

Ideology vs. Reality: Has White Noise Blurred the Lines?

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Abstract

This essay delves into the ideas of eco-criticism, a relatively new branch of literary criticism, particular as it relates to the work of Don DeLillo and his novel White Noise. Through an explanation of eco-criticism, an analysis of character interactions, and an explanation of the structure of the novel, the author makes claims about how eco-criticism evaluates the world and how the habitat of a novel can help define it. With DeLillo, this relationship is explored through analogy, the analogy of his characters and how they relate in comparison to how American society relates to its environment. With this new awareness, the author asks readers to reassess their relationship to their environment.

Though a newly budding field of literary criticism, eco-analysis is intentionally broad in scope as to allow for the development of domain specific application. Environmental Literary Studies, or ecocriticism, is defined as the intentional safeguarding of the natural world for the purpose of generating awareness to human interaction's influence on such (Buell 640). This type of scholarship is open to several means of accomplishing such an end. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has not been immune to commentary entrenched in the topic. The postmodern novel chronicles the happenings of one Jack Gladney and his family. A professor of Hitler studies at the local college, Jack faces two major plotlines. The first of which is a train derailment resulting in Jack's subsequent chemical exposure, while the second involves his wife, Babette, and her pharmaceutical addiction to a drug aimed at curing a chronic fear of death—an ailment faced by both husband and wife. Weaved throughout are several interactions between minor characters that leave the reader questioning the actuality of events in this satirical work of American popular culture. Overall, the novel confronts the prevailing theme of reality versus simulation as it pertains to the physical world as well as its characters' psyches.

On trend with popular analysis, DeLillo's novel opens itself up to an ever-present attention on "toxic discourse," a closely related cousin to ecocriticism that concerns itself with a poisoned world in cyclical debate through a variety of disciplinary vantage points—medicine, political science, ethics, and the like (Buell 641). According to Lawrence Buell, a professor of American Literature at Harvard University, a new "risk society" has risen that is defined by "a 'solidarity from anxiety' deriving from the inability... to calculate the lethal consequences of everyday life" (642). Critics aplenty seem to have picked up on this "anxiety" as they respond to DeLillo's words in comparison to global distress, loss of reality, and the American infatuation with risk.

DeLillo's second chapter involving an "Airborne Toxic Event" is often the first to be interpreted by critics through the sub-category of toxic discourse. Generally considered satirical in delivery, this chapter projects the physical risk of losing a clean troposphere. While the happening will not be referred to in its entirety within this analysis, the Event is relevant in regard to the typical

critical responses associated with DeLillo's text. Nonetheless, what is more apparent—or at least more frequently discussed—is the context of the event framing the human relationship with disaster. In other words, the event's value is based on the reactions its afflictions create on the novel's characters. This exchange is most commonly discussed through a critical platform tasked with investigating the uncertainties of our contemporary world through theoretical analysis—otherwise defined as “risk theory” (Heise 747). The event is staged as a media produced performance. For example, Jack first learns of the event through his own sight, but neglects to move his family until the radio instructs him to do so. He is later exposed to an unidentified airborne substance but does not succumb to worry until a computer analyzes his potential and eventual death. Ursula K. Heise, a professor of Literary studies at the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA, comments on this inconsistency and perpetuates another common form of criticism regarding DeLillo's text as a catalyst to project the disaster victim's inability “to relate to [his/her] own situation unless it is amply covered by the media” (750). Heise does this by connecting the “risk theory” mentioned above with the ecocritical movement by suggesting that modernization is one culprit of our morphed sense of danger (750). Such perspectives are also referred to as a response to media-scape centered critiques: “the way in which the American dream is manipulated by the media” (Wilcox 346). Overall, eco-critics and their subsequent disciplines seem to respond to DeLillo exclusively in regard to his middle chapter and its accompanying themes: risk, toxins, and loss of reality.

While these subjects are essential when relating DeLillo's work to environmental issues, the task here is to provide a less conventional commentary on how the character relationships he shows us are just as “risky” as the outside forces thrust upon them. Though representation of setting and circumstance are no doubt relevant to defend the claim that *White Noise* is making a statement about habitat, this analysis will focus on how human interaction is subjected to similar misuse. Further, through this misuse, humankind is doomed to both rationalize and repeat abuses on each other and their environmental setting. I believe that DeLillo's piece, whether intentional or not, is thrusting responsibility on its readers to look past the physical plot and understand that the ideologies of its characters, and thus the ideologies of America, are just as damning a cause to environmental deterioration as the materialistic misuses highlighted through the science of the text's time.

