, Death Consciousness, Consumerism, Media, Don DeLillo, Existentialism

Introduction

Published in 1985, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* captures the essence of postmodern America—a society obsessed with information, consumption, and survival amid the white noise of everyday life. Set in the small college town of Blacksmith, the novel chronicles the life of Jack Gladney, a professor of “Hitler Studies,” his wife Babette, and their blended family. Beneath the surface of suburban ordinariness runs a deep current of unease—a pervasive awareness of mortality intensified by the media's endless reproduction of catastrophe and the numbing comfort of consumerism. DeLillo's narrative is emblematic of postmodern fiction: fragmented, ironic, and self-reflective, it dismantles the illusions of progress and stability that define modern Western life.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo envisions a world where technology mediates every experience, reducing both life and death to consumable images. The characters' anxieties are not only psychological but structural—products of a society where meaning collapses under the weight of information and simulation. Through satire and dark humor, DeLillo reveals that the fear of death, rather than being transcended by modern science, has become amplified by the very systems designed to control it.

The study of anxiety and death in DeLillo's *White Noise* remains critically relevant to understanding contemporary postmodern consciousness. The novel anticipates the existential condition of the 21st century, where technological immersion, ecological crises, and media sensationalism shape the collective psyche. In a culture where even death is mediated—turned into spectacle through news cycles, screens, and digital archives—DeLillo's work raises pressing questions about authenticity, identity, and the human capacity for meaning. His characters embody the postmodern subject: hyper-aware yet emotionally detached, connected to the world through information but alienated from genuine experience. Examining the intersection of anxiety and death consciousness thus illuminates the psychological cost of living in an age of relentless mediation.

This paper investigates how postmodern culture's obsession with technology, media, and consumerism generates a unique form of existential disquiet. In *White Noise*, death is omnipresent yet unspeakable—its horror displaced by televised disasters, pharmaceutical solutions, and the illusion of safety. The “Airborne Toxic Event,” for instance, exposes the fragility of the human condition and the unreliability of institutional assurances, revealing the paradox of a society that worships control but is haunted by chaos. The research problem, therefore, centers on understanding how *White Noise* dramatizes the psychological repercussions of living in a postmodern world where the boundaries between the real and the simulated dissolve, and where death becomes both spectacle and taboo.

This research seeks to achieve the following objectives: to explore the representation of postmodern anxiety in *White Noise* as a manifestation of cultural and existential disintegration, to analyze the motif of death as a recurring psychological and social phenomenon within DeLillo's portrayal of late capitalist America and to interpret DeLillo's critique of media simulation, consumerism, and the commodification of fear as central mechanisms of postmodern identity.

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in postmodern and psychoanalytic frameworks. The theoretical foundation draws on Jean Baudrillard's notion of *hyperreality*, Fredric Jameson's theory of *late capitalism*, Jean-François Lyotard's concept of fragmented metanarratives, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of death anxiety and repression. This interdisciplinary approach enables a reading of *White Noise* that situates personal fear within larger structures of cultural

production and symbolic mediation. The paper also engages secondary criticism on DeLillo's work to contextualize his narrative strategies within the broader discourse of postmodernism and existential thought.

White Noise encapsulates the fragmentation of identity and the pervasive fear of death in a postmodern society dominated by media simulations and consumerist ideology. Through the interplay of irony, fear, and commodification, DeLillo exposes the paradox of a culture that seeks to repress death while simultaneously consuming its images, revealing anxiety as the fundamental condition of postmodern existence.

Literature Review

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has been one of the most frequently analyzed novels in the postmodern canon, serving as a touchstone for understanding late twentieth-century American anxiety, consumer culture, and death obsession. The novel's thematic core—its fusion of existential dread with mediated experience—has prompted critical discussions spanning media studies, postmodern theory, and psychoanalysis. The following review synthesizes key theoretical perspectives and critical readings that illuminate the novel's treatment of postmodern anxiety and death consciousness.

