
“Sign, Trace, and Différance: Deconstruction in *White Noise*”

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Abstract

Postmodern fiction thrives on the instability of meaning, challenging traditional assumptions about truth, language, and reality. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* exemplifies this postmodern sensibility through its fragmented narrative, satirical exploration of consumer culture, and persistent engagement with death, media, and technological noise. This article examines *White Noise* through the lens of Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, focusing on the concepts of *différance*, the trace, and the endless play of signifiers. By analysing key moments in the novel—such as the supermarket episodes, the “Airborne Toxic Event,” and the Dylar subplot—this paper argues that DeLillo constructs a world where meaning is perpetually deferred, mediated, and destabilized by the very language meant to express it. While earlier studies of *White Noise* have highlighted its critique of consumerism and media saturation, this article extends these readings by emphasizing how DeLillo’s text itself performs deconstruction. Through close textual analysis, it demonstrates how *White Noise* mirrors Derrida’s assertion that meaning is never final but an ongoing, infinite process of interpretation, making DeLillo’s novel a quintessential postmodern text.

In engaging with both DeLillo’s text and Derridean theory, this article situates *White Noise* within broader debates on postmodernism, hyperreality, and the power of language to shape human experience. While existing scholarship has focused extensively on the novel’s critique of consumer culture and the influence of mass media, this study contributes to the field by emphasizing how *White Noise* operates as a literary performance of deconstruction itself. It suggests that DeLillo’s narrative not only thematizes the collapse of stable meaning but also invites readers to embrace the multiplicity, contradictions, and open-endedness inherent in interpretation. Ultimately, this article argues that the “white noise” of DeLillo’s title is not simply a metaphor for modern distraction but a Derridean reminder that meaning is never final—always an infinite interplay of traces, differences, and deferred possibilities.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Deconstruction, Don DeLillo, White Noise, Différance**Introduction**

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a radical transformation in literature, marked by the rise of postmodernism—a movement that destabilized traditional ideas of meaning, authorship, and narrative coherence. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985)

is frequently cited as one of the most defining postmodern novels, widely discussed for its critique of consumer culture, its portrayal of media saturation, and its exploration of mortality. Scholars such as Frank Lentricchia, Mark Osteen, and John N. Duvall have analyzed the novel through the lenses of postmodernism, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis, highlighting its engagement with the fragmentation and hyperreality of modern life.

However, despite extensive scholarship on *White Noise* as a postmodern text, there has been comparatively little focus on a systematic, explicitly Derridean reading of the novel. While critics have noted its themes of language instability and deferred meaning, few studies have directly applied Jacques Derrida's concepts—particularly *différance*, the trace, and the supplement—to DeLillo's narrative. This article addresses this gap by exploring how *White Noise* not only aligns with Derridean philosophy but also performs deconstruction through its language, structure, and thematic preoccupations.

By integrating Derrida's theories from *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Dissemination*, this study examines how DeLillo's novel destabilizes the very possibility of fixed meaning. It argues that the supermarket scenes, the "Airborne Toxic Event," and the Dylar subplot illustrate the Derridean interplay of signs, where language both constructs and erodes meaning. **This article contends that *White Noise* has often been read as a cultural critique of consumerism and technology, but its narrative strategies reveal a deeper engagement with the philosophical question of how meaning is endlessly deferred—an aspect that has not been fully explored in existing scholarship.**

Through a close textual analysis informed by deconstruction, this paper positions *White Noise* as not just a reflection of postmodern anxieties but as a text that actively enacts Derrida's vision of language as an unstable, self-referential system. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of both DeLillo's work and the intersection of literary postmodernism with deconstructive theory.

Understanding Derrida's Deconstruction

To explore the resonance between Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Jacques Derrida's thought, it is necessary to first clarify the principles of deconstruction. Derrida's intervention in literary and philosophical discourse—most notably articulated in *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967), and *Dissemination* (1972)—challenged the structuralist view of language as a stable, self-contained system of meaning. Structuralist thinkers, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure, argued that language is a network of differences, where the meaning of a word (or "signifier") arises from its contrast with other words within the system. For example, the word *cat* signifies what it does because it is not *cap*, *rat*, or *bat*. While structuralism revealed the relational nature of language, it continued to assume that the system of relations itself was fixed and coherent.

