

## Be Wilder or Bewildered? Facing death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Makiko Mieuli

### Abstract

This paper examines the role of the main character's youngest son, Wilder, in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The protagonist, Jack, is increasingly "bewildered" by the fear of death. The way Jack is easily influenced by the words of people around him, and the power of suggestion, contrasts with his son's lack of language, and his happy existence. In the novel, DeLillo suggests that this "white noise," which surrounds Wilder, is the key to processing the fear of death. Instead of being "bewildered" we should "be Wilder."

Keywords: Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, a fear of death, satire, dark comedy

### I. Introduction

Wilder, the name of the protagonist's son in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, has great significance in the story. In this paper, I will discuss this influence and how Wilder relates to one of the primary themes of the novel: *timor mortis conturbat me*. The main character, Jack, is greatly disturbed (*conturbat*) by a debilitating fear of death (*timor mortis*). Much of the novel deals with his increasingly desperate attempts to process this fear.

In addition to Jack, the major characters in the novel include his fourth wife, Babette, and their children from previous marriages: fourteen-year-old Heinrich, eleven-year-old Denise, seven-year-old Steffie, and two-year-old Wilder. Wilder is said to have a 25-word vocabulary; however, he does not speak in the novel. This silence gives him a uniqueness in the novel, presenting him as a special character who will later greatly influence the story's conclusion. Babette has a healthy image and is described as having a "fanatical blond mop" of hair. Jack is a university professor whose academic interest is Hitler studies. He founded the Department of

Hitler Studies at his university in March 1968. He regularly enjoys reading *Mein Kampf* and named his son Heinrich, after Himmler. Heinrich exercises every day because he wants to become stronger. At the university, Jack often has discussions with Murray, who specializes in Elvis studies. The Gladney family appears to be relatively normal.

Both Jack and Babette are consumed by the fear of death. A shadowy figure named Willie Mink—also known as Mr. Gray—invents a drug called “Dylar” which supposedly reduces people’s fear of death. Babette sleeps with Mink in order to acquire a supply of Dylar, which she secretly ingests. Meanwhile, a train accident causes the release of a toxic cloud of a chemical called Nyodene D. Jack is exposed to this chemical for two and a half minutes at a gas station, and it subsequently triggers a mental crisis.

Although the novel may seem tragic or pessimistic, it can be considered a satire or dark comedy. It includes references to pop culture, such as TV and radio in the 1980s. The plot flows smoothly with a whimsical rhythm. It includes both real and false information, which the reader must distinguish independently. There are also various subplots which combine into a singular narrative.

## II. Wilder

Jack has a strong emotional connection with his youngest son, Wilder. Although Babette provides emotional support for him, they connect primarily through speaking and discussion. In contrast, he connects with Wilder nonverbally, as highlighted through the scene when they visit the supermarket together:

I liked being with Wilder. The world was a series of fleeting gratifications. He took what he could, then immediately forgot it in the rush of a subsequent pleasure. It was this forgetfulness I envied and admired. (170)

Jack admires Wilder because he lacks the fear of death and is free to absorb small pleasures without thinking. Wilder never speaks in the novel; instead, he cries, laughs, screams, or makes other noises, which Jack finds comforting. The noises that Wilder makes calm Jack, like the “white noise” of the novel’s title. This is one reason why Jack always enjoys spending time with Wilder.

Moreover, Jack believes that Wilder has his own world in which he experiences—even if only temporarily—ceaseless satisfaction. Jack appears to admire this state. Later, in Chapter 24, he gains deep satisfaction from watching his children sleep:

I got out of bed in the middle of the night and went to the small room at the end of the hall to watch Steffie and Wilder sleep. I remained at this task, motionless, for nearly an hour, feeling refreshed and expanded in unnameable ways. (182)

The children's sleeping faces mentally rescue him. These scenes are described beautifully, contrasting with the image of Jack's dark depressive (or self-pitying) moments. In Chapter 27, he discusses this with Babette:

“I[Babette] think it's being with Wilder that picks me up.”

“I[Jack] know what you mean. I always feel good when I'm with Wilder. Is it because pleasures don't cling to him? He is selfish without being grasping, selfish in a totally unbounded and natural way. There's something wonderful about the way he drops one thing, grabs for another. I get annoyed when the other kids don't fully appreciate special moments or occasions. They let things slide away that should be kept and savored. But when Wilder does it, I see the spirit of genius at work.” (209)

As refugees from Nyodene D., they stay at a boy scout camp site. Jack and Babette are depressed by the situation; however, Wilder's existence relaxes them. While their other children are also precious, they somehow believe that Wilder possesses a wonderful spirit. For this reason, in the novel the line “Where is Wilder?” is often repeated. It shows that Jack and Babette pursue this calm state generated by Wilder. Similarly, the line “Where is Dylar?” is also repeated in the latter half of the novel. The similarity in pronunciation reinforces the connection between these two phrases.

