

A Threatened Hero: An Analysis of Jack Gladney in *White Noise*

LAN Haiying^{[a],*}

^[a]Ph.D. Candidate, School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Jack Gladney, the protagonist in *White Noise*, impresses as a middle-class, middle-aged, mild man circled by threats from his career, his family and the society. Those threats confuse and castrate him as a dignified mature man. Apart from that, threats from all sides deprive him of his academic power, patriarchal power and life power. Loss of power fits into the destiny of common beings in the teeming world and reflects the common psyche of fear and anxiety of the contemporary world.

Key words: *White Noise*; Jack Gladney; Threat

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INTRODUCTION

White Noise centers on a middle class family obsessed with fear of death, which is typical of contemporary American society. Cornered by inner fear of death, the fifty-one year old protagonist is entangled in the kinds of threats brought about by his colleagues, children, wives, friends and relatives. Unfortunately, in spite of endless and perverse struggles, this “castrated” middle-class, middle-aged, mild man is still circled by threats he is not capable of change or control. As Engels (1999) comments, “DeLillo demonstrates with the case of Jack Gladney that the notion of individual autonomy is itself a fantasy, and that middle-class white men are especially apt to harbor

this particularly American form of self-delusion” (p.756). “Individual autonomy” is an indispensable sign which dignified American white men sweat their guts out for. However, these white middle-classed men only live in a contemporary world of “self-delusion”, who can never achieve heroic effects in this threatening world.

1. THREAT TO HIS ACADEMIC POWER

Jack Gladney, according to Murray, is a professor of Hitler studies and he is also the department head of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. Murray says, “You’ve established a wonderful thing here with Hitler [...] This is the center, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney’s Hitler” (DeLillo, 1984, p.11). Seen from other people’s perspective, Jack is quite successful as the founder of Hitler studies. His academic power and authority are highly valued and envied by his colleagues. However, at the beginning of the novel, the tone of ridicule reveals itself stealthily. His sense of instability and lack of confidence flows between the lines of narration. When Jack relates the chairmen at his college, he says “as they [idling students] witness the chairman walking across campus, crook’d arm emerging from his medieval robe, the digital watch blinking in late summer dusk” (Ibid., p.9). The “idling students” look at the chairman in quite a satirical way: The queer combination of “medieval robe” and “the digital watch” points to the improper and out-of-date dress style of department heads at College-on-the-Hill. “Department heads wear[ing] academic robes” (Ibid., p.9) is quite a traditional way of asserting authority and academic power, but the juxtaposition of cast-off academic tradition and byproduct of modern technology relentlessly pokes at the hypocritical intellectuals in contemporary society, which instead diminishes the academic power of the department heads, Jack Gladney included.

Jack Gladney, according to the chancellor, “make[s] a feeble presentation of self” (DeLillo, 1984, p.17), which

endangers his academic authority. Jack Gladney is advised by the chancellor to “do something about [his] name and appearance if [he] wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (Ibid., p.16). Urged by the chancellor, he “invent[s] an extra initial and call[s] [him]self J. A. K. Gladney” (DeLillo, 1984, p.16). This renaming does not guarantee his sense of security, although “[t]o [Babette Gladney] it intimate[s] dignity, significance and prestige” (Ibid., p.17). DeLillo admits in an interview by Thomas LeClair, “renaming suggests an innocence and a rebirth” (LeClair, 2005, p.9). That is true. Generally speaking, renaming implies a ray of hope and “rebirth”. But it does not fit Jack Gladney. His social background fails his attempts at renewal and power through a powerful sign or name. From the perspectives outside he enjoys great prestige and power, and achieves “rebirth” through renaming, but deep inside, he “[wears the tag] like a borrowed suit” (DeLillo, 1984, p.16) and he feels he is “the false character that follows the name around” (Ibid., p.17). The threat to his academic power grows into him inwardly and it has, to some extent, changed his identity. “Borrowed suit” and “false character” designate both his self-awareness of academic power loss and his satirical attitude towards academic power itself.

