

FEMINIST MISREADING OF *WHITE NOISE* DEBUNKED

Don DeLillo

(1936-)

Feminists teach *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo as a Feminist novel, as exemplified in “Homocidal Men and Full-Figured Women: Gender in *White Noise*,” *Approaches to Teaching Don DeLillo’s White Noise* (MLA 2006), a cultural studies article by Philip Nel: “DeLillo has learned from feminism. If readers of *White Noise* are paying attention, they can learn from feminism too.” Philip Nel himself has not paid attention. *White Noise* satirizes Feminism--as well as Nel himself. The most satirized character in the book is a cultural studies professor like Nel who lives “near the insane asylum.” How did Nel invert the meaning of the novel?

Like so many who presume to teach literature these days, Philip Nel is in the wrong field. “Cultural Studies” is politicized anthropology. Anthropology is a field that clings to discredited research in order to advocate cultural determinism and moral relativism. “Cultural Studies” is a catch-all of liberal causes invented by the Marxist radical Frederic Jameson at Duke as a way of penetrating English and other departments. It was used as a wedge in the 1980s to replace objective disciplines with politically correct advocacy. Nel grovels so low to radical Feminists as to cite as authorities Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who got ordinances passed in several cities that would allow a woman to have any man who sold a magazine with an image in it offensive to any woman thrown in jail and sued for damages. Dworkin argued that even consensual heterosexual intercourse is rape and that men should be murdered. Nel cites a dozen Feminist “cultural studies” specialists and no objective literary scholars. He is a literary illiterate. This is why he is so perplexed by the book he has to keep asking his students what they think it means: “A difficulty of *White Noise* is that it often takes aim at multiple subjects simultaneously, making us wonder about its subject position and ours.”

Nel justifies his confusion with another theory—called “provisional irony”: “irony’s doubleness can act as a way of counteracting any tendency to assume a categorical or rigid position of ‘Truth’...an undogmatic alternative to authoritative pronouncements.” This theory that irony can mean anything absolves the Feminist professor of any professional responsibility to know what she/he is pontificating about. The claim that meaning in literature is relative and subjective deflates all authority from Feminist criticism. Nel’s inability to interpret tone is due to his failure to read parts in the context of the whole. Feminists and cultural studies specialists claim to be “contextualists” focused on the socio-political *context* of a work of art. They disregard the most pertinent context, that within the work of art itself as a whole. Feminists cannot read the tone of literature because they are biased rather than objective and holistic. They indulge in selective perception. Literature is too complex for Nel, who says: “the trouble with provisional ironies: they seem both to elude and to engage political questions.”

Politics is binary—Us versus Them—whereas art is holistic. For example Nel asks, “Does *White Noise* present gender differences as natural or as products of socialization?” Either-or. For him, it is one or the other. He does not allow for the possibility that it is both. Throughout his article he repeatedly implies that gender differences are products of socialization—completely. His theory is false. He argues with other Feminists that Nature (biology) is nothing and Nurture is everything. If insanity is defined as adaptation to reality, then Feminists are insane. Scientific studies of identical twins raised separately have shown that human traits are over 50% genetic, contrary to the theory of cultural determinism promoted since the early 20th century by behavioral psychologists such as B. F. Skinner, Communists, and Feminists including Margaret Mead, who got hoaxed by two teenage Samoan girls. Hence it is clearly ironic—not in the least “provisional”—that Nel criticizes others for “prejudice disguised as scientific fact.”

Nel agrees with another theorist, Berger, that a woman defines herself entirely in response to her environment: “Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.” Her independence is “supplanted” by the approval of others? Thus, the Feminist theory of cultural determinism denies women independence of mind, reducing them to conformists fit to be led by Feminists.

The same applies to men, of course, as exemplified by Nel. As a man, assuming he is one, Nel is nil. His type of academic male is known as an Uncle Tim, a variation on Uncle Tom.

Nel claims that DeLillo “agrees” with the reduction of women to products of their environment, citing as evidence DeLillo’s only direct statement about gender: “What I mean is that we are all of us made up not only of muscle, brains and blood, but also of the things which others tell us and the things others see in us.” Nel claims that “His words strongly echo Berger’s analysis.” No they do not. DeLillo includes Nature with Nurture: “muscle, brains and blood.” Nel bases the entire argument of his article on a false rendering of DeLillo’s words both in and out of the novel. Prejudiced from the outset by political correctness, Nel set out not to explicate a work of art nor to be truthful but to “think critically about gender” and to advance his theory that gender is entirely a “social construct.”