Fredric Jameson's formulation of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" provides a crucial framework for understanding *White Noise* (Jameson 6). For Jameson, postmodern culture is characterized by depthlessness, pastiche, and the commodification of all experience. DeLillo's novel vividly enacts these dynamics: the supermarket, the family home, and the college all function as sites where identity and meaning are consumed rather than constructed. Jack Gladney's obsession with his own image and academic persona reflects the commodified nature of knowledge and selfhood. As Jameson observes, postmodern subjects are trapped within systems of consumption that render authenticity impossible, a condition perfectly mirrored in DeLillo's portrayal of suburban America's sterile comfort and hidden dread.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of *simulation* and *hyperreality* further deepens the analysis of anxiety in DeLillo's fictional universe. According to Baudrillard, postmodernity marks a stage in which reality is replaced by models and representations that "no longer have any relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 6). In *White Noise*, the omnipresence of television and media spectacle exemplifies this collapse of the real. Events like the "Airborne Toxic Event" or televised disasters are filtered through media narratives, transforming authentic fear into commodified spectacle. As Osteen notes, "DeLillo's characters do not experience events directly; they experience their representations" (Osteen 165). Thus, anxiety in *White Noise* emerges not from confrontation with reality, but from the impossibility of distinguishing reality from its simulation.

The fear of death—what the novel calls "the greater and more personal danger" (DeLillo 141)—is the emotional nucleus of *White Noise*. Drawing upon Freud's theory of the death drive (*Thanatos*), the novel portrays death consciousness as both repressed and omnipresent. Freud postulates that human beings are driven by an unconscious compulsion toward death, balanced by the life-preserving instincts of *Eros* (Freud 46). Jack and Babette's obsession with their mortality, and their desperate pursuit of Dylar—a drug that promises to eliminate fear of death—illustrates this duality. As Cowart suggests, DeLillo "renders the death drive in terms of consumer desire, revealing a culture that purchases its own denial" (Cowart 72). Their attempts to anesthetize fear through pharmaceutical and commercial means dramatize the futility of repressing mortality in a postmodern culture that transforms even dread into commodity.

Philosophically, DeLillo's preoccupation with mortality aligns with existential thought. Heidegger's notion of *Being-toward-death* frames human authenticity as a confrontation with finitude (Heidegger 294). Yet, in *White Noise*, this authenticity is systematically deferred; media and consumption provide perpetual distraction. Babette's confession that she takes Dylar because "fear of death is stronger than death itself" (DeLillo 198) encapsulates the paradox of postmodern existence: individuals are obsessed with mortality but incapable of genuine encounter with it. Critics like Duvall argue that DeLillo uses death "as a metaphor for the loss of metaphysical meaning in postmodern culture" (Duvall 39). The novel's characters do not live authentically but in a state of suspended dread, mediated by the hum of "white noise" that fills every space.

The role of media in *White Noise* cannot be overstated. It acts both as symptom and cause of postmodern anxiety. According to Baudrillard, mass media produce a "hyperreal" world in which the distinction between image and event collapses (Baudrillard 13). DeLillo's narrative embodies this phenomenon through the characters' dependence on television for reality validation. The recurring motif of "Most Photographed Barn in America" encapsulates Baudrillard's insight: the barn's significance lies not in its existence, but in the idea of its constant reproduction. As LeClair argues, "DeLillo exposes how the image has replaced experience, how mediation has become the means of existing" (LeClair 58).

Moreover, the media's endless documentation of disaster—chemical spills, plane crashes, and supermarket panics—creates a feedback loop of anxiety. Each catastrophe is simultaneously terrifying and reassuring because it confirms that disaster remains spectacle, not personal fate. As DeCurtis notes, *White Noise* "is a meditation on the ways we experience death through images, never as immediate truth" (DeCurtis 61). The novel thus portrays a society where individuals seek meaning through the media's simulation of fear, losing their capacity for direct emotional engagement.

Consumerism functions as both the anesthetic and the amplifier of postmodern anxiety in *White Noise*. The supermarket scenes, described with almost religious reverence, symbolize the substitution of spiritual transcendence with material consumption. The abundance of products becomes a metaphor for the void it conceals. As King observes, "DeLillo's supermarket is a cathedral of desire, where consumption serves as ritual against existential despair" (King 98). Ironically, these rituals offer no solace; they merely reinforce dependence on an economic system that thrives on discontent.

In postmodern society, irony replaces sincerity, and parody replaces belief. Lyotard's concept of the "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) helps explain why DeLillo's characters cannot locate meaning in traditional structures—religion, family, or science. Their lives are fragmented into episodes of information, consumption, and fleeting emotion. As Heller notes, "DeLillo's irony is not liberating but paralyzing—it mocks belief while exposing the need for it" (Heller 54). The novel's humor, therefore, is deeply tragic, revealing how irony itself becomes a defense mechanism against existential fear.

