DeLillo: Features Of The Characters

DeLillo's characters cradle religious, psychological, and existential motivations, but their projects of self-realization tend to succumb to the inertness of the material shapes they take and to the claustrophobic paranoia of a closed history of things which connect only to other things. In the words of a character in Underworld, 'Technology makes reality come true' (177). Technology appears to DeLillo's characters as a kind of hypostasized human dream, which in turn, or recursively, influences the kind of dreams they have, and so the ones they realize in technological form. The result is not a dystopian technocracy like that depicted by the modernists or the romantics. DeLillo's characters are not victimized by technology as in A Clockwork Orange, 1984, or 'The Terminator.' Rather, they exist in collusion with technology in an ontological quest either for self-definition (as in Americana or Cosmopolis) or for self-deception (as in White Noise and Underworld), and most characteristically in an existential cross-breed of both.

In DeLillo‘s fiction we find a picture of the present culture: shopping malls and supermarkets; the temples of the new consumerist creed, of a market organized entirely around consumer demand; the detritus and waste of consumerism produced by that insatiable demand. Libra is about the influence and identification of general public with the famous personalities. Oswald finds many coincidences of his and President Kennedy‘s life, like both had brothers named Robert, their wives got pregnant at the same time, and their military service in the Pacific. Sometimes he would force coincidences, as he did at the time of the shooting. Oswald believes that the chance passing of Kennedy‘s motorcade below the window, where he works as the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, must mean that he is destined to shoot the President. By shooting Kennedy, Oswald takes revenge against all the famous men whom he blames for confining him to small rooms or the life he had been living. Libra also highlights the role of the media. After the assassination Oswald faces imprisonment. He is satisfied with the feeling that though his body is in prison his name is carried by radio and TV stations across the world: Everybody knew who he was now. This charged him with strength? (Libra 435). He feels proud as he has displaced media attention from the President to himself, occupying Kennedy‘s place in the limelight.

DeLillo's protagonists are predominantly Underground Men: self-awareness is not a goal but a curse to be warded off by routine and detachment; knowledge serves only to make them aware of the unknowable; and their search for candor and honesty reveal only the depths of their self-deception. Whenever Bell begins to wonder who he is, he tells us, he takes 'the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell' (Americana 11). Jack Gladney, like most of DeLillo's characters, wants to believe his emotions and aspirations are larger than a synapse, that he is a unique being, with some measure of control over himself and his destiny. But every trait, quirk, and habit Jack cherishes as part of his own unique self turns out to be mediated from something outside him.

The problem of self-definition comes down to describing what is left when the sense-making things are taken away — routine, cause- and-effect , narrative, language, perception. Perception is the first mediation, DeLillo suggests, helping us to make sense by reducing everything it confronts, selecting and composing so that at times even the arbitrary notes of a boat whistle

can sound like a tune. But it is in the empty places, the actual and metaphorical deserts, that DeLillo's characters feel the tug of recognition from their own selves. In the face of uncertainty, confusion, doubt and fear, the characters develop strategies to trick themselves, to comfort and console, to make sense. They lose themselves in groups, create mannequin selves through brand name consumerism, repress the present, remake the past, imitate rather than feel. Susceptible to fear, they hide in the third person, using abstraction to divorce from themselves and their environment.

Many of DeLillo's characters, such as Libra's General Walker, fear the awful mystery of who they are and so create a single, hard-edged identity to compensate. For others, such as Lee Harvey Oswald, the persona itself is composed of layers: he schemes to become a real defector to Russia by posing as a false defector posing as a real defector, and to spy on Bannister by posing as a rightist posing as a leftist. At every level the identity is performed, worn outwardly in costume and disguise. An identity is attractive because it represents the ideal of wholeness, of form; like plot, identity gives meaning. All his life, Oswald has been searching for an identity, for an event to shape his life, to catch up all the loose ends and contradictions, to make his life coherent.

For DeLillo identity is often shaped from outside, particularly by media images. Images invade consciousness so effectively that in Americana, David Bell believes the solid world is merely shadows and echoes, and identity itself a lifetime accumulation of advertising and movie images. The image is powerful because it is simpler and safer than the real. It prompts third-person self-detachment so often that this maneuver becomes second nature to most of DeLillo's characters, particularly in morally ambivalent situations. Many characters live life at two removes, inside the double-walled insulation of identity.

