



Fear and Simulated Reality: Postmodern Features in *White Noise*

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Abstract

White Noise, a novel by American writer Don DeLillo, stands out as a key work that reflects postmodern traits in literature. Published in 1985, the novel explores the daily life of an American family in a world shaped by technology, media, and a deep fear of death. The story follows Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, who lives with his family in a small town. Their lives are thrown into confusion by events like the “airborne toxic event,” which impacts them in strange and absurd ways. Through irony, intertextuality, and emotional detachment, the novel shows how postmodernism breaks down ideas of identity, truth, and reality. This study aims to examine how postmodern features appear in *White Noise*, including loss of meaning, consumer culture dominance, identity confusion, and existential fear. It also explores how media and technology affect people in a modern society that lacks certainty. The study answers a central question: How does *White Noise* use postmodern elements to critique American life? The importance of this research lies in offering a new reading of the novel as a deep cultural critique that addresses modern fears especially environmental threats, fear of death, and disconnection from real life. The study draws on diverse academic sources and uses postmodern concepts like Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” and Lyotard’s idea of “narrative play.”

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1. Introduction

According to Salman literature is an author's reflection on life and living. This is combined with the power of imagination and creativity supported by experience and observation. In most cases, literary works are referred to as whole written expressions, with the limitation that not all written documents can be categorized as literary works in a more precise sense. Furthermore, literature includes written forms that deliberately and creatively experiment with language to suggest images and ideas that engage the reader's imagination. Therefore, from a long time ago, literature was considered an expression of the human condition and the nature of his thoughts in an innovative way other than that of the ordinary method. Literature carries human cases and transmits them in a language that differs from everyday language, so this language is the literary language through which the author expresses his or other cases. (Salman *et al.* 217).

Postmodernism is not just a stage that follows modernity in time or thought. It is a different way of seeing the world, understanding meaning, and living as a human in a changing world. This idea gained strength after World War II, during major shifts in politics, economics, and culture. Truth was no longer clear. Language could no longer carry meaning in a fixed or stable way. Instead, people began to live in a world full of images, symbols, and nonstop flows of information. Many literary works emerged from this context, trying to reflect the anxiety and noise that surround human life. One of the most important of these works is *White Noise*, a novel by American writer Don DeLillo, published in 1985.

DeLillo, known for his sharp and thoughtful style, presents in this novel a picture of an ordinary American family living in a small town. However, the family lives in constant fear of death and feels the effects of media, technology, and pollution. The novel does not follow a traditional structure. Instead, it uses postmodern techniques such as repetition, irony, intertextuality, and time distortion. The aim of this study is to analyze *White Noise* from a postmodern angle, in order to understand how DeLillo uses postmodern tools to criticize modern American society, especially in matters of fear, identity, and truth.

The main question this study tries to answer is: How does Don DeLillo's *White Noise* use postmodern elements to critique modern American society? To answer this, we will rely on a critical reading of the novel and the ideas of postmodern thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, and others. We will explore key concepts such as "simulacrum," which refers to the fake reality that replaces real life (Baudrillard 6); the "logic of late capitalism," where consumption becomes human identity (Jameson 19); and "double-coded irony," which exposes the emptiness of power (Hutcheon 2).

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it does not treat the novel as just a work of fiction, but as a mirror that reflects real problems people face today. Fear of death, media control, environmental pollution, and loss of meaning these are all issues found in the novel, yet they remain strongly present in our modern lives. By studying *White Noise*, we can see how postmodern literature uses its tools not to offer solutions, but to expose the absurdity, irony, and fragility of the world. The novel opens with a jarring scene of ordinary family life. Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, lives with his wife Babette and their children from previous marriages in a comfortable house in a small college town. But this apparent stability quickly unravels due to a chemical accident called "the airborne toxic event," which threatens their lives and forces them to leave town. This event is not shown simply as a disaster, but as a media event broadcast on TV and discussed by people as if it were a movie or advertisement. Here, the idea of the "simulacrum" appears: people do not experience the disaster itself, but only its image (Baudrillard 9). Media doesn't report truth it creates a new reality where the line between real and fake disappears.

In this world, people do not seek meaning they run from it. Everyone in the novel fears death, but no one faces this fear directly. Instead, they distract themselves with shopping, news, or searching for drugs like Dylar, which is supposed to stop fear. Jack, despite his academic power, feels helpless in the face of death. He asks, "Who will die first, me or my wife?" but finds no answer, because death cannot be understood or controlled. This existential anxiety reflects the loss of meaning in a world ruled by materialism, consumption, and constant noise (Wilcox 83).