His sense of insecurity comes, to a certain degree, from his “conceal[ing] the fact that [he does] not know German” as a Hitler studies scholar of “high professional standing” (Ibid., p.31). A sense of insecurity and “living [...] on the edge of a landscape of vast shame” (Ibid., p.31) pushed him, especially his academic power, to a corner. He is forced to meet with the challenges of learning German. Not knowing the German tongue is to Jack Gladney what Achilles’ heel is to Achilles. German is a “protective device” (Ibid., p.31) and his learning German must be kept as “secret” (Ibid., 1984, p.32). This denotes his inner state of mind. Threatened by the young students, colleagues and scholars, he wants to catch “the last straw on camel’s back”, and make every effort to make up for his weak points and assert his authority. In fact, he knows he is “secure in [his] professional aura of power, madness and death” (Ibid., p.72), and “all [have] an aura to maintain, and in sharing [his] with a friend [he is] risking the very things that [make him] untouchable” (Ibid., p.74). Tragically he is only secure in his “profession aura” and must try to maintain the “profession aura”, which intimates that he does not feel safe and secure and he lives in a void of feeble aura or fluorescent bubbles.

His authority and power in the academic circle of Hitler studies is dwarfed by a good grasp of more professional knowledge in the fields of chemistry, computer science and medical science, which are closely related to life and death. Driven to the evacuation center by the government, he finally falls victim to the SIMUVAC men, one of whom “regard[s] [him] with the grimly superior air of a combat veteran” (Ibid., p.139).

The SIMUVAC man is representative of the government. A good command of knowledge bloats the SIMUVAC man. As “a combat veteran”, he assumes a superior and pompous stance when examining the potential victim to the toxic fallout. In the extremities of disaster, he deprives Jack Gladney of pretentious and false academic power. Jack Gladney has been trying every means to maintain and preserve.

2. THREAT TO HIS PATRIARCHAL POWER

Patriarchal love recurs in *White Noise*, which grows stronger as Jack Gladney’s academic power diminishes. Jack Gladney enjoys life experiences with Wilder, his youngest step-son, who ascertains his patriarchal power as a middle-aged father. Not for once Jack Gladney “watch[es] Steffie and Wilder sleep” and becomes “refreshed and expanded in unnameable ways” (Ibid., p.182). In spite of sorrows and fears, his sense of protection is quite clear. Just as he reports, “I find I love him [Heinrich] with an animal desperation, a need to take him under my coat and crush him to my chest, keep him there, protect him” (Ibid., p.25). Patriarchal protection is primitive and innate, which rises to its own feet when one’s offspring meets with danger.

Unfortunately, the son Heinrich enjoys his superiority to Jack Gladney. Heinrich has a better command of human life and technological development. It seems that Heinrich does not need the father’s protection. Even if love and protection are needed in such a disaster as the airborne toxic event, Jack Gladney is not capable of providing necessary and effective measures. When forced by Heinrich to explain, he could only use the word “just” to prevaricate, and he can neither provide his son with eloquent evidence nor reason his son into accepting his own opinion. The words “it just won’t” “I just know” “they just would” “because it won’t” (Ibid., pp.110-12) imply that the father is outsmarted by his fourteen-year-old adolescent son who has a good command of knowledge and reasonable attitude toward technological development and the disasters like the airborne toxic event. As Conroy (1994) comments, “the authority has passed to the younger generation in this encounter” (p.99). The name “Heinrich” is very interesting. Jack takes it as “a forceful name, a strong name”, and he feels “it ha[s] an authority that might cling to [Heinrich]”, whose wishes of “shield[ing] him mak[ing] him unafraid” are quite clear and affectionate. To name his only son Heinrich adds strength to his academic power. However, not having a good command of German plays a joke with him. The name Heinrich, in German, means “der Herr im Haus” (the man in the house). This name poses a threat to Jack Gladney’s central patriarchal position in the family. In the evacuation center, the