In the novel Babette embodies both Nature and Nurture—as lover, wife, mother, and teacher. From a male perspective it is Babette, ironically, who “has it all”—not the liberated ex-wives. Jack Gladney has names connoting a common man inclined by nature to be glad. He gladly married several independent professional women. Smart women. One even worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. Ambitious independent women. They had the characteristics that Feminists want men to embrace. Jack did embrace them, but he felt unfulfilled by any of them. No longer glad, he divorced them all. As professionals they joined the male world, adopting the competitive values and personalities that women had always criticized in men. In DeLillo, as in *The Names*, the CIA is a symbol of American complicity in evil. Furthermore, though smart, his ex-wives also lack compassion and common sense. Most personal of all, they are no longer attractive as women.

Jack’s ex-wives were so emasculating he became insecure about his manhood and needs the nurturing that is natural to Babette, who represents the traditional gender role of housewife that Feminists hate. This is the great politically incorrect contrast in *White Noise*, between the ex-wives and Babette. Demoralized by his ex-wives, Jack overcompensates for his lost authority by establishing Hitler Studies, a counterpart to Women’s Studies. Feminists turn men into fascists—even sensitive Jack. His son Heinrich is prematurely balding and already exhibiting stereotypical traits of a Nazi. Nel discusses the gender issues of Jack, Babette and Murray, but ignores the ex-wives except for one merely physical comparison to Babette. He must avert his eyes from the unsatisfactory ex-wives and their faults in order not to offend Feminists, who as editors, readers and colleagues will pass judgment on his article.

Nel quotes the comical scene when Jack and Babette are in bed and keep deferring to each other: “‘I want to do whatever’s best for you.’ ‘But you please me by letting me please you,’ she said. ‘As the male partner I think it’s my responsibility to please.’ ‘I’m not sure whether that’s a sensitive statement or a sexist remark.’ ‘Is it wrong for the man to be considerate toward his partner?’ ‘I’m your partner when we play tennis, which we ought to start doing again, by the way. Otherwise I’m your wife.’” Jack has been conditioned by his ex-wives to be so hypersensitive and deferential that he can no longer be assertive in bed. Babette objects to the Feminist gender paradigm of “partners” and wants to be closer than that—a wife. At the same time, she is reinforcing his uncertainty with her own when she says ‘I’m not sure whether that’s a sensitive statement or a sexist remark.’ Feminism interferes with heterosexual relationships and subverts marriages. Nel finally catches a glimpse of the meaning of the novel when he wonders about this scene, “Perhaps DeLillo is mocking political correctness.”

Babette (Nature) gets corrupted by the toxic secular environment, fears death, takes drugs, turns selfish and becomes a faithless liberated woman. Feminist teachers of the novel interfere with heterosexual relationships in the same way that DeLillo depicts. For example, Nel quotes from the scene when Jack and Babette are alone in the stadium and her running up and down the steps sets her “body throbbing.” Jack embraces her and puts his hands inside the waistband of her pants. Nel then quotes from the scene in the supermarket when Jack rubs against her: “She rotated her hips and I nuzzled her hair and murmured ‘Dirty blonde’...I tried to fit my hands into Babette’s skirt, over her belly, as the slowly moving line edged toward the last purchase point.’ And in the Gladney’s kitchen, ‘I grabbed her by the inside of the thigh as she passed the table. She squirmed deliciously.’”

These are examples of natural erotic play between husband and wife. Yet Nel takes issue with such behavior: “Should Jack’s actions be interpreted as unwanted scrutiny or as tender displays of affection?” Why would anyone interpret them as “unwanted scrutiny”? Jack’s actions are clearly wanted, as Babette responds in kind each time. The only unwanted scrutiny here is by Professor Nel: “Some students read these scenes and think that Jack is being possessive and is demonstrating that Babette is his woman. He can touch her anytime, anywhere—at the stadium, in the supermarket, or in his home.” These must be the students who have never experienced heterosexual attraction. They are clearly students inclined to stereotype heterosexual males as brutes. This is the thinking of those who have imposed sexual assault policies on campuses that deprive accused males of due process. These are people who presume to dictate how a heterosexual male should express affection *in his own home!* Nel is sticking his nose in like Murray in *White Noise*. Why do Nel and his students question Jack’s actions and not Babette’s? Nel requires his students to “scrutinize” Jack and make value judgments on his sexual behavior. Would he do the same if the couple in question were gay?

Nel also biases his presentation by giving more weight to students with negative reactions to Jack (he gives no count) than to those students who “see him as genuinely affectionate.” He concludes with his own verdict, which encourages students to laugh at the heterosexual Jack: “A third reading is to see his behavior as hypermasculine in a way that contrasts with his other, less traditionally masculine traits. If we see these scenes in this final context, then his actions might be parody: he comically overcompensates for his relative lack of stereotypical masculinity. I am inclined to interpret the scenes as both genuinely affectionate and parodic.” Professor Nel—having no evident masculinity himself—declares that expressions of heterosexual affection are “hypermasculine overcompensation.”

Michael Hollister (2013)