Before the commencement of this argument, there is relevance in acknowledging the bias of the 21st century reader. The average American today cannot make a consumeristic decision without the consideration of environmental concern. With screening apps for products containing unethically sourced palm oil, to low-flow home plumbing, not to mention the glaring polarization surrounding global warming, the nation is at the peak of eco-crisis. No matter the side one stakes his claim, it is almost impossible not to at least see inklings of environmental prejudice in all aspects of life—literary, social, political, etc. For this reason, one should notice the partiality that imprisons the modern reader. However, there is still relevance in re-examining landmark publications for what they could be saying about their time as well as ours. Whether intent is to examine these aspects or not, it is arguable that the way a text is read is just as relevant as its initial purpose.

Perhaps most influential when understanding *White Noise* through any lens are the inner workings of DeLillo himself, or rather the persona he projects. Born in the Fall of 1936 and spending a majority of his young life within New York City, DeLillo was like any other teenager (DeLillo, Dewey 2). He lacked a motivation in school and describes his experiences at Fordham University as not learning “much of anything” (DeLillo, Dewey 2), a fact that bodes well for his

description as any other adolescent. However, what proves relevant within DeLillo's biography is not so much reliant on his personal attributes, but rather the experiences he likely went through, or was at least made aware of.

Through the consideration of multiple interviews involving DeLillo, one can see the constant change of customs he demonstrates from interaction to interaction, as well as the array of personal details shared. However, one constant factor is his criticism of the world around him. Likely due to the pessimistic trends displayed in his pedigree of publications, DeLillo has been scrutinized by the statement that many of his pieces deal with an unsettled or "shaken up" world. To this claim, DeLillo responds by saying that "[his] work is influenced by the fact that we're living in dangerous times" (DeLillo, Nance 3). Such an assertion is no doubt present within the pages of *White Noise*, as each character is tasked with facing a different social issue—judgment surrounding incarceration, addiction to narcotics, fraud, and self-worth, among others. Complementary to his above defense is DeLillo's frequent concerns with human tendencies that appear to make up the "danger" he refers to. The author's responses read elusively, hinting at the fear of crowds (Nadotti 87-89), contemporary American personality (LeClair 22), and the resistance of intimacy (Dewey 10)—all of which apply to different texts—*Mao Two*, *Players*, etc. Even still, all of these themes are equally as present within the one this analysis is tasked with understanding. Though vague, DeLillo also links this instability to his upbringing in New York specifically by referring to this setting as a *series* of dangerous experiences (DeLillo, Dewey 2006). Though DeLillo's authorial intent is undetermined, it can be said that a link between these personal beliefs has no doubt translated *to White Noise*. Furthermore, it is worth a look into the so called "dangers" surrounding DeLillo's early life as they undoubtedly play a part in his understanding of the contextual environment within our primary text; thus, making them pertinent to identifying the setting in which his characters interact.

Being in his 50s at the time of *White Noise*'s publication in 1985, and in relation to some biography discussed above, it is clear that a link is present between what DeLillo grew up experiencing and some of his more modern societal interactions demonstrated throughout the text. The 1960s were marked, partly, by the emergence of several environmental concerns still discussed today. News of acid rain and chlorofluorocarbons—a chemical frequently used in the production of aerosol sprays—dominated the media via magazine, radio, and television coverage (Williams et al. 2). Ultimately, this sparked the need to diagnose a central proponent to the happenings which produced the all too familiar relationship between fossil fuels and ozone depletion (Likens et al. 43-45). Even more relevant to the text, predictions were being made in regards to a deeper dependency on coals and natural resources creating the contaminated rain and snow being experienced at the time (Likens et al. 51). All of this framing the actual production of *White Noise* can be seen as a link to the conflicts DeLillo presents within the book's plot or at least the actual setting of certain climaxes. For example, the Airborne Toxic Event discussed earlier takes place during a snowfall while another major apex, the conflict between Gladney and secondary character Mr. Grey, is similarly framed by rain—certainly encouraging the environmental awareness of any reader familiar with this context.