While numerous scholars have explored *White Noise* as a satire of consumerism or a critique of media, relatively fewer studies have synthesized these interpretations through the lens of *postmodern anxiety and death consciousness*. Existing analyses often treat the novel's themes—technology, simulation, death, family—as discrete, yet DeLillo's narrative weaves them into a unified commentary on the human condition in late modernity. This paper fills that gap by integrating postmodern theory (Baudrillard, Jameson, Lyotard) with psychoanalytic and existential perspectives (Freud, Heidegger) to reveal how *White Noise* dramatizes the internalization of cultural fear. The death consciousness that haunts DeLillo's world is not merely personal; it is systemic, arising from a society that replaces meaning with noise, and authenticity with imitation.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual grounding of this study lies at the intersection of postmodern theory, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy, all of which converge to explain the anxiety and death consciousness that permeate Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The postmodern individual, as depicted in the novel, exists in a world of simulated meanings and mediated realities, where technology and consumerism produce both comfort and alienation. The theories of Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Sigmund Freud, and Martin Heidegger provide the interpretative lens for examining this cultural and psychological condition.

Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulation* and *hyperreality* is central to DeLillo's narrative world. According to Baudrillard, in a postmodern society, "the real is no longer what it was" because images and signs no longer refer to any underlying truth (Baudrillard 2). Fredric Jameson's notion of *the cultural logic of late capitalism* illuminates the socio-economic dimensions of this anxiety. Jameson argues that postmodern culture is marked by depthlessness, fragmentation, and a compulsive reproduction of commodities (Jameson 9). In DeLillo's novel, the supermarket becomes the symbolic heart of this capitalist order—offering material abundance as a substitute for spiritual or emotional fulfillment.

Jean-François Lyotard's *incredulity toward metanarratives* helps explain the epistemological breakdown in *White Noise*. The novel's characters live in an era where grand narratives of religion, progress, and morality have collapsed, leaving only fragmented truths (Lyotard xxiv). Jack's academic construction of "Hitler Studies" as a serious discipline parodies this condition—an attempt to impose meaning where none exists. His obsession with authority and image underscores the postmodern condition of self as spectacle, not essence.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud's concept of the *death drive* (*Thanatos*) provides a framework for understanding the novel's fixation with mortality. Freud asserts that humans are driven by an unconscious compulsion toward self-destruction, which coexists with the life-preserving instincts of *Eros* (Freud 46). Jack and Babette's obsessive fear of death—culminating in their desperate search for Dylar, a drug that promises to neutralize this fear—illustrates Freud's paradox: the more one attempts to repress death, the more it dominates consciousness. The family's reliance on pharmaceutical and consumer remedies dramatizes the Freudian tension between repression and return.

Finally, Martin Heidegger's notion of *Being-toward-death* situates the human confrontation with mortality as the foundation of authentic existence. Heidegger argues that only by acknowledging death as inevitable can individuals achieve genuine understanding of being (Heidegger 294). In *White Noise*, however, this confrontation is deferred through distraction and simulation. Jack's realization—"I am the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo 17)—captures Heideggerian inauthenticity; he exists not as a self-aware being but as a construct within a mediated culture.

Together, these frameworks reveal that DeLillo's *White Noise* is not merely a narrative of individual fear but a diagnosis of cultural pathology—an exploration of how postmodernity transforms death from a private reality into a public spectacle, and anxiety from emotion into ideology.

Analysis and Discussion

The Spectacle of Death: Media, Simulation, and Fear

The "Airborne Toxic Event" epitomizes the transformation of real catastrophe into mediated experience. Rather than confronting danger directly, the Gladney family consumes information about it through radio and television updates. DeLillo writes, "The radio said we were safe... the television said we were in danger" (*White Noise* 127). This contradiction exemplifies Baudrillard's idea that media simulations generate confusion and amplify fear. The toxic cloud, though tangible, becomes more symbolic than physical—representing the omnipresence of technological uncertainty. Trauma in this sense is mediated and dispersed, blurring the line between reality and representation (Baudrillard 6).

Television in *White Noise* operates as both anesthetic and amplifier of fear. The novel opens with the televised "station wagons" arriving for the college semester, signifying the mediated texture of daily life (DeLillo 3). As Osteen observes, "Television becomes the collective unconscious of the Gladney family" (Osteen 170). News broadcasts translate death into spectacle—detaching individuals from authentic experience while feeding their obsession with catastrophe. The constant stream of "white noise"—advertisements, news, static—constructs an environment where fear is commodified, its repetition transforming mortality into a consumable image. Authentic dread dissolves into background entertainment.