Postmodernism is known as a state of uncertainty, where identities break down and truth becomes unclear. DeLillo reflects this state through the novel's narrative style. There is no tight plot events and ideas repeat across the chapters. Even the language seems empty at times, filled with slogans, ads, and repeated words. A child in the story asks simple but deep questions, showing how people have lost the ability to truly connect. This use of repetitive language is a critique of media culture, where language loses its meaning and becomes just another source of noise (McCaffery 25). DeLillo does not

offer heroic characters. Instead, he presents ordinary people lost, confused, and afraid of things they do not understand. These characters reflect modern individuals who live in a world saturated with images, fear, and endless streams of information. The novel does not provide a solution or a comforting ending. Instead, it continues the themes of anxiety, fear, and the search for something unreachable. This makes the novel a vivid example of postmodern literature, which does not guide the reader but instead makes them feel the same sense of disorientation (Hassan 123).

Scholar Tom LeClair argues that *White Noise* is not simply a story about a family, but about an entire system of noise that hides the truth. This noise is not just an external sound, but a mental and emotional state experienced by individuals (LeClair 55). Media, technology, and consumer culture all generate this noise, which blocks deep thinking and prevents people from understanding themselves. Some critics believe the novel predicted the digital age, where people live through their phones and follow news in real-time, yet it has little real impact on their lives (Boxall 98).

Scholar Linda Hutcheon explains that postmodernism is not only a critique of modernity, but also a form of irony and playfulness directed at modern ideas. DeLillo does this by connecting Hitler studies, fear of death, and shopping culture in a satirical way. It feels natural that the novel's main character is a professor of Hitler Studies because it shows how knowledge itself has become part of a cultural game not aiming for understanding, but for entertainment or status (Hutcheon 77). In this world, even disasters become part of a media show, and things lose their original meaning. Postmodernism rejects the old idea that there is one truth or a single grand narrative that governs the world. Instead, it sees many truths, small stories, and scattered voices. DeLillo reflects this through multiple characters, each viewing the world from a different angle, yet none of them knows the truth. Even the scientists in the novel don't really understand what happened during the "airborne toxic event." They speak in vague terms, which only increase fear rather than ease it. This shows a loss of trust in scientific knowledge and institutions an idea central to postmodern thought (Lyotard 65).

This research uses an analytical and cultural critique approach, blending close reading of the novel with an understanding of its cultural and intellectual context. The sources include critical books on DeLillo, studies of postmodernism, and the ideas of thinkers like Baudrillard, Jameson, Hutcheon, and Hassan. The goal of this study is to offer a fresh reading of the novel as a sharp, painful satire of modern life, where people live surrounded by endless noise and fading meaning.

2. Discussion

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the daily life of an American family collides with media noise, existential fear, and technological pollution. The narrative feels like broken glass scenes repeat, but never flow smoothly. Instead, the story jumps from one moment to the next, without clear direction. This fragmented style mirrors the fractured state of modern life, where reality crumbles under constant streams of information. The similar chapters, repeated dialogue, and recycled media language all create the sense that the world is stuck in a loop with no real start or end (McCaffery 27). This critical approach to storytelling breaks down the old idea of a

novel as a unified tale and places the reader inside a restless, uncomfortable experience. When the “airborne toxic event” occurs, the family’s life is turned upside down. But the disaster isn’t shown as a tragic moment it’s filtered through TV screens, ads, and news reports. The threat becomes a calculated image, drawing attention without real emotion. People don’t live the disaster; they consume its media version (Baudrillard 11). The brightness of the news, the speed it spreads, and the blurred line between truth and image turn the crisis into something people watch rather than feel.

In this world, people don’t seek truth they seek distraction or escape. Jack’s wife, Babette, treats the news like reality TV. She absorbs information the same way she flips through a shopping catalog. The constant noise fills every space. There’s no peace, no room for reflection. Even family conversations feel shallow and collapse with the slightest tension. It’s as if language itself has lost the power to carry meaning, drained into a mess of overlapping images with no purpose (Wilcox 90). Fear of death repeats in the characters’ minds like an annoying musical note that never stops. Jack watches his body closely. He tries to notice any small flaw, as if death were a precise machine ready to strike at the smallest error. Illness, the drug “Decongestant D” or “Dylar,” doesn’t treat disease it treats fear. This vague anxiety isn’t diagnosed. It’s sold as a product a pill to calm the soul, a new item on the pharmacy shelf (Jameson 45). Here, literary criticism meets cultural critique: fear itself becomes something to be consumed.