Derrida disrupts this assumption by demonstrating that language does not simply convey pre existing meaning but is itself the site of constant slippage, instability, and play. Deconstruction is not a method of destroying meaning but of exposing how texts undermine their own claims to coherence. Derrida's concept of *différance*—a deliberate neologism that

combines the French verbs *différer* (“to differ” and “to defer”)—captures this idea of meaning as both relational and perpetually postponed. Words acquire meaning only in relation to other words, which in turn point to yet other signifiers, creating an infinite chain of references that never arrives at a final, authoritative meaning. As Derrida famously observes, “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is no outside-text”)—meaning is always mediated by language rather than grounded in an external, stable truth.

Central to deconstruction is also the concept of the *trace*. Every signifier contains the shadow or residue of meanings it has excluded in order to signify. Meaning, therefore, is never present in its entirety but is haunted by what it is not. In *White Noise*, this can be seen in how consumer language, advertising slogans, and the hum of media “noise” both construct and obscure reality, leaving a residue of fear, particularly the fear of death, which cannot be fully articulated. The supermarket, for instance, is filled with the “traces” of modern desires, anxieties, and commodified identities that are not explicitly named but nonetheless structure the characters’ experience.

Derrida also critiques the binary oppositions that dominate Western thought—speech/writing, presence/absence, life/death, reality/representation—revealing how these pairs are never as stable as they seem. Instead of one term being clearly superior, each depends on the other for its definition, creating an unstable hierarchy that texts often disrupt. In *White Noise*, the boundary between reality and simulation collapses under the weight of media saturation, echoing Derrida’s assertion that signs create a self-referential network that shapes rather than merely reflects reality.

The concept of the *supplement*, another key Derridean idea, further illuminates the novel’s thematic concerns. A supplement appears to add something to a structure, but its presence reveals that the structure was incomplete to begin with. In DeLillo’s novel, consumer goods, television broadcasts, and pharmaceuticals such as Dylar act as supplements. They promise to fill existential voids—offering comfort, distraction, or the illusion of control—but instead reveal the inherent emptiness and fear that permeate modern life.

Finally, Derrida’s notion of *play*—the freedom and openness of meaning once the illusion of a fixed centre is abandoned—is mirrored in *White Noise*’s narrative strategies. DeLillo employs repetition, fragmentation, and self-referential irony to highlight the instability of meaning. The novel’s rhythmic cataloging of brand names, chemical compounds, and bureaucratic jargon becomes an almost musical pattern of signs, where meaning is endlessly deferred and reconstituted.

Reading *White Noise* through a Derridean lens thus means relinquishing the search for a singular interpretation and instead engaging with its layers of contradictions and ambiguities. The novel does not merely illustrate Derrida’s theories but performs them,

presenting a world in which language itself—like the “white noise” of media and consumer culture—operates as both a source of meaning and a constant reminder of its own limitations.

Postmodern literature and Language Play

Postmodern literature emerged as a response to the collapse of certainty and the recognition that meaning is neither fixed nor singular. Where modernist writers sought to reconstruct order amidst fragmentation, postmodern authors embrace fragmentation itself, highlighting the playful, unstable, and self-referential nature of language. This literary movement reflects a world where meaning is contingent, constructed, and endlessly deferred—an understanding that resonates profoundly with Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction.

Derrida’s concept of *différance*—the idea that meaning arises through difference and is perpetually deferred—finds a striking literary counterpart in the techniques of postmodern fiction. Texts by authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo foreground the gaps, contradictions, and multiplicities of meaning rather than resolving them. DeLillo’s *White Noise* stands out among these works for its deliberate engagement with the semiotic overload of modern life, where language, media, and consumer culture intersect to shape both personal identity and collective reality. The novel’s fragmented structure, metafictional awareness, and ironic tone enact what Derrida describes as the endless play of signifiers. Scholars have frequently interpreted *White Noise* as a postmodern critique of consumerism, media saturation, and the fear of death (Lentricchia 1991; Osteen 2000; Duvall 2012). These analyses have shed light on the cultural and sociological dimensions of the novel. However, while critics have acknowledged the novel’s engagement with language and meaning, few have explicitly connected DeLillo’s narrative strategies with Derridean deconstruction. This study extends existing scholarship by exploring how *White Noise* operates not merely as a postmodern text but as a literary performance of Derrida’s ideas. The novel does not simply illustrate the instability of meaning; it enacts this instability through its shifting voices, ironic repetition, and pervasive use of media language. The narrative’s obsession with brand names, supermarket aisles, and televised images reflects a postmodern world in which signs no longer point to stable referents but only to other signs—a phenomenon that Jean Baudrillard describes as “simulacra” and which closely aligns with Derrida’s view of language as self-referential and endlessly deferred. For instance, DeLillo’s rhythmic cataloging of commercial products and slogans creates a textual environment that mimics the “white noise” of modern existence, where meaning is drowned out by the constant circulation of signifiers. This narrative strategy resonates with Derrida’s claim that meaning is never fully present but is always produced through traces of other meanings that haunt the text.