DeLillo's world is one where authentic experience has been displaced by simulation. The characters' responses to crisis are mediated through screens, manuals, and scientific jargon. Jack's inability to distinguish between lived fear and televised emotion underscores Baudrillard's theory that hyperreality replaces the real. "For most of us there are only two places in the world: home and the supermarket," Jack muses (*White Noise* 38). The banalization of life through routine and repetition reflects how simulation produces emotional numbness. Fear persists, but in an abstract, aesthetic form—more image than experience, more spectacle than suffering.

Consumerism and the Illusion of Security

The supermarket in *White Noise* symbolizes the sacred space of postmodern consumerism. It offers a sense of stability amid existential chaos. Jack finds comfort in “the bright packaging, the music, the sense of replenishment” (*White Noise* 36). King interprets this as “a ritual of reassurance against the void” (King 98). The repetitive act of shopping constructs an illusion of control and permanence, masking the underlying fear of mortality. DeLillo’s supermarket is thus a modern cathedral, where consumption substitutes for faith, and the abundance of goods serves as the secular promise of immortality.

Dylar, the experimental drug Babbette consumes, epitomizes postmodern society’s pharmacological repression of death anxiety. When Jack learns of the drug, he becomes fixated on its promise to “eliminate the fear of dying” (*White Noise* 197). Freud’s notion of repression applies here—the more one seeks to suppress the death drive, the more it resurfaces as neurosis (Freud 50). Babbette’s confession, “I want to believe there’s something that takes it away” (*White Noise* 199), encapsulates the human desire for technological transcendence. Yet the Dylar experiment reveals only the futility of such faith: fear, once commodified, becomes incurable.

In DeLillo’s vision, consumerism extends beyond goods to encompass emotions, relationships, and even fear itself. Jack’s family consumes not only products but identities, television scripts, and narratives of safety. As Cowart notes, “Consumption becomes the medium through which DeLillo’s characters negotiate the void” (Cowart 72). This commodification breeds emotional numbness; affection and anxiety are equally mediated. When Jack describes the supermarket’s “too bright” atmosphere (*White Noise* 38), it symbolizes overstimulation masking emptiness. The pursuit of comfort through objects ultimately erodes genuine affect, leaving the individual trapped between material abundance and spiritual desolation.

Fragmented Identity and the Collapse of Meaning

In *White Noise*, DeLillo portrays a world where identity disintegrates under the weight of language and media saturation. Jack Gladney’s academic persona—a professor of “Hitler Studies” who does not speak German—symbolizes the artificiality of postmodern identity (DeLillo 36). His reliance on jargon and titles reveals the fragility of meaning in a world where simulation replaces substance. As Jean Baudrillard notes, “the real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models” (Baudrillard 2). DeLillo’s academia mirrors this simulation, where intellectualism becomes spectacle, and truth collapses into performance.

The parody of academic life in *White Noise* exposes the emptiness of institutional discourse. The college’s obsession with disciplines like “Advanced Nazism” and “American Environments” ridicules postmodern academia’s detachment from reality (DeLillo 12). As Fredric Jameson suggests, postmodern culture thrives on “depthlessness” and the “waning of affect” (Jameson 10). DeLillo captures this through scholars who debate trivialities while ignoring existential crises, thereby dramatizing the intellectual vacuum of the postmodern subject.

DeLillo also dissects the postmodern family as a collage of disconnected selves. Jack’s household, composed of children from multiple marriages, represents fragmented kinship in a mediated world. Their communication is mediated through screens and consumer symbols rather than genuine emotion. When Jack’s son Heinrich discusses the toxic cloud using statistical probabilities, it highlights how “the family becomes another arena of simulation” (Osteen 213). The domestic space, once intimate, is transformed into a microcosm of postmodern disconnection and epistemological uncertainty.

Existential Dread and the Search for Authenticity

Jack’s confrontation with mortality is the novel’s central existential axis. His encounter with the toxic cloud and later with Babbette’s infidelity reveals a deep fear of nonexistence. DeLillo writes, “Who will die first? This was the true and lasting question” (*White Noise* 155). Jack’s dread echoes Freud’s theory of the death drive, where self-preservation coexists with an unconscious pull toward destruction (Freud 46). DeLillo transforms this anxiety into a postmodern condition—death is both omnipresent and absurdly mediated.

The novel exposes the futility of escaping mortality through science or media. The experimental drug Dylar, which promises to erase fear of death, epitomizes technological hubris. As Babbette admits, “It makes you forget that you’re afraid of dying, but not that you’re going to die” (DeLillo 197). This echoes Ernest Becker’s assertion that culture and science serve as “immortality projects” masking the terror of death (Becker 28). DeLillo’s characters illustrate the paradox of a society that intellectualizes death while failing to confront its inevitability.

