

Review

The fearful dream of the Gladneys: Death

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Everybody has some fears; however, death, the termination of the biological functions of a living organism, is probably the most feared thing for human beings. Nearly all people fear death but some of them fear excessively. They are obsessed with death and they feel it in every moment of their lives. They do not want to accept that they cannot do anything about dying and there is no point in fearing death itself. Hence, people, worrying about death, apply some strategies such as using drugs and living in a crowd to deal with their own fear of death or to escape from death. *White Noise*, written by Don DeLillo, examines the theme of the fear of death with the characters of the novel, who have been obsessed with death. The main characters, Jack and his wife, Babette, could not overcome their own fear so, instead of facing reality, they create an artificial lifestyle and remain plagued in a depression. At the end of the novel, we understand that instead of meditating always on death, characters of the novel realize the harsh truth of death because life goes on despite it. Death is for all people and this world is not their eternal home, so they comprehend that death is inevitable for human beings.

Key words: Death, fear, *White Noise*, reality, artificial.

INTRODUCTION

"This is the nature of modern death. It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We can predict its appearance, trace its path in the body. We can take cross-section pictures of it, tape its tremors and waves. We've never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes. 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. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. Is it a law of nature? Or some private superstition of mine? I sense that the dead are closer to us than ever. I sense that we inhabit the same air as the dead" (*White Noise*; Murray Jay Siskind; 150).

Death, the termination of the biological functions of a living organism, is probably the most feared thing for human beings. Death is the center of all people around

the world because human beings are mortal and this world is not their eternal home. They are only travellers in this world. They are born, live and when the time comes, they die. Epicurus (1940) in the *Letter to Menoeceus* says: "Death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist". Contrary to Epicurus' argument, nearly all people meditate on death; feel the fear of death. While people are crying at funerals and grieving for the deceased, they also think of their own ending. In general everybody has some fear about death; however, some people fear excessively. They are obsessed with death so, they feel the death in every moment of their lives. They do not want to accept that they cannot do anything about dying and there is no point in fearing death itself. Also, today's world compels people to struggle with death because they live in a post modern world in which they're preoccupied with consumerism, the pervasiveness of technology, simulations, media imagery,

various drugs, poisonous smokes and so on. That postmodern world is full of anxiety, terror and complexities. It is natural that in such a chaotic world people cannot achieve to live without fears, especially fear of death, because people are obsessed with phobias in this postmodern world.

In this paper, *White Noise* (1985), written by Don DeLillo and an important novel of the 20th century has been examined in terms of the theme of the fear of death with the help of characters of the novel and other important themes. Like most people, Jack – the chairman of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill and the narrator of the novel and his wife – Babette who teaches adult education classes and reads to an elderly blind man – have been obsessed with the fear of death. They cannot accept death as a natural fact. They are so consumed by their fear of death that their thoughts and daily conversations are often interrupted by this question: “Who will die first?” Both of them claim to want to die first, since either of them can bear the burden of living without the other. However, it is ironic that neither of them want to die first because both of them fear death excessively. After four marriages Jack and Babette believe they found partners with whom they feel safe. Jack thinks that Babette is the opposite of his other wives because she does not conceal anything. They consider that they tell each other everything, even their anxieties, but they conceal their fear of death from each other. Therefore, Jack and Babette, according to themselves, apply some strategies so as to deal with their own fear of death. So, instead of facing reality, they create an artificial lifestyle and remain plagued in a depression.

VARIOUS WAYS TO ESCAPE FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH

Death as a fearful dream of the Gladneys drags them to find some ways to escape from it. Both Jack and Babette try different escapeways. Jack Gladney, firstly, chooses to study Hitler who was the most feared figure and who caused destruction during the World War II so as to cope with his fear. “Hitler would seem to symbolize all the irrational and dangerous forces that have destabilized modern life, but for Gladney he provides the solid foundation of a successful career” (Cantor, 1991). He runs Hitler’s conferences and teaches Advanced Nazism. Since Hitler is a symbol of death, Jack thinks if he wraps himself in Hitler’s image, he can deal with death. “The study of Hitler, who appears “larger than death”, provides an orderly myth; it is as close as Gladney can come to religious faith” (Mobilio, 1986). By affiliating himself with Hitler, Jack pretends to guarantee himself as a measure of mythical proportion. He hopes that he too can become greater than death. So, he uses Hitler only as a protective device. For one of his seminars, he collects various parts from mystical epics, songs and speeches from the films

that make Nazi propaganda. After the showing ends, one of the students asks Jack about the plot to kill Hitler. Jack finds himself saying:

“All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’s plots ...”

With this conversation Jack surprises both himself and us. In what degree he believes in that notion? It is understood from his plans to decrease his fear of dying that he does not believe in that notion.

