

# Heinrich's Hidden Prophecy: The Quest for Relevance in Don Delillo's *White Noise*

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According to American history scholar James Leisy, the folksong “The Cowboy’s Lament” was derived from an old Irish drover ballad called the “Bard of Armagh” (Leisy 67). From this “dirgelike melody,” Irish immigrants who settled in the Appalachians brought the song to the mountains in another form called “The Unfortunate Rake,” which dealt with a young man dying of mercury poisoning brought on by an eighteenth century treatment for venereal disease (Leisy 67). With the great push west, the ballad transformed itself yet again and was appropriated by the American cowboy, where it landed its present name (Leisy 67). Today, however, most Americans are more familiar with the name “The Streets of Laredo” when referring to the song, due to its famous opening lines. “The Cowboy’s Lament/The Streets of Laredo” is a tale of a cowpoke that crosses paths with a dying cowboy. Like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, the wounded cowboy, fearing death, begs the traveler to hear his tale of woe and asks him to honorably dispose of his body in proper cowboy fashion. The universal and lasting appeal of the western dirge is illustrated by the vast number of late twentieth century folk artists who took up the ballad, including such notables as Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, and Johnny Cash. Interestingly, not only the musical, but the literary world as well has appropriated the song. In 1985, Don Delillo employed “The Streets of Laredo” to foreshadow the end of his novel, *White Noise*. By allowing his character Heinrich, the inquisitive though withdrawn son of narrator Jack Gladney, to “moodily” sing the cowboy dirge, Delillo offers the enlightened reader a cultural parallel to the life of Jack Gladney and a hidden prophesy of the

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climactic events to come (Delillo 297). Delillo's allusion reveals the problematic struggle for relevance in the oppressive technological society inhabited by the romantic Jack Gladney.

On the day of Jack's final confrontation with Willie Mink, Delillo extends to the reader a Gladney family moment that not only sets up the novel's climax, but also foreshadows future events. By this time, Jack has succumbed to the violent temptations of the gun his father-in-law gave him and obsesses over the weapon every day at work. He is deeply affected by his fear of death and uses the gun as a crutch, or as Marion Muirhead believes, "the gun evokes in Jack a sense of empowerment" (Muirhead). The "empowerment," however, is edging dangerously close to madness. It appears that Jack, deeply affected by his fear of death, is slowly transforming himself from the "dier" he claimed to be, into the "killer" his wife, Babette, fears in all men as he starts to see the "genius [of the weapon] for the first time" (Delillo 292, 297). When he arrives home that evening Jack hears "Heinrich in his room, moodily singing 'The Streets of Laredo'" (Delillo 297). It is here, in the lyrics of the folksong, that Delillo reveals his hidden prophesy. If we explore the text of the cowboy dirge, we find that the life of the dying cowboy symbolizes Jack's own as he searches for relevance in his own dying state.

As the narrator of "The Streets of Laredo" is introduced to the dying cowboy, readers of *White Noise* will see a parallel to the life of Jack Gladney:

As I walked out on the streets of Laredo.

As I walked out on Laredo one day,

I spied a poor cowboy wrapped in white linen,

Wrapped in white linen as cold as the clay.<sup>1</sup> (“The Streets of Laredo”)

The “poor cowboy” is the romantic Jack Gladney, and as Marie-Christine Leps states, Jack is “constantly searching for meaning” in the postmodern world (Leps 191).

Unable to come to grips with technological society, he has turned his back on modern culture and longs for a perceived romantic past. Leonard Wilcox observes this also and believes that Jack is “a modernist displaced in a postmodern world” (Wilcox 348).

This feeling of alienation may stem from the fact that Jack is a historian, and historians by nature are inquisitive people. Their minds require that they explain things in order to grasp some significance of the world surrounding them. As the narrator of *The Education of Henry Adams* relates, a technological society is not the best place for people of Jack Gladney's breed: “The historical mind can think only in historical processes, and probably this was the first time since historians existed, that any of them had sat down helpless before [...]mechanical sequence[s]” (Adams 342).

Author Douglas Keesey picks up on this also and points out that Jack's profession “heightens” his inability to function in technological society (Keesey 135). The industrial revolution is the cause of this perplexity.

Unable to decipher the white noise around him and physically threatened by technology itself in the form of The Airborne Toxic Event, Jack's ideal family and social existence is shattered when the Nyodene D enters his system and makes him a “subject,” rather than an “observer” of disaster, as Michael Messmer points out (Messmer). This awakens the dormant mistrust of technological society he has always

held and has tried to suppress by studying the leader of the German totalitarian state, Adolf Hitler, arguably the greatest manipulator of violent technology in world history. The simulacrum of the *White Noise* culture, which he has just experienced in the toxic event, makes Jack fear that he is insignificant in the greater scheme of things and is only a cog in our present day totalitarian society of consumerism; this feeling of insignificance is a common fear of all humanity. All members of mankind want to feel relevant and important in the world, and long for at least a little attention in the time of their dying. In essence, they long to be missed by the world or to have left a mark. This is the underlying fear of the dying cowboy as well. In his plea for a proper cowboy burial, he is crying out for his lasting mark in the world, albeit in death. In Jack Gladney's world, Wilcox deftly points out that Murray picks up on this fear, as he does many things because of his ability to submit to the "surface and simulacrum" of the culture (Wilcox 352). "In cities no one notices specific dying," Murray contends, which names not only Jack's fear, but the dying cowboy's also (Delillo 38). The "white linen as cold as the clay" which ends the first verse, therefore, is not only the cloud of death enveloping the cowpoke, but the Airborne Toxic Event which menaces Jack as well due to their fear of irrelevance in the face of cultural uniformity.