Oswald believes his inner life is secret, wholly his own, but it is made up propaganda and movie images. 'There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth' (Libra 260). What the characters think of as coming from themselves--their own needs and desires--are actually manipulated by external forces; their thoughts, emotions, sexuality, even perceptions are all mediated from outside them. These outside influences gain power through a corresponding internal drive to repress and alienate the self out of fear. KGB agent Kirilenko knows what people like Oswald want: a 'second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else' (Libra 166). In Americana, the abstract nature of the self is emphasized in the central metaphor of the motel in the heart of everyman. In a duplicated room, within a duplicated motel, 'you can easily forget who you are...you can sit on your bed and become simply man sitting on bed, an abstraction to compete with infinity itself' (257).

DeLillo's novels have their share of spies, double agents, and terrorists; DeLillo's deeper interest is in the double life of everyone, the secret life engendered by isolation and loneliness, the conspiracies that begin with the split in the individual. Though DeLillo's characters and settings are diverse, they are held together by the particular aura of our time, marked by a proliferation of information, images and technology, the promised flowering of civilization and science. Advertising images intensify self-consciousness while masking self-awareness. To many of DeLillo's characters, the entire environment seems to suggest massive conspiracy, cover-up, and manipulation at the level of our very senses.

Like David Bell and Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Gladney feels estranged from the world because

everywhere he looks he sees an image. Its power lies in its ability to seduce us, to insinuate itself into our own imagination until we cannot distinguish between our perception and the commercial image. The landscape becomes an omnipresent television that cannot be turned off, a world of primary representations that neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real. They merge with our own perceptions, shape them, and endow them with a pre-formed structure that becomes part of our reality. In White Noise the television offers cable news, weather, health and nature, making the entire environment one's footstool, reducing nature itself to a simulacrum, a copy with no original. The image has saturated the world, mediating all perception, emotion, thought and act, until it becomes neither possible nor necessary to distinguish primary actions from imitations of actions. The ultimate power of the image, then, lies in this offer of freedom from the authentic self, deliverance from the age-old burden of existence.

DeLillo's works are illustrative of American life and culture, in that they reveal and comment on cultural pathologies that can be understood as inherently American, and that these pathologies are linked with postmodernism. Each of these novels presents a protagonist who is on a journey of self-discovery, effectively seeking what many critics have identified as an out-dated form of self – a modernist notion of self. The problematic nature of identity in these novels is exacerbated by changes in representation and warfare, particularly the perceived loss of originality and the rise of terrorism. Mark Osteen also examines the crisis of self and search for the self in DeLillo's novels. In his article "The Nature of the Diminishing Self" Osteen claims that the main characters in DeLillo's works have an inclination towards pursuing

an origin that is also an end: each narrows himself to discover either a life governed by rules that obviate the need for thought or an end to life itself. Each narrator strives to reduce competing impulses and discourses into a single line story that moves inexorably toward perfect, violent closure. But none of them find the solution to their malaise […] (Osteen, 32).

DeLillo's characters are ultimately left empty-handed in their search for self. Our world, our country, the same world that DeLillo's characters populate within these novels, is filled with postmodern ailments – hindrances that are distinctly postmodern in nature, and that keep DeLillo's protagonists' from discovering themselves.

DeLillo's presentations of the characters reactions to social conditioning: anxiety, panic, and apathy, are part of his strategy of critiquing postmodernism from the inside. Paradoxically, characters often act out their agency panic through self-defeating actions. The characters in the novels experience control of, and intrusions into, their identities and bodies, and their reactions range from apathy to violence; they are either "killers" or "diers," as Murray Siskind explains in White Noise (290). In White Noise, the characters' identities are repeatedly shown to be influenced and shaped by society. As has been pointed out by several critics,6 mass media intrudes constantly into the lives of the characters of White Noise. TV and radio "noise" invade the characters' minds and determine their choices and values. As a result of influence from mass media, the characters think about product jingles and mutter product names in their sleep, and one of the children thinks the sun's corolla is a car (WN 212, 155, 233). Frank Lentricchia views Jack's tendency to note the brand names of products everywhere as Jack's "unconscious epistemology of consumption" ("Tales" 105). The shopping habits of the Gladney family are products of the messages they have received from external sources, thus evidencing how the mediated signals the characters receive penetrate their minds and impact their lives in constructing their identities.