Jack gives his elder son the name of Heinrich because “He thought it was a forceful name, a strong name. It has a kind of authority”. That is another strategy for him in order to escape death. Heinrich was born shortly after Jack started Hitler’s studies and so, Heinrich’s name calls to mind the chief of the German police, Heinrich Himmler:

I wanted to do something German. I felt a gesture was called for, ... I thought it was forceful and impressive ... I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid. People were naming their children Kim, Kelly, Tracy ... There’s something about German names, the German language, German things ... In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course.

Jack demonstrates his interest in Hitler and German culture with his studies and with his son’s name. Dealing with German culture or language makes him feel stronger and he likes all things German. However, Jack praises the German culture as an outsider since he cannot speak German despite being an expert in Hitler’s studies. He cannot work himself into the deep structure of the language; he can never really become German; he is merely a postmodern simulacrum of a German (Cantor, 1991). It is understood that his using of Hitler and German culture is only a strategy and at the same time, for Jack, being like a German is a necessity to overcome the panic of death.

While teaching, Jack Gladney wears a long black robe showing him as a great man. When he wears robe, he feels himself powerful and he forgets his fear of death. Even if it is a short time, death does not come back to his memory. Moreover, Jack adds an initial to his name in order to symbolize his prominence and calls himself as J.A.K Gladney. He feels that this name is somehow more real than himself. Jack is unclear about his own identity. He also alters his appearance to present the illusion of having more depth and strength. He wears glasses with thick black heavy frames and bushy beard. He says, “I am the false character that follows the name around”. In fact, he is aware of his fake personality but he prefers living an impersonal life to defeat his fear. Without his academic robe and dark glasses, the colleague, Eric Massingale – a former microchip sales engineer who changed his life by coming to Hill to join the teaching staff

of the computer center – notes that Jack is “a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy”. This shows that Jack is also aware that all these things – long robe, initial name, thick black glasses and bushy beard – point out him as a strong man and they are his escape ways in order to cope with his fear of death.

Jack and Babette Gladney create a large, protective crowd around them with their children and with their professions in order to attempt to master death. Jack has four children: Mary Alice and Steffie from his first and second marriages to Dana Breedlove; Heinrich from his marriage to Janet Savory; and Bee from his marriage to Tweedy Browner. His wife, Babette’s three children are Denise, Eugene and Wilder. Only Heinrich, Steffie and Wilder, all from different marriages, live with them. Babette sees the children, gathered from different marriages as life savers. She also thinks nothing can happen to them as long as there are dependent children in the house: “...we’re safe as long as they’re around”. Also, Babette’s public role as reader to the blind gives her power over others. In her crowd, the students are old and remind her of death but their interest for tabloid stories and training their bodies to be upright bring about her relief. With her crowd, she keeps death away. She feels stronger than death when she is with her crowd.

In his lectures about the crowd psychology of the Nazis, Jack Gladney also applies a strategy for himself as Nazis do: “Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd”. Jack considers that people cannot live without the feeling of death; however, people get rid of the fear of death by virtue of crowds. While he is lecturing, he feels comfort because his students are around him: “People gathered round, students and staff, ... I realized we were now crowd ... Death was strictly a professional matter here”. As Saltzman specifies: “Crowds may confer magnitude” (Saltzman, 1986). Jack states that death is a professional matter in the classroom and there he is comfortable with the concept of death. Because of his authority over the subject of death, he distances himself from the reality of his own death. In other words, the crowd, giving them comfort, is another strategy of escaping from the fear of death for Jack and Babette.

Supermarket, as another way to escape from death, is a significant place in the novel because as Saltzman says: “Malls and supermarkets are our epiphanic parlors, bastions of spiritual purchase”. Supermarkets and consumerism are at the heart of the postmodern world. By doing daily shopping, people forget their distress, fatigue, misery, even death. They feel spiritual fulfillment by spending money, especially purchasing brand name products. Like many people, Jack Gladney and his family feel themselves happy when they fill their bags with a lot of colorful products. Especially when Jack and Babette

suffer from an anxiety, they rush their family off the supermarket because they feel a sense of fullness in their life. Jack replaces his inauthentic Hitler aura with the equally inauthentic aura of shopping, which he experiences (Duvall, 1986). Jack states:

plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight, and size and number ...in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls ...”

He finds replenishment in the supermarket and forgets his fears. He thinks he has a place in the world. He finds that noises of people in the market, colours of products, fullness of shelves spiritually recharge them. “The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit” he states. As it is understood from the passage he thinks himself greater than death because of supermarket and he relies on a consumer lifestyle as an escape from his fear of death. Furthermore, television is their another tactic to repress their fear of death. Friday nights, the whole family gathers to watch television. They think that this activity reduces their phobias. Television serves as a temporary way to struggle with the fear of death.