narrator Jack makes a comparison between the father Jack Gladney and his son Heinrich. Jack remains “at the outer edges of one of the largest clusters” while Heinrich “[is] at the center of things” (DeLillo, 1984, p.130); Heinrich depicts “the airborne toxic event in a technical way”, and “his knowledge of chemistry [is] fresh and up-to-date” (Ibid., p.130) while Jack Gladney moves around between different crowds of people for information. Here the stark comparison between “outer edges” and “the center” reinforces the fact that Heinrich, the son, is replacing the father’s central position in the family and the father Jack Gladney has been gradually pushed to the margin of the family. The son has been threatening his patriarchal power and the change in words from “my own son” to “this adolescent boy” indicates this threat has alienated their affectionate connections. Not only Heinrich, but also Bee brings Jack Gladney “a nameless threat” (Ibid., p.94). Bee’s look becomes “[the] adolescent female’s tenderest form of condescension” (Ibid., p.97). Bee has grown up. The fact that they do not live together alienates the primitive father-daughter relationship and questions his patriarchal power.

Apart from threats from the children, his patriarchal power is also challenged by his four wives. As a fifty-one-year-old middle-aged man, he has had four marriages before the present marriage with Babette. His wives abandon him. According to Jack Gladney, Dana Breedlove likes involving him in “household plots, faculty plots” (Ibid., p.49), who “work[s] part-time as a spy” (Ibid., p.213). Another wife “Tweedy [comes] from a distinguished old family that ha[s] a long tradition of spying and counterspying” (DeLillo, 1984, p.213) who “take[s] all [his] money” and “[marries] a well-to-do, well-connected, well-tailored diplomat” (Ibid., p.87) while his third wife “Janet, before retiring to the ashram, [is] a foreign-currency analyst who [does] research for a secret group of advanced theorists connected to some controversial think-tank” (Ibid., p.213), who “[is] always maneuvering” (Ibid., p.87). These three women do not embody female love or sacrifice. They are not weak physically or mentally. Comparatively speaking, they are stronger than Jack Gladney. They are new women freed from household. With them, he feels dis-empowered and weakened, just as he reveals, “[his] security [is] threatened” (Ibid., p.87). Babette, his present wife, in spite of kindness and love, has an extra-marital love affair with the so-called Mr. Gray. Marriage discards him, cheats him and “castrates” him metaphorically. This threat from women incurs a sense of insecurity and a perverse way of finding comfort by lying “between [Babette’s] breasts” and “nuzzling into that designated space like a wounded sub into its repair dock” (Ibid., p.172). It is quite ironic. Threatened by his ex-wives and wife, he loses his patriarchal power as a strong and domineering husband. Unexpectedly, he still relies on Babette for security and

consolation. He wants to stay with a mother figure. Such mentality denotes that his patriarchal power is lost and irretrievable.

3. THREAT TO HIS LIFE POWER

According to “Declaration of Independence”, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are the three basic rights of human beings. Life is the most important right human beings deserve and the government should protect human beings’ life at every cost. Jack Gladney is encircled by threats of death. In Jack Gladney’s narration, the words “air-raid sirens [...] came from our own red brick firehouse”, “brute aggression [...] close to us, so surely upon us” and “sonic monster” (Ibid., p.118) indicate that Jack Gladney is aware of the approaching danger which may threaten his life. As Martucci (2007) puts it, “[h]is narrative indicates that he is acutely aware of the threats surrounding him” (p.83). When he flees to the evacuation center, he describes the airborne toxic event in such a way, “[t]he enormous dark mass move[s] like some death ship in a Norse legend” (Ibid., p.127), through which the connection between the spilling accident and death threat is quite clear. The undertow of “death ship” and the toxic fallout extract fear from those involved in the toxic event, who believe that “[i]t is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms” (Ibid., p.127). As time goes on, Jack Gladney learns more about the toxic event. Out of need of gas, he is exposed to the toxic content for two and a half minutes. “Exposure to the toxic cloud makes Gladney more aware of the reality and inevitability of death” (Martucci, 2007, p.88). It must have filled Jack Gladney with great fear of unnatural and tragic death. The evasion from exposure to the toxic cloud reminds him of “the time-factored death [...] in [his] chromosomes and blood” (DeLillo, 1984, p.159). The toxic chemical material has grown into his genes and his blood. It seems that he is sentenced to potential death. Jack Gladney has taken four medical checkups and “a battery of tests” which “turn him into a televised picture, he learns that “he has no control over what the screens broadcast” (Olster, 2008, p.88). For the man carrying a tiny TV set, Jack Gladney looks “haunted, ashen, lost” (DeLillo, 1984, p. 163). That’s to say, fear of death has deprived Jack Gladney of energy, vividness and glimmer of life. Jack Gladney is surer of his potential death, reinforced by other man’s observation.