The chorus of "The Streets of Laredo" clearly carries the entire song, and manifests the fear of irrelevance exhibited by the dying cowboy and Jack Gladney:

Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin.  
Six dance-hall maidens to bear up my pall.  
Throw bunches of roses all over my coffin.

Roses to deaden the clods as they fall.

Then beat the drum slowly, play the Fife lowly.

Play the dead march as you carry me along.

Take me to the green valley, lay the sod o'er me,

I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

("The Streets of Laredo")

Like Jack, the dead cowboy wishes to be remembered. In order to achieve this he begs for "six jolly cowboys" and "six dance hall maidens" to honor his body ("The Streets of Laredo"). The confession at the end of the chorus, however, "I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong," is his acknowledgment of having lived an inconsequential life and his warning to the living. In the second stanza of the song, the cowboy implores the narrator to hear his "sad story," while he lays wounded with a bullet in his "breast" ("The Streets of Laredo"). His admission of guilt is unique in the longing plea for a decent burial. Like Coleridge's murderer of the albatross, the dying cowboy demands that the narrator listen to his romantic tale so that he does not repeat the same mistake and find a bullet in his own body. He begins his lesson by reminiscing about the "gay" times he "once [had] in the saddle" ("The Streets of Laredo"). Unfortunately, by reaching for relevance he overstepped his bounds in "the card-house and then down [at] Rose's," with a bullet to show for his desire ("The Streets of Laredo"). Jack Gladney's life also resembles the cowboy's in terms of this quest for relevance. Unable to acquire the relevance he seeks, he cries out for help by going to see Murray about his unnatural fear of death. Murray, whom Mark Osteen

believes is “the most persuasive [...] authority in the novel,” instructs him to repress his fear (Osteen 169). Although Jack questions his ability to do this, he lovingly takes the advice home to Babette. To his surprise, however, she shuns his words and is now a sarcastic caricature of her former self due to the escapist effects of the Dylar, as the following conversation illustrates:

“What is night? It happens seven times a week. Where is the uniqueness in this?”

“It’s dark, it’s wet.”

“Do we live in a blinding desert glare? What is wet? We live with wet.”

“Babette doesn’t speak like this.” (Delillo 301)

By wearing running clothes to read Wilder a bedtime story, Babette is showing her new role as “a runner” from death, which her search for Dylar illustrates (Delillo 301). This role causes her to “speak like this” in order to fulfill what “a runner needs” (Delillo 302). With the perceived loss of his life due to the airborne infiltration and the new loss of Babette due to her need to escape death, Jack loses his last shred of relevance and feels there is no choice but to follow the path of the dying cowboy in what Wilcox describes as “a heroic showdown” with Willie Mink (Wilcox 353). In his decision, Jack is filling the role of a gunslinger in order to “buy life” by “watching others squirm,” as Murray proposed (Delillo 291).

By deciding to murder Willie Mink, whom he refers to as Mr. Gray, Jack Gladney declares war on technological society itself. With the loss of Babette, his last

solid foundation of relevance left in the world, “the anxiety for control,” as N.H. Reeve points out, now leads him to seek out and murder Mr. Gray (Reeve and Kerridge). The only way to feel relevant and regain control of his life is to confront the technological culture oppressing him, and in the personage of Mr. Gray, Jack can attack his tormentor in a physical form. This is not an illogical description of the “staticky” man thanks to the many critics who have perceptively commented that Willie Mink resembles the television set that he symbolizes (DeLillo 296). He is described by Jack as a man whose “face [which] was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting” and with “long and spiky” hair, signifying an antenna with which he channels the white noise of society as he watches the television with the volume off (DeLillo 305-7). His conversation with Jack alternates between reality and the white noise of consumer culture which he has mastered and no longer needs to hear; in fact, he is the spokesman for the medium. Faced with such a pathetic creature, which is far from the SKYNET image he envisioned, Jack is forced to constantly change his plans in order to carry out Mr. Gray’s termination. Overcoming this confusion, Jack transforms himself during the confrontation. Surrounded by the white noise of Mr. Gray and riding the high of relevance, Jack describes the feeling of control he now feels:

I continued to advance in consciousness. Things glowed, a secret life  
Rising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing  
Drams. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet  
Was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of  
dreams (The waste material of premonitions). Great stuff everywhere,

racing Through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density. I  
believed Everything. I was a Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist.  
(Delillo 310)

Possibly, for the first time in his life, Jack Gladney is now at one with technological culture. “[He] believe[s] everything” and is in touch with reality like never before. Like Tommy Roy Foster and the cowboy before him, Jack achieves relevance in the act of murder and only armed with this knowledge “was [he] ready to kill him” (Delillo 311) What is interesting, however, is that Jack, newly integrated in technological society and its corresponding feeling of relevance, has accepted the fact of his mortality. It appears that by taking up the role of a romantic hero, Jack has found in the experience a new outlook on life which allows him to define himself.

