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Sample MonkeyNotes

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White Noise

by

Don Delillo

1985



MonkeyNotes by PinkMonkey Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting of this novel is Blacksmith, a small, liberal arts college town in Middle America. The college is aptly named College-on-the-Hill.

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Jack Gladney - The founder and professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill.

Babette - The current wife of Jack; mother of Denise, Wilder, and Eugene.

Heinrich - The son of Jack and Janet Savory; pseudo-philosopher and media fanatic.

Denise - The daughter of Babette and Bob Pardee; works hardest to solve the Dylar problem of her mother.

Steffie - (Stephanie Rose) daughter of Jack and Dana Breedlove.; the wildest and youngest of the children; son of Babette and Jack; never says anything but frequently is missing.

Murray Jay Siskind - The professor interested in car crashes and Elvis; is seen most often in the grocery store.

Minor Characters

Howard Dunlop - Jack's German instructor.

Dana Breedlove - Jack's first and fourth wife and part-time spy.....

CONFLICT

The real conflict in this novel is with death. Babette, Jack, Murray, and the rest all seem preoccupied with death and avoiding it. The manifestation of this conflict seems to come at the very end, when Jack confronts Willie and shoots him.

Protagonist - Jack Gladney is the protagonist. Not only is he the narrator, but he is also.....

Antagonist - There is no formal antagonist, but if we define antagonist as the object of the protagonist's struggle and conflict, then death is the antagonist. Jack's constant fear of death and.....

Climax - The climax of the novel comes when Jack tries to kill Willie and in the process, he is shot himself. This moment leads to the hospital, where both men are saved, and the last vestige of.....

Outcome - In effect, the novel ends with a greater sense of foreboding as well as a simultaneous sense of hope. The "white noise" is expanding, but the one character to whom the others look as.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The plot is rather simple: an Airborne Toxic Event strikes a small college town. After a rather chaotic evacuation, the Gladneys are eventually allowed to come home. During this event, Jack is exposed to Nyodene D, which is potentially deadly. SIMUVAC is not satisfied with the data from the event and decides that a simulation is needed to prepare the town. Babette has been secretly taking an experimental drug, Dylar, for

which he provides sex to the drugs inventor, Minks. Jack eventually finds out and confronts her. In the end, Jack confronts Minks and is shot in the process.

THEME

Main Theme

The primary theme of this novel is that death underlies all aspects of popular culture. The glitz, packaging, and showiness of popular culture is an attempt to hide death beneath the surfaces, eventually allowing the people to forget or become dulled to death.

Minor Themes

One minor theme is that one cannot focus on death; one must live life and not "die slowly." Both the SIMUVAC computer person and Winnie present this belief to Jack.

A second minor theme is that we as a culture cannot see reality. The "Most Photographed Barn....."

MOOD

The mood of the novel is ironic. This novel repeatedly makes irony of contemporary culture and life. All of the clichés and stereotypes about contemporary America are presented as.....

AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Don Delillo was born in New York in 1936. He is a contemporary American writer who has written numerous novels, including *The Names*, *End Zone*, *Ratner's Star*, *White Noise*, *Americana*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, *Great Jones Street*, *Running Dog*, and *Players*. Most of his novels deal with contemporary American popular culture; at times they appear to critique contemporary culture while at others they seem to reveal in the kitsch.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Delillo's fiction should be considered as a literary version of Pop Art. He is conscious of this, even titling one of his novels, *Mao II*, after a silkscreen by Andy Warhol. Other novels of his focus on college football (*End Zone*) and the John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy (*Libra*).

As part of contemporary American fiction, *White Noise* explores the interaction of the media and popular culture with high art. Aspects of consumer culture are strewn throughout the narrative for no other reason than to simulate the constant presence of products and advertisements in our lives.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

PART 1: WAVES AND RADIATION

Chapter 1

Summary

A line of station wagons arrives with college students getting ready for the semester. Jack Gladney is watching them, noting the possessions that they bring with them. He also notes how similar the families, students, and possessions are. He also mentions that there is an insane asylum nearby as well as a freeway. He concludes by informing the reader that he is a professor of Hitler Studies and in fact started the field of Hitler studies itself.

Notes

This first chapter establishes the setting, the small college town of Blacksmith. The setting is important because it is cliché Middle America. By setting the story here, Delillo effectively is saying, "this is America."

