

# Don delillo's white noise: modernity and the nuclear family



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Patched together from different marriages, various mothers and fathers, the nuclear family in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is nothing if not impacted and constructed by modernity. This explication of a typical American lifestyle does not examine the simplicity of daily life but rather the influence of outside sensory impact that impinges itself upon the nuclear family. The "noise" that surrounds and engulfs the modern family separates it from larger, universal issues that become muddled with the continuing barrage of information and confusion. Life and death become nothing but commodities, pieces of information, tossed into the slew of images, sounds and movements involved in modern living. TV, radio, food products, toxic waste)they enshroud the family, separating it from universal understanding to protect it, and, paradoxically, destroy it. For Jack and his wife, fear of death is all that remains of survival. Modern life, the implications of technology, capitalism and progress, all separate the typical nuclear family from such philosophical, spiritual understandings as the meanings of life and death. The toxic cloud, spreading its poison over Iron City and vicinity, immediately affects the community and the nuclear family in such a way that technology overwhelms humanity. Heinrich realizes his fifteen minutes of fame in the Red Cross camp where he discusses the dire fate of Nyodene D. victims. His father asks, " Was he finding himself, learning how to determine his worth from the reactions of others? Was it possible that out of the turmoil and surge of this dreadful event he would learn to make his own way in the world?" (131). The cloud of noxious, deadly chemicals was a construct of mankind; the nuclear family is pushed and prodded by this cloud. Their very interactions, personal pursuits and attitudes are drastically altered by a modern, manmade mistake. Technology, as a modern

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institution, places a literal wall between members of the family by the arrival of this gaseous, daunting smog. Jack watches Heinrich in wonderment; his own son has completely transformed himself into the tour guide, the omnipotent master of Nyodene D. knowledge. The cloud has affected him to such a point that his own family cannot recognize him from the young boy who maintains a chess match with a convicted killer. Jack recognizes this change when he comments, " I didn't want him to see me there. It would make him self-conscious, remind him of his former life as a gloomy and fugitive boy" (131). The gloomy and fugitive boy, if unimpressed by the overwhelming socio-technological event around him, would remain just as his father had initially perceived him to be a rather introverted, literal, argumentative and highly intelligent creature. With the volatile substance, however, the family was altered. The outside forces, created by man, are implicated in the destruction of man's social network. The television, perhaps, is the most widely used tool in DeLillo's commentary. The stunning scene of the family gathered around the set watching their wife and mother mouth instructions about posture is one of the most haunting scenes in the book. The volume is down and the image of this woman gesturing and moving her lips creates such a draw, like the human fascination with a car accident, that all pretences of family disappear. Technology and modernity have separated the family physically the face that remains on the set evokes the shock. " Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces," Jack relates. " What did it mean? What was she doing there in black and white, framed by formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through the wavebands, through <https://assignbuster.com/don-delillos-white-noise-modernity-and-the-nuclear-family/>

energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?" (104). Because Babette is placed in this box of fluorescence and light, her family cannot understand who she is, where she is, or even if she is alive. The universal understanding of death after life is muddled here; Jack and his children see Babette, but they cannot conceive of her living "framed by formal borders." Technology has inundated their lifestyle to the extent that Babette has overwhelmed the traditional family nucleus and burst out of her sphere into a technological world where boundaries are nonexistent. Life is made up of "wavebands," "energy levels" and essentially, white noise. Death has become inconceivable, the family does not maintain the spatial ability to see Babette in such a position, confined yet emancipated by technology. Technology's emancipation, though flabbergasting the conception of the nuclear family in the situation of Babette on TV, also brings the family to new heights of modern experience. The continuing flow of information can adversely reform the nuclear family; however, modernity can also sugarcoat it. Commodification of family life becomes mainstream in DeLillo's novel, offering the idea that modernity can both aid and destroy community. When Jack suddenly feels expansive, in that he wishes to shop until he drops, he recognizes the freedom and happiness that surrounds himself, his family and his community in the midst of the mall. "When I could not decide between two shirts, they encouraged me to buy both. When I said I was hungry, they fed me pretzels, beer, souvlaki. They were my guides to endless well-being. People swarmed through the boutiques and garment shops. We smelled chocolate, popcorn, cologne; we smelled rugs and furs, hanging salamis and deathly vinyl. My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in <https://assignbuster.com/don-delillos-white-noise-modernity-and-the-nuclear-family/>