By acknowledging that Dylar will not erase his death, Jack Gladney regains control of his life. In the following exchange we witness the turning point:

“You are very white, you know that?”

“It’s because I’m dying.”

“This stuff fix you up.”

“I’ll still die.” (Delillo 310)

Prior to this exchange with Mr. Gray, Jack, like Babette before him, viewed Dylar as a wonder drug capable of solving his life’s problems. By acknowledging that “I’ll still die,” Jack accepts that Mink is nothing more than a charlatan, and in order to live life without a constant fear of dread one must accept the inevitable. The change in Jack is illustrated more clearly at the end of the text by his description of the overpass. If the

human being is the only creature on earth that is aware of its own mortality, then it is by going to the overpass that the people of Blacksmith express this dark knowledge. There, he and Babette join “mainly the middle-aged,” “the elderly,” and “handicapped and helpless people” as they express their happiness to be alive by enjoying nature, while privately contemplating their conflicted feelings of life and death (DeLillo 324-5). Like the overpass onlookers who “don’t know how to feel [and] are ready to go either way,” the dying cowboy of “The Streets of Laredo” is also aware of mankind’s mortality and expresses it in his wish for others to not follow his path of error (DeLillo 324).

In the conclusion of the folksong, we find not only the end of the dying cowboy’s tale, but also the climax of Jack’s story:

Then go write a letter to my grey-haired mother,  
And tell her the cowboy that she loved has gone.  
But please not one word of the man who had killed me.  
Don’t mention his name and his name will pass on.  
When thus he had spoken, the hot sun was setting.  
The streets of Laredo grew cold as the clay.  
We took the young cowboy down to the green valley,  
And there stands his marker, we made, to this day.  
We beat the drum slowly and played the Fife lowly,  
Played the dead march as we carried him along.  
Down in the green valley, laid the sod o’er him.

He was a young cowboy and he said he'd done wrong.

("The Streets of Laredo")

By asking the narrator not to mention "the man who had killed" him, the dying cowboy admits his error in life. To his benefit, however, he gains the relevance he was unable to attain in life through his own death and the honorable burial which followed. For Jack Gladney the story is strikingly different. After shooting Mr. Gray, *our* romantic hero sees him for the first time as a fellow man:

I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With restoration of the Normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first Time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing Again. Compassion, remorse, mercy. (Delillo 313)

Although Cornel Bonca believes that, "this is not one of those shootings where a man discovers his own human connection to another person thorough the spilling of blood," the text seems to disagree and we are given no reason to doubt Jack's narrative (Bonca). By seeing Willie as "alive" and in "a puddle of blood," which is one of the most definitive expressions of life itself, Jack no longer views Mr. Gray as the "staticky" figure representing technological culture (Delillo 296). Instead, he viewed him as just another frightened man, whose use of Dylar was evidence of the same frail condition that Jack possessed himself. This change is illustrated in his decision to save Willie Mink's life by taking him to the nuns for medical attention. He, therefore, "forgive[s]" Willie—

and like the dying cowboy who does not want to “mention” the name of his former enemy in order that he may “pass on,” Jack allows Mr. Gray to “pass on” by saving him from a violent death (Delillo 315) (“The Streets of Laredo”).

Unlike the cowboy redeemed in death, Jack Gladney is redeemed in life. Both have found relevance and are better off than they had been before. The “marker” left in place for the dead cowboy is the tangible symbol of the relevance he attained by telling his story (“The Streets of Laredo”). It also represents the tombstone of the old Jack Gladney. Like a cowboy, the newly invigorated Jack, free from the crippling fear of death he lived with prior to his romantic courtship, enjoys watching sunsets from the overpass with Babbette and Wilder. While he is aware of man’s predetermined death and “don’t know how to feel” about the knowledge, he frees himself from the paralyzing influence of terror he felt in the past (Delillo 324). This is due to the relevance he attained through his confrontation with Willie Mink and the subsequent forgiveness of the man and the oppressive technological society he inhabits.

#### Notes

1. While I do not feel it is of any importance to the work, I must point out that I anachronistically used Johnny Cash’s 2003 version of “The Streets of Laredo” for my source. As any literary translator of merit will relate, the author’s ‘feeling and expression’ is what is important and by choosing to use the 2003 version of the song, rather than a pre-1985 source, I feel that Johnny Cash successfully modernizes the lyrics and continues to relay the original folk songs ‘feeling.’

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