There are various examples of Wilder's nonverbal communication with Jack. One night, Wilder appears near Jack's pillow. Jack and Wilder stare at each other for a long time. Then Wilder walks silently to the window, which looks out on the backyard, and stares. Consequently, Jack notices Vernon, Babette's father, in the backyard. Here we see Wilder communicating something to Jack without saying anything.

There are several other examples of this nonverbal communication in the novel. When Jack and Wilder are at the supermarket in Chapter 22, Wilder notices Murray. He screams loudly to alert Jack to Murray's presence. Referring to this scream as "the call of Wilder," DeLillo writes "Wilder called out to him, a tree-top screech, and I wheeled the cart over." (168)

In Chapter 37 of the novel, Jack and Murray discuss Wilder:

"Why do I [Jack] feel so good when I'm with Wilder? It's not like being with the other kids," I said.

"You sense his total ego, his freedom from limits."

"In what way is he free from limits?"

"He doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all. You cherish this simpleton blessing of his, this exemption from harm. You want to get close to him, touch him, look at him, breathe him in. How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing. Think about it. A person's entire life is the unraveling of this conflict. No wonder we're bewildered, staggered, shattered." (289–290)

Although Murray is presented as being somewhat untrustworthy, he occasionally says something insightful. Murray states that Wilder's ignorance of death makes him powerful and lucky. When we, as adults, gain the knowledge of our own mortality, we are "shattered," or, as Murray states—perhaps in a play on Jack's son's name—"bewildered." This conversation leads into Murray planting the dangerous idea in Jack's mind that being a "killer" can somehow defeat death.

### **III. Bewildered**

Jack's "bewilderment" increases following his exposure to the deadly Nyodene D. chemical. Believing the toxic chemical is already in his body, he becomes even more terrified of death. This fear is exacerbated by the uncertainty of the doctor who examines him. Although the chemical exposure is deadly, it is unknown whether the chemical will kill him before he dies of natural causes.

This situation can have both a tragic and comic interpretation. From the tragic perspective, Jack is doomed to die because of his exposure to a deadly chemical.

From the comic perspective, we are encouraged to laugh at Jack, the cowardly university professor. His exposure to the chemical has changed nothing; he is already doomed to die in the future from natural causes. The chemical exposure has simply increased his awareness of this fact.

In Chapter 37, Jack and Murray discuss death, and Murray seems to deliberately increase Jack's fear:

“I [Murray] know how you feel. But the tough part is yet to come. You've said good-bye to everyone but yourself. How does a person say good-bye to himself? It's a juicy existential dilemma.”

“It certainly is.”

We walked past the administration building.

“I hate to be the one who says it, Jack, but there's something that has to be said.”

“What?”

“Better you than me.”

I nodded gravely. “Why does this have to be said?”

“Because friends have to be brutally honest with each other. I'd feel terrible if I didn't tell you what I was thinking, especially at a time like this.”

“I appreciate it, Murray. I really do.” (293–294)

Rather than comforting him, Murray responds coldly to Jack's news of his impending death, exclaiming, “better you than me.” Murray perceives humans as research objects and has little sympathy with them. This is highlighted by the way Murray takes notes on Jack's children, treating them as test subjects. Here, Murray deliberately increases Jack's fear just to observe his reaction. It is extraordinarily cruel, and it can even be considered black comedy. Furthermore, Jack doesn't respond to Murray; he merely praises what Murray says and thanks him for being honest. These lines present a terrible satire of college professors. Following this scene, Jack worsens and ceases caring about his life. He begins to toss out his belongings.

Jack's bewilderment reaches its apex when he begins to act on Murray's idea that being a killer is better than being a “dier.” The idea, which Murray explains, is that becoming a killer somehow enables one to defeat death. The idea parallels the notions of strength which Jack finds attractive in his Hitler studies. Murray's words

can be compared to Hitler's words, which also incited people to kill.

In a heightened psychological state, Jack takes the gun he received from Babette's father and decides to kill Mink. He finds Mink living as a Dylar addict in a dirty motel room, staring at a TV. A shoot-out occurs in which both Jack and Mink are injured. After changing his mind about killing him, Jack revives Mink with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and takes him to the hospital. Mink forgives Jack, and at the conclusion of the scene Jack appears to have developed a fondness for Mink.

#### **IV. From bewildered to "be Wilder"**

The main cause of Jack's bewilderment is that he is strongly influenced by the words of those around him. As his fear of death becomes more intense, his actions become more reckless and dangerous. Thus, he blindly follows Murray's suggestion to transform from "dier" to "killer," and he takes the gun given him by Babette's father and prepares to find and kill Mink. Jack is easily influenced by Murray's words, in the same way that followers of Hitler—whose study Jack specializes in—were controlled by his speeches.