In relation to the dangers DeLillo discussed in interviews, the textual representations remain relatively vague. Therefore, I attributed these influences more so to other events defining DeLillo's adolescence—specifically the relevance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Carson's text—published in 1962—centered around the thesis that mankind was subjecting themselves and the planet to a slow death by poisoning via the misuse of chemical pesticides and pollutants (Lear x). Praised for its public appeal and revolutionary subject matter, *Silent Spring* led to a social revolution responsible for

the eventual ban of DDT—a chemical commonly used in agricultural production—and political groups seeking environmental protection at both the state and federal levels (Lear x). The work arguably perpetuates as much progress in the field of eco-awareness as it does harm in regards to the conflict that protection of any one substance can bring—let alone an entire planet’s worth. Generally speaking, the more amplification bestowed upon an issue, the more polarized the response. Social awareness of environmental depletion can inhibit positive effects but, for some, this recognition only magnifies a problem in which they have no concern fixing. In this instance, the more awareness earth was given, the bigger the controversy: a controversy that shaped the political climate of DeLillo’s adolescence and beyond. In fact, in 1980 the Environmental Protection Agency issued a public relations statement urging naysayers to re-evaluate their information. Ten years after the creation of Earth Day, the piece defends the environmental movement as relevant and alive, fighting against the political giants concerned with international conflict and inflation (Nelson 1). Within the pages of *White Noise*, DeLillo is mixing these very real environmental dangers of the 1960s through the 1980s with the ideologies and dichotomies that have soured along with it.

Having gained an understanding of the events and perceptions that shaped DeLillo as an author, it is now relevant to discuss how he critiques the developed cultural ideologies of waste, progress over sustainability, and the glorification of conflict rather than rational solutions within his text. Furthermore, it is also necessary to look at how these ideologies shape the way we as a species treat our habitat. Jack Gladney is characterized as a professor, an intellectual, a father, and a husband. Currently in a relationship with a woman named Babette, Jack has actually been through four marriages in total with three different women (DeLillo 1-104). Though his current relationship first appears strong to readers—filled with long, loving monologues—we slowly learn about his careless past. With an array of children in tote, Jack seems to have rushed his way through human interaction and the development of love. One could categorize this as a lack of knowledge, but I instead see it as a misplacement of value. Based on circumstance alone, it appears that Jack is using these women for some unmeasurable gain.

Whether it be for children or simple companionship, Jack uses human intimacy the same way DeLillo was raised to see American culture using its surroundings. Just as we waste our natural resources with the expectation of an alternative, we are constantly renewing our affections instead of sustaining what has already been found. This is DeLillo’s way of urging his readers to understand their own flawed system of expense—to replace rather than to fix. It appears to be a statement about how humans treat the environment and how said interactions influence our treatment of each other. DeLillo is appealing to his reader’s likely inclination to see marriage as a sacred institution. In his mildly dystopian reality, he is projecting a loss in that belief as our habits eventually shape all of our relationships: relationships with friends, relationships with family, and relationships with our environment. Though Babette and Jack are highlighted here as central proponents of this theory, DeLillo seems to be representing this misplacement of value all throughout the text’s first section.

To take a step back from actual character interaction, it is equally illuminating to examine the role of structural implementation. In service of avoiding pulling evidence only out of plot, I see relevance in the simple manner of how section one of *White Noise* reads. A series of short three-to-four page excerpts, the reader is forced to breeze through twenty entire chapters within the context of 105 pages. Though these pieces are brief, they are the reader’s only insight into Jack’s life. All of his friends and family are defined here. We see glimpses of discussion and random encounters, but no real framework is built for the reader to find a steady footing on what is actually

going on. Like the interactions themselves, this style of writing can be seen as intentional on DeLillo's part. Perhaps these physically abrupt chapter beginnings and ends are another way for the author to make us aware of our flaws. Just as we are shown the short and seemingly valueless relationships Jack makes with others, we as readers cannot develop an accurate connection with either. The text almost blurs the reader's perception of who is who, what interactions are meaningful, and most intriguing, which ones are actually relevant. DeLillo is aware of this ambiguity and uses intentional structure to show the readers—or rather subject the readers—to the emotions we so easily neglect. Through this dubiety, the author is once again demonstrating the negligent tendencies of American culture: Misuse and a general disregard for the present in service of an affluent tomorrow. The writing style presented here forces the reader to have a physical reaction to the relationships presented and ideally a heightened awareness to its consequences. As shown later in the piece, though plots become vibrant and precise, audiences are left facing their lack of clarity due to the text's intentionally overlooked foundation. Though we may be comfortable cultivating our connections this way, having to understand it from an outsider's perspective allows the reader to become aware of the wasteful realities of such behavior. In short, just as mankind has developed an almost careless understanding of the environment, perhaps this contempt is spreading to the way we treat human relationships of dependence as well.

If the connection between character relationship and resource misuse still remains unclear, let a synopsis of thought thus far be provided. Due to the fact that most readers were inattentive, or uninterested with global resource protection at the time of his writing, DeLillo has ultimately provided a mirrored lesson delivered through the more appealing composition of human intimacy via Jack's interactions with others. However, let us not believe that he forgoes the traditional environmental representations found in so many other nature-centered critiques.