When the airborne toxic event, brought about by a train derailment, occurred Jack’s fear of dying increases. Until the toxic event, Jack already feels the dread of death. We know that he has trouble with sleeping. Whenever he reads obituaries, he compares the age of the deceased to his own age and so on. After that airborne toxic event, he feels death more denser than before. A man from SIMUVAC – simulated evacuation -checks Jack and says that he has been exposed to Nyodene D. – a chemical substance released by the toxic cloud - and this lives in the biological system for thirty years. But the SIMUVAC man guesses that it shows its effect in fifteen years. When Jack hears this information, his fear increases naturally. He becomes more obsessed with the fear of death. He meditates on death and begins to see himself as a man destined to die. Meanwhile, Babette continues to wonder, “What if death is nothing but sound? Electrical noise. You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful”. Death is such a horror for her that, she does her own plan to repress her fear of dying. She takes a drug called Dylar, which does not make people immortal, but promises to eliminate the individual’s fear of death. She creates for herself a simulation because this drug creates a new sense of reality by preventing the fear of death. She conceals this from her husband and sleeps with the project manager of the drug, Willie Mink, also called Mr Gray, in order to obtain Dylar. For several months, she has met him in a motel room and offers herself in exchange for drugs. That is to say, in order to eliminate her fear, she loses her individuality and moral life and

also she lives impersonal life like her husband. Still, she has not experienced any relief from the fear of death, although she has taken all her pills. She is not aware of the truth that Dylar is not a savior from death.

DEATH IS A NATURAL FACT FOR OTHERS

The novel not only focuses on the characters who are obsessed with the fear of death but also focuses on different characters like Murray Jay Siskind, a former sports writer and now a professor in the College on-the-Hill. He is one of the characters in *White Noise* who is not afraid of dying. Death is nothing; it is a natural phenomenon for him because he does not fear or hate death and he does not view death as a misfortune. He constantly analyzes the world around him. He senses death all around him and remains engaged by it. Murray tries to convince Jack on the nature of modern death: "It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension". When Murray is at the supermarket with Jack and Babette, he tells them his ideas about death:

Tibetans try to see death for what it is. It is the end of attachment to things. This simple truth is hard to fathom. But once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die ... We don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death ... We simply walk toward the sliding doors ... Look how well-lighted everything is ...It's timeless. Another reason why I think of Tibet. Dying is an art in Tibet. A priest walks in, sits down, tells the weeping relatives to get out and has the room sealed ...Chants, numerology, horoscopes, recitations. Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think.

Like Tibetians, he considers death as an art and as a natural fact of life. By embracing and confronting it, as Tibetians, people can live a good life. Though the Gladney family do shopping or watching television in order to struggle with their fear of dying, Murray does not do these activities to eliminate the fear of anything. So, he enjoys life and tries to live a meaningful life.

Orest, Heinrich's friend, is another opposite character in *White Noise* as he also has no fear of facing death. Orest is aware of who is he and he is willing to confront death so as to discover it. He tries to break the Guinness record for sitting in a cage full of poisonous snakes. Jack tries to understand why he would want to risk his life and takes this response: "At least I go right away...I die in seconds". It is seen from the speech that he wants to face death. Although he is very young – nineteen years old -he does not fear death like the Gladneys. When Orest fails to complete his mission, he disappears from sight. Instead of surviving unsuccessfully, he would prefer to die. In contrast to other characters, Orest does not fear

"death" itself but he faces death consciously.

Conclusion

It has been viewed in the novel that the Gladneys experienced quite a few ways to keep away from death phobia. However, Jack has a last plan which is about killing of Mr.Gray, who slept with his wife to confront his own fear of death. For this plan, Murray affects Jack with his ideas about death. When Gladney explains his suffering from death, Murray says to him that one way of relieving yourself from fear of dying is to kill: "What it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, to kill a person in direct confrontatiton ... To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up". According to Murray's theory, violence is a form of rebirth. So, Jack believes that to kill Willie Mink, who is "himself a rather Faustian figure whose theories bear terribly on Babette" (Moses, 1991), means to kill his fear of death. While he is going to kill Mink, he realizes the world around him. He feels the beauty of things. He saw things new because he pays attention to the details around him. Until Jack shoots Willie Mink, he lives in a world filled with simulations; however, after he shoots Willie Mink, because of his pain, he realizes the real world; feels himself closer to death and thinks that Mr. Gray is a human being. Therefore, he realizes that killing a person cannot prevent him from dying. Unlike Murray's theory, by saving a person he feels more alive than before.

In conclusion, Jack and Babette have developed some strategies for themselves in order to repress their fear of death and feel better. However, at the end, in some way they have realized that death is a natural fact and is for all people since it is inevitable for human beings. They understand that instead of meditating always on death, they should live beautiful life. At the end of the novel, Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedaled noisily to the dead end. This statement shows that life goes on in spite of death. Jack, Babette and Wilder go to watch the sunset and Jack says: "Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, . . ." He begins to feel the beauty of sunset; beauty of his life. Before hand, he is scared of sunset as a symbol of death but now he feels relieved and no more scared of sunset and so of death.

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