This contrasts with the way that Wilder calms Jack's fears nonverbally. Wilder is unaffected by people's words, and he lives in a world in which language is nonexistent. He lives intuitively and naturally. Wilder observes Heinrich's physics experiment and he touches whatever looks interesting at the supermarket. He is innocent, pure, and undaunted. As his name implies, he is almost "wild." According to the OED, wild means "Of an animal: Living in a state of nature; not tame, not domesticated." Wilder truly embodies this idea.

As Maggie Coval states in "Panasonic: The Power of Language in *White Noise*."

[L]anguage manipulates involuntary individuals. Orwell asserts that "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." (Orwell, 4). The former has been proven to be true by the willful manipulation of language, and the latter is perhaps best encapsulated by "the power of suggestion" exemplified in *White Noise*. Often perpetrated by the omnipresent voices of radio and TV, the power of suggestion pervades the home, psyche, and disposition of all of those in *White Noise*. (Coval 2017)

Wilder can be powerful because he is uninfluenced by the power of language. Wilder highlights his animal nature in a scene in Chapter 16. Wilder perceives that something bad is going to happen to his family, and he begins to scream without reason:

They watched him with something like awe. Nearly seven straight hours of serious crying. It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges—a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions. (79)

Here, we notice the words “remote” and “barren,” which evoke a sense of wildness. Of course, “wilderness” is an important feature of American literature. This connection with Wilder was shown in the earlier reference to Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903). The name of the main character Jack could also be a connection here. Another connection to wildness is evident in Wilder’s biological relatives. His biological father is now in Western Australia undertaking research in the “outback.” In addition, Wilder’s biological brother is presented early in the novel in a discussion with Murray:

“The boy is growing up without television,” I said, “which may make him worth talking to, Murray, as a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark his species as unique.” (50)

Jack states that Wilder’s bigger brother is “wild” and “savage.” In addition, Wilder’s name has a similar construction to Murray’s coinage of the word “dier.”

In Chapter 40, which is the final chapter in the novel, Wilder rides his tricycle through a wild-looking overgrown field and then across a freeway, surviving unharmed. This “wild” action of his son transforms Jack’s mental state:

No one plays a radio or speaks in a voice that is much above a whisper. Something golden falls, a softness delivered to the air. There are people walking dogs, there

are kids on bikes, a man with a camera and long lens, waiting for his moment. It is not until some time after dark has fallen, the insects screaming in the heat, that we slowly begin to disperse, shyly, politely, car after car, restored to our separate and defensible selves. (325)

As David Cowart suggests “[...] Wilder’s ride is a symbolically minimalist life journey [...]” (*The Physics of Language* 90). It is a way of life. His son’s “wild” action restores Jack, easing his fear of death without becoming a killer or using Dylar. All that remains is what he calls comfortable noises. Later, the hospital calls. However, Jack allows the phone to ring without answering it. Jack, who is influenced by words, suffers from the fear of dying. However, if he can cease being bewildered and ignore those unnecessary words and be “wild,” which focuses on the truth and being bold, he can live a life without fear. This is thanks to Wilder. As Murray states, “[...] we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security. [...] He asks me why the strongest family units exist in the least developed societies. Not to know is a weapon of survival [...]” (81–82) Thanks to his family, especially Wilder, Jack mentally survives. In this way, he is transformed from being “bewildered” into “being Wilder.”

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how the main character in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Jack, becomes “bewildered” by an overpowering fear of death. The words of his colleague, Murray, the doctor who diagnoses his exposure to a deadly chemical, and the other people he encounters in the story push Jack further toward insanity and a devastating act of violence. At the novel’s conclusion, he is saved by the calming presence of his son Wilder, who lives “wildly” without fear in a nonverbal world. This state of “white noise” that DeLillo appears to suggest through the character of Wilder is the only solution to the fear of death that all of us ultimately encounter.

## References

Coval, Maggie. 2017. “Panasonic: The Power Of Language In *White Noise*.” *Arts ONE*. 2017–2018. <https://artstone.arts.ubc.ca/2018/07/04/panasonic-the-power-of-language-in-white-noise/>(Accessed 13/07/2021)



- Cowart, David. 2003. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*. Georgia: The University of Georgia Press.
- DeLillo, Don. 1986. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Lentricchia, Frank. 1999. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. North Carolina: Duke UP.
- 1991. *New Essays on White Noise*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simpson, John Andrew and Edmund Simon Christopher Weiner (eds.). 2009. *The Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition on CD-ROM version 4.0. Oxford: Oxford University Press.