The novel also shows that academic knowledge is no refuge. Jack teaches Hitler studies, which suggests authority. But he doesn’t hold the truth; he can’t explain his fear or how it forms. Even his longing for the past brings no comfort. This shows a postmodern idea: grand narratives, like history or academic theory, can’t be trusted. Everything can be broken down, mixed, and mocked (Hutcheon 85). Among existing phenomena in cultural practice there is a whole line of those which are widely applied but they remain problematic. One of these examples is an irony. We willingly use it in our speech we easily notice it in the literary texts, but during an attempt to reveal its internal mechanism we stumble upon the complications. It dominates in the most bizarre and colorful art styles. Antic comedy, grotesque world of Rabelais, philosophical story of Voltaire, rich in shades the comic element of Gogol and Chekhov indicate the presence of ironical element at all stages of history of European literature, and the XX century according to the famous expression became “the kingdom of an irony.” (Kostenko 10) Irony runs throughout the novel. People talk about environmental threats like they’re watching a show. At the university, discussion panels feel like comedy routines. Even academic language becomes a bitter joke. This irony is the novel’s weapon. It attacks authority, knowledge, and modern life itself. One sharp word can break the cultural logic that claims to offer stability and control (Boxall 112).

When we ask about identity, we find that the characters in the novel don’t know who they are without being advertised or without consuming products. A person’s identity is tied to buying more goods, following the news, and wearing little cultural labels. For example, the child in the novel knows what a “new flat-screen TV” is more than he knows his own parents. This shows that modern identity comes more from consumer culture than from personal experience or roots (LeClair 60). Beneath the pollution of the “airborne toxic

event” is a bigger kind of pollution: the pollution of meaning. The novel doesn’t give moral messages. It presents reality as a field of noise something to be understood before it can be felt. The chemical smoke mixes with mental smoke, and people no longer know where reality starts and where images end. This is the world of postmodern fiction: images no longer represent real things they affect reality, hide it, and drain it of independent meaning.

Here lies the value of the novel as a postmodern document. It doesn’t just mock society it painfully reflects the cultural and social performance of modern life. Power, money, knowledge none of them guide us much. People live on an island of fear and noise. We read *White Noise* and feel like we’re inside it not because we understand everything, but because we experience its themes daily, the endless news cycle, life as numbers, losing touch with nature inside digital clouds. By exploring these points, the novel shows itself not just as a story but as a cultural critique aimed at helping us better understand our time. Not just postmodernism, but post-truth, post-fixed identity, and post-consumption as a final solution. If there is a “white noise” at the end of the novel, it is the same sound we hear inside ourselves a noise born from economic and spiritual emptiness.

3. Conclusion

White Noise does not offer a comfortable or easy reading experience. It pushes the reader to think about everyday life. DeLillo did not just write about fear of death he wrote about a world that lives under this fear, where news, ads, and products mix with daily details. In this world, reality is blurred by sound and images, until people lose their sense of what is real and what is fake. The noise doesn’t just come from outside it lives inside the characters and shapes part of who they are. By showing family life, the link to technology, and the search for comfort in consumption, DeLillo reveals how people’s relationship with themselves has changed. Knowledge, love, and faith are no longer sources of safety they have turned into goods and marketing tools. As Jameson noted, this shift reflects a deeper crisis, where modern humans lose touch with the core meaning of life and fall into a world of signs and images (Jameson 50).

White noise is not just a sound it is a constant state of distraction. It stands for the modern world, where there is no silence, no time for reflection, and no escape. Baudrillard explained this as a “build-up of fake reality,” where it becomes hard to tell the real from the image (Baudrillard 17). This idea captures the heart of the novel, which offers no answers but exposes a crisis. The characters don’t win or lose they remain stuck in a loop. The literary value of the novel lies in its ability to make the reader see their life in a distorted mirror. DeLillo doesn’t tell a classic story; he delivers sharp cultural criticism without heavy language or complex theories. The simple storytelling hides layers of meaning, making the novel both a warning and a revelation. As Hutcheon pointed out, DeLillo’s power comes from using irony and anxiety to understand the postmodern world (Hutcheon 90). In the end, *White Noise* stands as one of the key works of postmodern fiction because it doesn’t explain the world it makes you feel its confusion, its noise, and the constant anxiety that now fills our lives. There is no hero here, no clear solution just an ordinary person trying to find meaning in endless noise. That is why the novel still matters today: it speaks to the world we live in, and probably will

keep living in.

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