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**Tetiana STAROSTENKO,**

*orcid.org/0000-0003-2343-105X*

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,*

*Associate Professor at the English Philology Department*

*H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University*

*(Kharkiv, Ukraine) Tinatroickaja@gmail.com*

**Alyona SHEVCHENKO,**

*orcid.org/0000-0002-9953-1906*

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,*

*Associate Professor at the Department of Practice of Oral and Written English*

*H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University*

*(Kharkiv, Ukraine) alyonageorgievna@gmail.com*

## MICROSYMBOLS AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE AND THE INTRICACY OF DETAIL IN THE NOVEL BY DON DELILLO “WHITE NOISE”

*The article explores the role of microsymbolism and the intricate detailing in Don DeLillo’s novel White Noise, shedding light on how these elements enrich the narrative’s depth and complexity. By analyzing the nuanced interplay of symbols and their contextual significance, the study reveals layers of meaning that transcend surface interpretations. Such an approach provides a fresh perspective on White Noise, emphasizing its sophistication as a cultural critique and its relevance in contemporary literary discourse.*

*The study aims to uncover how microsymbolism and the poetics of detail in Don DeLillo’s White Noise contribute to its exploration of hypermodern anxieties, consumerism, and existential crises. By analyzing the interplay between subtle narrative elements and broader thematic structures, it seeks to highlight the novel’s aesthetic complexity and its critical engagement with postmodern cultural and philosophical concerns.*

*In White Noise, color symbolism serves as a subtle yet potent narrative device to underscore themes of modernity, mortality, and existential dread. The color white, often associated with purity, is ironically linked to sterility and the pervasive “white noise” of modern life, reflecting both the ubiquity of technology and the void of meaning. Grey signifies the blurred boundaries between life and death, as well as the monotony and ambiguity of hypermediated existence. Yellow, on the other hand, evokes decay and toxicity, exemplified by the airborne toxic event, symbolizing the lurking dangers of industrial and ecological collapse. Sound symbolism in the novel, such as the recurring hum of white noise, mirrors the characters’ inability to escape the constant buzz of consumerism and fear of death. The swan, a classical symbol of grace, is subverted as it becomes associated with death and decay, echoing mythological narratives where swans are liminal creatures, often bridging life and the afterlife. This interplay between symbolic elements deepens DeLillo’s exploration of how contemporary life is haunted by both ancient archetypes and new forms of existential uncertainty.*

***Key words:** symbolic detail, mythical motifs, transcendence, and the liminal spaces between life and death, the layers of meaning.*

**Тетяна СТАРОСТЕНКО,**

*orcid.org/0000-0003-2343-105X*

*кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,*

*доцент кафедри англійської філології*

*Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г. С. Сковороди*

*(Харків, Україна) Tinatroickaja@gmail.com*

**Альона ШЕВЧЕНКО,**

*orcid.org/0000-0002-9953-1906*

*кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,*

*доцент кафедри практики англійського усного та писемного мовлення*

*Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г. С. Сковороди*

*(Харків, Україна) alyonageorgievna@gmail.com*

## МІКРОСИМВОЛИ ЯК НАРАТИВНИЙ ЗАСІБ І ХИТРОСПЛЕТІННЯ ХУДОЖНІХ ДЕТАЛЕЙ У РОМАНІ ДОНА ДЕЛІЛЛО «БІЛИЙ ШУМ»

Стаття досліджує роль мікросимволізму та хитросплетінь деталізації у романі Дона Делілло «Білий шум», висвітлюючи, як вказані елементи збагачують глибину та складність нарративу. Аналізуючи тонку взаємодію символів та їхнє контекстуальне значення, робота розкриває глибинні шари змісту. Такий підхід пропонує новий погляд на «Білий шум», підкреслюючи його витонченість як культурної критики суспільства та її значущість у сучасному літературному дискурсі.

Метою дослідження вивчення того, як мікросимволізм та поетика деталей у «Білому шумі» Дона Делілло працюють на розкриття тривоги гіпермодерності, споживацтва та екзистенційної кризи. Аналізуючи взаємодію між тонкими нарративними елементами та ширшими тематичними структурами, дослідження прагне висвітлити естетичну складність роману та його критичне залучення до постмодерних культурних і філософських питань.