We are also introduced to the protagonist, Jack Gladden, who is a professor of Hitler Studies. Hitler Studies is important to Jack because it is a neat packaging of death. Jack does not deal with the 6 million Jews, gypsies, disabled, homosexuals, etc that Hitler ordered killed; he focuses on the celebrity and the trivia. Unimaginable death is hidden behind the word "Hitler," which in turn is sanitized by being a field of intellectual pursuit (reality is made theoretical).

Chapter 2

Summary

The second chapter is a description of Babette, Jack's wife. She is upset because Jack forgot to remind her about the arrival of the station wagons. One of her activities is to read tabloids to an elderly gentleman named Treadwell.

She and Jack have a brief discussion on how the rich experience death. Jack suggests that maybe it is merely a transference of documents. During this discussion, she asks where Wilder, their youngest child (and the only one that has both of them as its parents), has gone. Wilder is found, and the three other kids that live with them, Steffie, Denise, and Heinrich, all come downstairs. Steffie and Denise discuss Babette's tendency to buy health food that she will not eat, thinking that if she buys it, she will feel compelled to eat it. There is a brief focus on the packaging and white noise surrounding them.

Notes

Here we are introduced to Babette who is again, a kind of cliché. The name itself suggests the unintelligent wife who merely looks pretty. We meet her and see that her actions are typically American: she is worried about death and she feels that all she has to do is buy the product (not use it) and its effects will be felt.

The discussion between Babette and Jack about the rich and death is a way to describe death without making it personal. This allows the two of them security because it removes part of the fear of dying. DeLillo is also making a statement about the degree to which death has disappeared in this culture: many of us no longer understand the physicality of death; for us it merely entails changing something in a computer file or filing papers.

We are introduced to the rest of the children who live with Jack and Babette. Wilder's disappearance foreshadows his later runaway.

Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter returns to school campus. We are told that the Hitler Studies Department is in the same building as the Popular Culture Department. The one professor of popular culture, which Jack sees as being different (and he likes) is Murray Jay Siskind, who lectures on living icons. Murray lives in a rooming house with a number of odd types. Murray states that he is envious of the way that Jack has taken a figure and made a career out of him, in a way, making Hitler his own. Murray says that he wants to do the same thing with Elvis.

Murray and Jack take a short trip to see "The Most Photographed Barn in America." There are five signs pronouncing it "The Most Photographed" along the highway. While they are there, they discuss the impossibility of seeing the barn through the aura surrounding it. The barn is a celebrity for the sake of being a celebrity.

Notes

The irony here is that Hitler studies is not placed in the History building but in the Popular Culture Building.

This is vital to the understanding of Jack's work. He is not interested in understanding World War II better; he is interested in how one becomes a celebrity and how one packages death. Hitler was a superstar and sex idol in Germany in the later 1930s and early 1940s: he was Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and John F. Kennedy rolled up in one. This is what Jack is most interested in. Murray, Jack's one real professor friend, wants to make Elvis into the same kind of academic commodity that Jack has made Hitler into. He is attempting to redefine "greatness" and "worthiness of study."

"The Most Photographed Barn in America" is an important scene because it reveals how we as participants in American culture are often more interested in the copy than the original (this idea is known as simulacra or hyper-reality). Those who photograph the barn participate in a group celebrity: they gain fame by.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The characters are all rather superficial and stereotypical. No one extends beyond his/her role. DeLillo's characters do not achieve any kind of conscious enlightenment, but they do tend to progress slowly. Jack ultimately comes to see that focusing on death can itself be fatal. Babette moves towards a focus on Wilder. The rest do seem rather static.

Characters provide the opportunity for DeLillo, like Thomas Pynchon, to create allusions and references that expand the potential significance of a character, often to the point of absurdity. Heinrich, as an allusion to Himmler, the director of the SS, Hitler's information gathering police, seems.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot is insofar as DeLillo needs events to occur so that he can have simulated events to supersede them. As far as the narrative is concerned, the plot is arbitrary. The characters interact with popular culture. What is relevant about the plot is that it occurs as a few well spaced dramatic and.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The themes in this novel revolve around popular culture and death. Therefore, one must look at those two things as being interchangeable. This is not to say that they *always* are, but that they *sometimes* are. By seeing the grocery store as a place where death is hidden behind the bright packaging, the culture takes on a much more ominous tone. Likewise, to see death as a media event, forces us to.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you think that Jack in his role as professor of Hitler Studies has an impact on his relationships, identities, and his sense of mortality?
- 2) Does the family unit have an relationship to the novel and Jack's relations?.....

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