

# Delillo's white noise and the family



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Don DeLillo's protagonist in his novel "White Noise," Jack Gladney, has a "nuclear family" that is, ostensibly, a prime example of the disjointed nature of the "family" of the 80's and 90's — what with Jack's multiple past marriages and the fact that his children aren't all related. It's basically the antipodal image of the 1950's "nuclear family." Despite this surface-level disjointedness, it is his family and the "extrasensory rapport" that he shares with them that allows Jack to survive in his world. Murray, Jack's friend, argues that "The family is strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted" (82). Heinrich, Jack's son, explicates this notion in his constant "doubting" of reality, arguing, for example, that it's "all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex" (45). Jack is caught in a perpetual tension between experiencing reality and relationships with his family as "actual" while simultaneously being told that there is no "actual," that man is nothing more than "the sum total of" his "data" (141). It is only through a recounting of the past, the sensual experience of objects and the transcendent nature of his relationship with his children that Jack is able to affirm the actuality of the "actual," to affirm, for example, that love is more than merely a biological chemical. Ironically, for Jack and Babbette, it is only by recounting the past that they are able to "rescue" themselves "from the past" (30). Jack explains that Babbette and he talk of everything, "The smell of panties, the sense of empty afternoons, the feel of things as they rained across our skin, things as facts and passions, the feel of pain, loss...delight. In these night recitations we create a space between things as we felt them at the time and as we speak them now...The means by which we rescue ourselves from the past" (30). So in recounting "the smell of panties" etc., and viewing such

encounters with either " irony, sympathy and fond amusement," Jack is able not only to affirm the present and escape the past, but accomplishes something much larger: namely the ability to affirm the " realness" of such feelings. Thus the family, in this instance Babette, serves as the medium through which Jack is able to overcome Heinrich's skepticism (which is representative of modern " science" (24)) as to the " reality" of human emotions. DeLillo's image, moreover, of Jack and Babette " rescuing" themselves " from the past" also suggests that without family or someone to commune with, man can become lost in the past. DeLillo's novel is almost obsessively concerned with appliances: TVs, radios, microwaves etc. They are omnipresent, not only in the characters worlds but within the narrative itself. DeLillo repeatedly interrupts his narrative with sentences like " The TV said: And other trends that could dramatically impact our portfolio" (61) or " MasterCard, Visa, American Express" (100) or " That chirping sound was just the radiator" (94). Just as Jack's world is one suffused with such objects, so too is the narrative, a technique which DeLillo uses to force the reader into Jack Gladney's world. Objects play a dualistic role in Jack's familial life. Jack tells us that " Babette and I do our talking in the kitchen...We regard the rest of the house as storage space for...all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children...Things, boxes...There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding"(6). In this instance the disjointed structure of Jack's family is encapsulated in objects. Although such objects don't allow him to affirm the actuality of the " actual" they do show him where he can and cannot make such an affirmation. That is, they create spaces (" the kitchen and the bedroom") where Jack and Babette can talk, spaces where the actuality of the " actual" can be affirmed. But objects play another role

as well, serving, as Jack puts it in describing one trip to the supermarket, to create a "sense of replenishment," "of well-being," of "security and contentment," of "a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less" (20). His family, we are told, "gloried" (83) in such outings. Heinrich, of course, would argue that such feelings have no meaning or "realness," that they are nothing more than the presence of certain chemicals being released. That although objects, real touchable knowable "things," may serve to strengthen familial feelings, the reason for such feelings has no basis in reality; that is, they don't exist except as biological chemicals. DeLillo tells us later, however, that "It was a period of looks and glances, teeming interactions, part of the sensory array I ordinarily cherish. Heat, noise, lights, looks, words, gestures, personalities, appliances. A colloquial density that makes family life the one medium of sense knowledge in which an astonishment of heart is routinely contained" (117). Thus in this instance DeLillo suggests that "appliances" within familial life do function to affirm the actuality of the "actual" as revealed by his phrase "the astonishment of heart." This phrase suggests that "sense knowledge" is more than, as Heinrich would argue, a biological chemical, but rather has a basis in the "heart." Of course DeLillo's refers not to the biological "heart" but to the heart as a metaphor for the organ which creates "feelings," feelings which are based not on biological chemicals but which have a poetic reality all on their own. This sentiment is echoed repeatedly as Jack has repeated moments of "splendid transcendence," moments he tells us, "I depend on my children for" (155). He avers, "It was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a

magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things" (34). It is in these moments, as he watches Wilder sleep, or holds him as he cries, or watches Heinrich " walk through the downpour" loving him " with an animal desperation" (25), that Jack gains the strength he needs to survive. Despite Heinrich's rants, which he realizes do carry a measure of truth, and Murray's claims as to the strength of families having a direct correlation with the inability to perceive reality, Jack's family nonetheless, and the " extransensory" moments he shares with them, prove to him that feelings like these don't exist solely on a biological level, that their reality lies not in their chemical composition but in another separate reality, a reality which allows Jack to affirm the actuality of the " actual."