У «Білому шумі» колірні символи слугують тонким, але потужним засобом нарративу, який підкреслює теми модерності, смертності та екзистенційного страху. Білий колір, зазвичай асоційований із чистотою, іронічно пов'язаний із стерильністю та всепроникним «білим шумом» сучасного життя, що відображає як поширеність технологій, так і внутрішню порожнечу особистості. Сірий символізує розмиті межі між життям і смертю, а також одноманітність і неоднозначність гіпермедіального існування. Жовтий, у свою чергу, викликає асоціації з розпадом і токсичністю, як це показано у випадку токсичної події, що символізує приховані загрози індустріального та екологічного колапсу. Звукова символіка роману, наприклад, повторюваний гул білого шуму, відображає нездатність персонажів уникнути постійного гулу споживацтва та страху смерті. Лебідь, класичний символ грації, трансформується у символ асоційований зі смертю та розпадом, перегукуючись із міфологічними структурами, де лебеді виступають лімінальними істотами, які поєднують життя та потойбіччя. Це переплетення символічних елементів поглиблює дослідження Делілло у сфері сучасного життя, сповнене як давніх архетипів, так і нових форм екзистенційної невизначеності.

**Ключові слова:** символічна деталь, міфологічні мотиви, трансцендентність, лімінальні простори між життям і смертю, шари значення.

**Problem statement.** Literary detail plays a crucial role in shaping fiction, often serving as the subtle but powerful building block that strengthens the narrative, deepens character development, and conveys the thematic essence of a work. These details often function as microsymbology – small yet potent carriers of meaning – that contribute to broader symbolic networks within a text (Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1976). Descriptive details bring settings to life, such as weather or architecture (Culler, 2007); character-focused elements reveal personality through subtle habits or belongings (Gérard Genette, 1997); and symbolic details infuse objects or actions with multi-layered significance (Lotman, 1990). Theoretical perspectives underscore the role of these microsymbology, with structuralism analyzing their patterns to uncover universal storytelling structures (Levi-Strauss, 1974), while postmodernism disrupts traditional interpretations to explore fragmentation and irony (Baudrillard, 1994). Microsymbolism is evident in instances like a rose representing love, beauty, or mortality, or in color symbolism that amplifies mood and emotional resonance (Langer, 1953). These nuanced elements evoke atmosphere, foreshadow future developments, and contribute to cultural and historical authenticity, enriching the reader's engagement (Ricoeur, 1981). Intertextual references further extend the interpretive possibilities of microsymbology, inviting readers to co-create meaning and deepening the narrative's

thematic complexity (Kristeva, 1986). Investigating the microsymbology and the poetics of literary detail in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is crucial for a deeper understanding of the novel, as these elements function as critical conduits for exploring the text's multifaceted engagement with modern and postmodern culture, technology, and existential concerns. In *White Noise*, microsymbology serve as markers of the pervasive, often invisible forces shaping modern life, including environmental disaster, media saturation, and the disintegration of clear boundaries between the real and the simulated. DeLillo's precise attention to detail creates an atmosphere of hyperreality, where each description functions not just as a visual or sensory marker, but as a pointer to deeper existential questions.

**The analysis of the main studies and publications.** Scholarly discourse on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* spans diverse themes, reflecting the novel's complexity and relevance to contemporary concerns. Environmental crises take center stage in the 2024 *De Gruyter* article by Mine Ömerali Uslu, "Airborne Toxicity in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," which examines the ecological and human health implications of the airborne toxic event. Similarly, the intersection of postmodern life, technology, and mass media is explored in the 2023 *American Affairs Journal* piece by Julius Krein, the editor of the journal, "White Noise: Life in a Postmodern World," highlighting

themes of paranoia, consumerism, and media's impact on the American psyche. The 2019 works by Jenobia J. Britto, Dr. V. Sekar, and Mark Brown, published in *ResearchGate*, delve into the novel's meditation on death, addressing existential anxiety and the displacement of meaning in postmodernity, with death posited as a universal and immutable concept. Ross Maffey and Yugin Teo's 2017 *C21 Literature* article broadens this lens by exploring disaster and mortality in DeLillo's oeuvre, including *White Noise*. Advertising and consumer culture are critiqued in the *OpenEdition Journals* essay "Advertising and Ironic Distance in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," authored by Adam Szetela, which situates late-XXth-century advertising as a framework for exploring character and societal dynamics. Finally, the 2023 study "Navigating the Hypermodern World of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" by Andrew Terleckyj, published in *Athens Journals*, examines media's role in creating a fractured, hypermodern identity, underscoring the novel's enduring relevance in a world of simulacra and vanishing boundaries. Together, these studies reveal the thematic richness of *White Noise*, addressing its insights into environmental, existential, technological, and cultural anxieties.