"The Airborne Toxic Event" easily lends itself to the pro-earth mantra; however, what I find more relevant than the circumstance itself is the aftermath. Humans are no stranger to disaster—environmental or man-made—yet in most cases, we are equally as unprepared or unwilling to take the necessary steps to prevent another one. Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and several other critics have commented on this lack of reflection and even offered danger as a calculated risk that the human race is happy to accept (Heise 754). In fact, Heise sees risk throughout the novel's entirety as a recurrence of DeLillo's intentions (748-754). To expand upon this concept, it can be said that DeLillo does not see it as conscious repetition, but rather a series of rationalizations that seem to numb society of a crisis once it is over. This alternate interpretation is defended through an analysis of the medical aftermath of exposure to Nyodene Derivative—the hypothetical toxin released during section two of the novel.

The toxic event offers several different side-effects to its victims, but the most prominent is that of *deja-vu*. Described as "the false part of human memory" (DeLillo 114), this affliction leaves readers to consider human tendencies rather than physical environmental abuse. DeLillo offers no exact explanation for how the event occurred or really what was done to fix it, but spends a majority of the section chronicling how Jack copes with his own situation as well as that of his community—one of which is to confuse his own sense of reality. By implementing *deja-vu* as a diagnostic reaction, it would appear that DeLillo is again asking a bigger question: Just as environmental awareness can cause equal triumph as it can disaster, could we as humans be at fault for the continuation of catastrophic events because of the relationship we have cultivated with it? The text would agree, and further, this tendency to repeat is projected as uncontrollable. Though we

have gained an understanding of the environmental injustices that humans are subject to create, it can be said that through the rationalization of our own behavior we have displayed a pattern of upholding our own facades in lieu of our means for safety. In this way, it is not just the waste demonstrated within human-to-human relationships that can be problematic, but America's value to glorify conflict rather than seek resolution that influences our relationship with all factors outside of ourselves. Just as Jack cannot help his depleting connections because of the absorption of his culture, perhaps all characters cannot help but rationalize devastation, as it is simply a side effect to their affiliation with the environment. If this is true, DeLillo is expanding on ecocriticism, taking into account that habitat is both physical and mental. These two can even be one in the same. Therefore, it is no far cry to say that Jack's reaction is a tribute to how American society treats "toxic" events and more so how the mentality surrounding said events are toxic in their own right.

To repeat our vehicle for analysis with regard to the treatment of relationships in DeLillo's *White Noise*, a structural approach to the novel's "Airborne Toxic Event" continues to defend the claim that American values are misplaced. In contrast with section one's disjointed and sometimes random nature—introduced through short, manufactured glances of reality—the second section is one, 50-page long chapter. It appears that just as DeLillo uses structure to force the reader into a game of catch up with character development at the text's opening, we are almost given too much insight into dealings with disaster. Presented as a singularly tedious episode, the middle section reads as an orderly series of events when compared to the chaos of previous chapters. However, to this point, the events presented here warrant the most confusion. Again, this defends DeLillo's belief that harm, reaction, rationalization, and repetition is just another cycle of life. The reader is provided comic relief in a section that should be alarming. After the struggle of making sense of all the on goings in section one, audiences find comfort in a traditional literary style. Succinctly, in lieu of the suspense built up chapter-by-chapter, the happenings here are presented rhythmically, defending the commonplace social commentary surrounding it. Though the event is referenced in glimpses as the novel goes on, it is slowly replaced by bigger and more captivating narrative arcs, proving its worth as just another chapter in Jack's life, thus mirroring how Americans view the 24-hour news cycles of today—or better yet, of the 1980's. Therefore, similar to DeLillo's illusions to relationship depletion through wasteful bouts of interaction, society has an equally as damaging relationship with disaster—a cyclical one.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new field of literary study. All texts inherit a setting, and though overlooked in the past, context defines content. It can be said that habitat is a product of experience, and human interaction with said habitat is equally as pertinent to environmental commentary as explicit events contributing to its downfall. *White Noise* plays to this observation through narrative circumstance, but arguably critiques the deeper issue. DeLillo has noticed the significance of human relationship's influence on environment and vice versa. Just as an author's upbringing creates the social subtext of a novel, the relationships displayed within it warrant just as much attention as plot. DeLillo has tapped into this link between his players and their surroundings and chose to show readers that social values can affect environmental ones, thus informing audiences of the 1980s as well as today that personal philosophy is losing its hold on the individual. In consideration of this new awareness regarding the fact that the collective human experience will inevitably define all aspects of relationship, perhaps it is time to reassess.

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