Furthermore, *White Noise* exhibits what Derrida refers to as the *supplemental* nature of language and culture. The novel’s consumer products, pharmaceuticals (like Dylar), and media broadcasts act as supplements that promise to complete or enhance reality, but in doing so, they expose the underlying void and anxiety they seek to conceal. This interplay of surface and absence underscores the novel’s alignment with deconstructive thinking:

meaning is always provisional, constructed through layers of signs, and haunted by what it excludes.

Ultimately, DeLillo's work does not merely comment on the instability of meaning; it actively stages this instability. The "language play" that defines postmodern literature—its fragmentation, irony, and metafictional strategies—becomes in *White Noise* a form of philosophical engagement with the very nature of meaning. By analyzing this interplay through a Derridean lens, this article illuminates how DeLillo's novel offers more than cultural critique; it becomes a textual experiment in the endless deferral of meaning itself.

Close Textual Analysis of *White Noise*

A Derridean reading of *White Noise* reveals that DeLillo's narrative does not merely represent a postmodern world of media and consumerism but actively enacts the instability and deferral of meaning that deconstruction describes. To illustrate this, three key narrative strands—the supermarket scenes, the "Airborne Toxic Event," and the Dylar subplot—can be analyzed as sites where language, signs, and cultural codes fail to deliver stable truths. These moments underscore Derrida's assertion that meaning is always produced in a chain of *différance*, haunted by traces of what is absent or unspoken.

1. The Supermarket: Signs without Depth

The supermarket emerges as one of the most symbolically rich spaces in *White Noise*. For Jack Gladney and his family, it initially provides a sense of order and security. Jack notes, "Everything is neatly packaged, brightly colored, and clearly labeled, as if the world were finally arranged and comprehensible" (DeLillo, p. 36). However, this sense of order is illusory. The products' packaging and branding function as signs referring not to their intrinsic value but to a larger network of consumerist signifiers. This aligns with Derrida's notion of the *supplément*—the idea that what appears to add value to a structure (e.g., consumer goods) actually reveals its inherent incompleteness. The supermarket's carefully arranged signs provide the illusion of meaning, but this meaning is endlessly deferred, as the act of consumption only temporarily masks the existential void beneath.

Moreover, the supermarket catalog of brand names—often recited rhythmically by characters—becomes a textual performance of *différance*. When DeLillo strings together phrases like "Toyota Celica. MasterCard. Tab. Tegrin. Stir-fry. Whipped topping" (DeLillo, p. 51), the language itself becomes a kind of white noise, evoking the endless circulation of signs in modern culture. These names do not refer to a deeper reality; rather, they refer to each other, creating an echo chamber of meaning that never arrives at a final truth. In Derridean terms, the supermarket scene is a microcosm of a semiotic system where meaning is "deferred along the chain of signifiers" (*Of Grammatology*, p. 27).

2. The Airborne Toxic Event: Language vs. Reality

The "Airborne Toxic Event" serves as a powerful commentary on how language mediates—and often distorts—reality. When a chemical spill creates a deadly black cloud, the Gladneys' initial fear is shaped not by their direct perception but by the terminology of experts and media broadcasts. Jack reflects, "The plume was out there, looming, but somehow it felt less real once it was named 'Nyodene D'" (DeLillo, p. 110). Here, naming acts as both an attempt to control and a means of distancing oneself from the terror of the

event. This dynamic echoes Derrida's argument that language does not transparently convey reality but imposes structures of meaning that can obscure as much as they reveal.