Threats from all sides reinforce his sense of approaching death and corresponding fear. Babette’s adultery with Mr. Gray not only challenges Jack Gladney’s patriarchal power, but also poses a threat to his life in power. As a middle-aged man, his sexual power is in question as sex is seldom mentioned in the

couple's marital life. As is known to all, sexual power is indicative of health, strength, energy and life. The sexual intercourse between Babette and Mr. Gray haunts him and pushes him into crazy and absurd behavior. People may argue that in the last but one episode Jack Gladney avenges himself on Willie Mink through murder. Boxall (2006) says, "[i]n killing Mink he can assert his sexual power by revenging his cuckoldry; he can establish himself, [...], as a sexually powerful killer rather than an impotent dier" (p.127). However, his revenge is not successful. He changes his idea in the end. He does not let Willie Mink die. Instead he sends him to the hospital and saves him. So attempt at grasping life power through revenge goes bankrupt.

The unexpected arrival of Vernon Dickey also surrenders Jack Gladney to threat of life. As is narrated, old Vernon Dickey suffers from poverty, fatigue and disease. Vernon Dickey is described by Jack Gladney as an image of Death. Quite ironically, such an old man "seemed to attack [Jack] with terms like ratchet drill and whipsaw" and "saw [his] shakiness in such matters as a sign of some deeper incompetence or stupidity" (DeLillo, 1984, p.245). The sharp contrast between Vernon Dickey and Jack Gladney through the perspective of Jack Gladney himself shows that Jack Gladney is writhing in agony of threats to his life. In spite of illness and old age, Vernon Dickey lives an energetic and optimistic life. "It is no accident that Vernon [...] raises questions about Jack's masculinity" (Basu, 2005, p.102). Jack Gladney in fact agrees with Vernon Dickey on this point. He senses problems of his life. He neglects that the most important power of life is braveness. Lack of braveness, strength and optimistic spirit threatens his life.

His life power is also threatened by computers, medical devices, and all sorts of medical checkups and tests. Generally speaking, a medical checkup could reason a panicked man into physical and mental soundness. However, the change of death's nature has caused disappointment all round. Jack Gladney puts every hope in medical checkup at Autumn Harvest Farms. He lives a simple way of life. He feels that his virtue should be rewarded. He hopes that the doctor will tell him nothing is wrong with his body. However he is quite frustrated when the doctor says "[t]he magnetic scanner says it's there. I'm looking at bracketed numbers with little stars" (DeLillo, 1984, p.279). In the past medical checkups, he is filled with anxiety about the side-effects of Nyodene D or doubts about the death threat, but the doctor's words and actions affirm his fear, anxiety and doubts rather than alleviate them or add points to his life. Till then he is

sure of threat to his life power, threat caused by modern technology and also modern medical technology.

CONCLUSION

"A novel without a hero" is the subtitle of *Vanity Fair* by the British writer William Thackeray. *White Noise* revolves on narrator/character Jack Gladney. Traditionally speaking, it is also a novel without a hero. However, critics have different opinions. In Halldorson's opinion, "although Jack becomes aware of his responsibility as an unrepressed hero, DeLillo does not imply that Jack can deliver a boon to all the heart-weary postmodern in the audience" (Halldorson, 2007, p.142). Halldorson regards Jack Gladney as "an unrepressed hero". That is to say, Jack Gladney is typical of postmodern men, and represents the anxiety, fear and doubts of the crowds of the postmodern society. Nevertheless, his heroic deeds are useless rather than beneficial. This "unrepressed hero" is not capable of saving any postmodern man. For me, Jack Gladney is a threatened or repressed hero rather than an "unrepressed hero". He is very clear about his situation. He admits, "I tell myself I have reached an age, the age of unreliable menace" (DeLillo, 1984, p.184). With threats to his academic power, patriarchal power, and life power, he becomes repressed, enthralled, and castrated in his aspiration to control and power.

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