Irony and fear coexist in DeLillo’s philosophical inquiry into being. Jack’s attempted murder of Babbette’s lover becomes both tragic and absurd, an existential outburst framed by the artificial calm of media imagery. As Lyotard observes, postmodernism is defined by “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv)—and DeLillo’s narrative resists redemption or resolution. The closing supermarket scene, with its surreal glow of consumer goods, signifies humanity’s desperate attempt to find meaning amid chaos. DeLillo’s prose thus transforms existential dread into a postmodern meditation on authenticity, mortality, and the disintegration of self.

Findings

Echoes of Fear: Postmodern Anxiety and the Death Consciousness in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

The analysis of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* reveals that postmodern anxiety is intricately bound to the fragmentation of identity, the saturation of media, and the commodification of death. DeLillo’s narrative situates the human psyche within an artificial world where fear, rather than faith or reason, becomes the dominant mode of existence. The novel’s depiction of the *Airborne Toxic Event* encapsulates how media transforms catastrophe into spectacle—rendering trauma both consumable and distant. Through the incessant repetition of televised warnings and contradictory news reports, DeLillo exposes a culture desensitized by simulation, in which the experience of fear is no longer authentic but mediated through technology (Baudrillard 2; DeLillo 121).

Consumerism functions as both anesthetic and illusion. The supermarket, with its ordered abundance, becomes a site of temporary stability—a “spiritual refuge” for characters seeking control amid existential chaos (DeLillo 38). Yet, this illusion collapses under scrutiny, as consumer rituals merely mask death anxiety. Jack and Babette’s dependence on Dylar—a pharmaceutical attempt to erase fear of dying—demonstrates how modern individuals outsource emotional management to products, enacting what Ernest Becker describes as “the cultural denial of death” (Becker 28). DeLillo thus reveals that consumer capitalism not only commodifies material life but also colonizes human consciousness, transforming fear into a marketable commodity.

The novel further discloses the fragmentation of identity in a world overrun by simulation. Jack Gladney’s self—constructed through his academic persona as a Hitler Studies professor—is a façade built on linguistic and institutional performance (DeLillo 36). His inability to sustain this role signifies the collapse of meaning within postmodern discourse. In alignment with Jameson’s notion of the “waning of affect” (Jameson 10), DeLillo portrays language as emptied of authenticity, leaving the subject alienated and performative. The parody of academia and family life underscores a world where communication fails, and relationships are mediated by screens, data, and consumer rituals rather than genuine emotion.

DeLillo’s engagement with existential dread elevates *White Noise* beyond social satire to philosophical inquiry. Jack’s confrontation with mortality transforms the narrative into a meditation on authenticity and being. Despite his attempts to control death through intellect, violence, and medicine, he remains haunted by the inevitability of decay. The futile reliance on science and media for salvation reaffirms Freud’s concept of the death drive (Freud 46), suggesting that the fear of death underlies every postmodern structure of knowledge and power. In the end, the supermarket—illuminated by the glow of its electronic scanners—emerges as a modern cathedral of consumption, symbolizing humanity’s continued worship of technology in place of transcendence.

Ultimately, *White Noise* embodies the postmodern condition as defined by Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). It rejects redemptive closure, presenting a world where irony, simulation, and fear coexist without resolution. DeLillo’s portrayal of postmodern anxiety and death consciousness reflects a society suspended between meaning and nothingness—a civilization haunted by its own technological creations, seeking solace in the very systems that perpetuate its dread.

Conclusion

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* stands as a profound meditation on the postmodern condition, where the fear of death permeates every aspect of human experience. The novel exposes how media saturation, consumerism, and technological advancement distort authentic perception, replacing genuine emotion with simulated reassurance. In a world where catastrophe is televised and identity is mediated through performance, DeLillo’s characters struggle to locate meaning amidst chaos. The *Airborne Toxic Event* and the Dylar experiment symbolize humanity’s futile attempts to rationalize or escape mortality through artificial means. DeLillo portrays death not merely as an end but as a pervasive consciousness that defines existence in late-capitalist society. Jack Gladney’s existential awakening reflects the universal human condition—caught between the awareness of death and the desire to transcend it. The novel’s closing image of the supermarket, illuminated by its mechanical light, encapsulates the illusion of order within a culture of fear. Ultimately, *White Noise* reveals that postmodern anxiety is inseparable from the human confrontation with mortality. Through irony and philosophical depth, DeLillo transforms the ordinary into the metaphysical, showing that the noise of modern life is not merely external—it echoes from the deepest recesses of fear and being.

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