The official updates—filled with bureaucratic jargon and scientific language—are treated by the characters as if they carry authority, yet they only deepen their confusion. In Derrida's terms, this moment demonstrates how language is not a stable bridge to reality but a network of signs that perpetually “defer” meaning. The toxic cloud, even when dispersed, leaves behind a *trace*—a lingering awareness of danger and mortality that cannot be erased. Jack's exposure to Nyodene D becomes both a physical and semiotic mark, a reminder that reality is always mediated through the unstable framework of language.

3. The Dylar Subplot: The Failure of Language and Technology

The Dylar subplot—where Babette secretly takes an experimental drug designed to eradicate the fear of death—highlights the limits of both language and science. The drug is marketed with the promise of conquering mortality, but it fails to address the underlying existential dread. Babette admits, “It doesn't work the way they said it would. It only makes me aware of how much I want it to work” (DeLillo, p. 199). This resonates with Derrida's notion of the *supplement*: Dylar appears to “add” something (freedom from fear) but instead reveals the lack or absence that was already present.

The Dylar subplot also underscores Derrida's idea that meaning cannot be stabilized through technical or linguistic mastery. Just as words fail to capture the raw experience of mortality, Dylar's scientific language—promising “neurochemical adjustments” and “psychotropic stability”—fails to provide actual transcendence. Instead, it exposes the characters' dependence on signs, labels, and promises that defer any ultimate resolution. This mirrors *différance*: the cure for death is always postponed, just as meaning is always delayed in language.

4. The Meaning of “White Noise”

The titular “white noise” encapsulates the novel's Derridean dimension. It represents not just the background hum of media, consumer culture, and modern life but the incessant, chaotic play of signs. As Jack observes, “The world is full of abandoned meanings. In the end, everything becomes a sign” (DeLillo, p. 212). This statement aligns with Derrida's assertion that texts are never anchored to a single, stable meaning but are instead caught in an endless interplay of traces.

Through its fragmented structure, ironic tone, and recurring motifs, *White Noise* performs deconstruction. It shows how language both constructs reality and simultaneously reveals its own insufficiency. Meaning, like the static hum of white noise, is omnipresent yet elusive, always on the verge of slipping away.

While *White Noise* has often been studied as a critique of consumerism and media culture, these textual moments reveal that DeLillo's novel is not simply a commentary on postmodern life but a literary performance of Derrida's philosophical insights. By foregrounding the instability, deferral, and play of meaning, DeLillo creates a narrative that

does not just describe a postmodern condition but enacts it, inviting readers to embrace the multiplicity and contradictions inherent in language itself.

Conclusion

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is more than a satirical narrative of postmodern American life—it is a sustained meditation on the limits of language, the instability of meaning, and the semiotic architecture of everyday reality. Through its fragmented structure, self-referential irony, and linguistic excess, the novel dramatizes what Jacques Derrida articulates in his theory of deconstruction: that meaning is never final or fixed, but always in flux, always *differed* and *deferred*.

This article has argued that *White Noise* not only reflects Derridean ideas but actively performs them. The supermarket, far from being a neutral site of consumption, becomes a symbolic landscape of deferred desire and consumerist semiotics. The “Airborne Toxic Event” reveals how official language distorts lived experience and how naming itself becomes an act of distancing. The Dylar subplot underscores the futility of linguistic and scientific mastery over existential fear. Across these episodes, DeLillo reveals that signs do not ground experience—they mediate and displace it, echoing Derrida’s assertion that language always carries the trace of absence and is never self-contained.

While *White Noise* has been widely studied as a postmodern novel, previous scholarship has largely emphasized its critique of consumer culture, its commentary on media saturation, or its existential concerns. What has remained underexplored is how deeply the novel resonates with, and enacts, Derrida’s deconstructive logic. This article has attempted to fill that gap by offering a sustained, explicitly Derridean analysis—one that treats DeLillo’s language not as a transparent vehicle for ideas but as a site of philosophical performance.

By showing how *White Noise* dismantles the possibility of stable meaning and foregrounds the endless deferral of interpretation, this study contributes to the broader discourse on postmodern literature and critical theory. It highlights the value of applying deconstruction not only as a philosophical tool but also as a method of literary reading—one attuned to slippages, ruptures, and the play of signs.

In the end, DeLillo does not offer solutions to the crises he portrays. Instead, like Derrida, he invites readers to dwell within uncertainty—to recognize that language, while insufficient, is also inescapable. The “white noise” that surrounds us may drown out certainty, but it also reveals a truth central to both literature and theory: that meaning is not something we possess, but something we endlessly pursue.

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