some reflecting surface" (83). The family, pulled together by the love of products, the hunt for commodities, displays its core nuclear essence during this shopping trip. However, the very fact that the shopping itself is bringing the family to a higher essence of being demonstrates that the modern nuclear family is simply a construct of the modern lifestyle that they succumb to. Over and over, Jack sees himself and his family reflected in the surfaces of TV monitors, glassware, chrome. Their well-being is commodified to such an extent, that happiness is constructed by the things that surround them. As Jack explains, " I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me" (84). The person he'd forgotten existed was only brought to life by the purchase of worldly goods. The " vivid and happy transaction[s]" now have a " human buzz" (84). Humanity has merged with technology to the point that human existence is nothing without the white noise that embodies it. Technology and capitalism go hand in hand, as Jack continues to find self-fulfillment from the modernity that surrounds him. The family remains intact as long as the requisite noises remain the same. The TV set continues its inane flicker, the radio chats interminably, the ATM always spews crisp bills to the beholder. As he says in the mall, " These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums came back to me in the form of existential credit" (84). " Existential credit" demonstrates how the money is an investment in the mind, an investment towards the happiness of his nuclear family. They observe the bills slip from his hand, create instant gratification in a purchase, and retreat to the dull roar of contentment. His interactions with the ATM are of a euphoric state; he has such a faith in the electronic system that receiving money from its bowels is nothing less than an epiphany. " Waves

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of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies" (46). His life, his family, is unaffected by money; rather, the entire network has created a universal harmony that overcomes the larger issues of life and death. Although Jack and Babette are both constantly threatened by impending doom, this moment of happiness at the ATM machine transcends such humanity and constructs a new reality of modernity. In the same way that Babette becomes addicted to talk radio, Jack finds "personal value" from a machine. They are both completely influenced and subverted by the power of technology, so much so, that it affects their understanding of death and transforms it into overwhelming fear. According to Murray, death parallels modern progress and technology. Death is inherently connected to everyone's life, but it continues to grow in stature and prominence the more it is deconstructed. "We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows" (150). Like technology, the more humans discover about death, the larger it becomes in their lives. Death overwhelms the psyches of Babette and Jack, frightens Steffie immensely during the "toxic event" and doesn't even phase Heinrich as he considers the fate of his best friend in a cage of snakes. The family's understanding of death has been distorted to such a degree by technology that the emotions surrounding the inevitability of death are distorted completely. The drug, Dylar, is perhaps the most obvious distortion of humanity by technology. The family itself is ostensibly skewed by <https://assignbuster.com/don-delillos-white-noise-modernity-and-the-nuclear-family/>

Babette's actions with " Mr. Gray." She sleeps with the elusive project manager repeatedly if only to glean some drug-induced understanding into her fear of death. Willy, so overcome by his own discovery and downfall, stuffs handful after handful of Dylar into his mouth as Jack approaches him with the gun. The whole idea of death at this point is so ludicrous and awry that it becomes comical. Technology has so changed the family and the individual's conception of death and life, that their only reality is an advanced polymer shell of a drug containing a state of the art concentration gradient. Jack feebly attempts to combat modernity's affect on his understanding of death by striding around the house throwing out old bits of trash. He somehow sees a connection between the commodity and his contorted worldview; his children, meanwhile, follow him around in wonderment, just as affected by modernity as him. The continuous white noise of the radio and TV, the bright packaging of the products attacks their senses unremittingly; Jack somehow discovers the old coat hangers, dirty wash clothes, bent boxes and battered toys are contributing to his downfall. The family feels an inevitability, especially as the girls follow him around the house in a " respectful silence." Referring to old possessions, Jack says, " They'd dragged me down, made escape impossible" (295). The image of Wilder riding his tricycle amidst traffic on the highway demonstrates the inordinate effect of modernity on the nuclear family. Though many scenes show how the family becomes happier with the addition of radio or ATMs, the climactic period of Jack's violence elucidates the unnatural control of the constructed environment on the natural, nuclear family. Wilder survives the honking of horns and the swerving of cars without even tilting his head to acknowledge the salvo of technology and " progress" hitting him in the face.

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As he falls into the roadside ditch, however, he all of a sudden weeps displaying an emotional tendency that transcends the influence of technology. To him, the white noise is a way of life. It affects the adults in his microcosm to such an extent that they cannot bear the thought of death while continuing to be influenced daily by the influx of sound and image. The nuclear family is not disconnected from technology; nor is it always engulfed by it. The modern family constantly struggles to maintain the balance of both emotional understanding and commodity influence; DeLillo, through his explication of violence and fear may believe that modernity is winning the race for control of the nuclear family.