The study of microsymbolism and the poetics of literary detail in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* represents a crucial yet underexplored avenue in literary scholarship, offering a new lens through which to examine the novel's thematic complexity and cultural critique. While existing studies have largely focused on its broader postmodernist concerns – such as media saturation, consumerism, and existential anxiety – the intricate web of subtle symbols and meticulously crafted details remains insufficiently analyzed. Investigating these elements could uncover how seemingly minor narrative features – like objects, colors, and gestures – function as symbolic nodes, encapsulating the novel's engagement with pervasive modern anxieties and the fragmentation of meaning. Such an approach would illuminate how DeLillo's precise attention to detail operates not merely descriptively, but poetically, shaping the reader's understanding of hyperreality, mortality, and the disintegration of personal and cultural coherence in the late XXth century. By addressing this gap, we can deepen the appreciation of *White Noise* as a text where the minutiae of language and imagery resonate with the broader philosophical and social concerns of postmodern life.

**Statement of the task.** The objective of investigating microsymbolism and the poetics of detail in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is to uncover how the novel's subtle symbolic elements and carefully constructed descriptive elements contribute to its broader

thematic and philosophical concerns. This study aims to analyze the ways in which minor details function as microsymbols, encapsulating the anxieties of hypermodernity, consumerism, and technological mediation, while also reflecting existential and ecological crises. By examining the poetics of detail, the research seeks to demonstrate how DeLillo's narrative techniques not only enrich the aesthetic texture of the novel but also serve as a critical framework for engaging with issues of identity, mortality, and the collapse of cultural and personal meaning in a postmodern context. Ultimately, the study aspires to fill a significant gap in literary scholarship by articulating the interplay between the micro-level narrative elements and the macro-level thematic structures within *White Noise*.

**Presentation of the main material.** In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo constructs a chronotope infused with a rich layer of literary details that exemplify postmodern traits. The novel's labyrinthine structure mirrors the closed, yet versatile, systems typical of American postmodernist works, where intersecting narrative pathways create an intricate web: "*The house, the car, the children, the job... were all connected... in ways we couldn't yet explain*"; "*We had entered a new phase of existence, a whole new way of being alive, and this fact, once fully realized, was not something we had the means to articulate*"; "*I am the walrus of the modern world. All these elements are shifting, have been shifting. A continual change, a constant redefinition*" (DeLillo, 1999). Irena Snihovska offers a significant perspective, arguing that the interaction between the author, text, and reader is heightened by the novel's incorporation of historical, social, and ideological contexts. Through postmodern techniques like intertextuality and self-parody, DeLillo uses familiar cultural codes to destabilize traditional worldviews and challenge mass cultural narratives. The manipulation of these codes creates an active dialogue with the reader, subverting stereotypes and inviting deeper reflection. This poetics of detail and symbolism not only builds the novel's rich thematic tapestry but also fosters an interpretive engagement that reveals the complexity of modern existence (Snihovska, 2018: 15–16).

In *White Noise*, the novel's temporal framework is intentionally elusive, yet several key textual markers provide subtle points of reference. One such anchor is Jack Gladney's founding of the "Hitler studies" department in 1968, which serves as a historical signpost. DeLillo further enhances this sense of temporal grounding by weaving historical figures into the narrative. These references, when coupled with biographical details, allow the reader to infer the broader his-

torical context. For instance, the mention of American presidents helps to further situate the narrative within a specific and recognizable historical period, subtly guiding the reader's understanding of the novel's temporal landscape: "*The chancellor went on to serve as adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria*" (DeLillo, 1999: 15). Furthermore, the novel incorporates references to the deaths of real-life cultural icons, such as American actor James Dean (who passed away on September 30, 1955) and singer Elvis Presley (who died on August 16, 1977). These allusions to historical figures serve two key purposes: they anchor the narrative more firmly in the realm of reality, while also providing the author with a means of subtly signaling a particular temporal context.

A notable characteristic of the novel's setting is the lack of a specific geographical pinpointing for the events. However, as John Pistelli suggests, certain place names within the text, such as *Iron City* (a brewery in Pittsburgh) and *Germantown* (a village in Wisconsin), evoke the imagery of the Rust Belt and the Upper Midwest. This spatial ambiguity aligns with the novel's thematic preoccupation with the erosion of labor and the loss of industrial expertise (Pistelli, 2018).

The novel's central characters, Jack Gladney and his wife, Babette, meander through the urban landscape of Blacksmith, traversing a series of locations – *home, college, supermarket, hospital*, and others – each serving as a temporary refuge from their pervasive existential anxieties concerning death. Despite this mobility, much of the narrative remains anchored within their *domestic space*, with the kitchen and bedroom emerging as the central areas of activity. Conversely, the rest of the household is dominated by an accumulation of objects that evoke a sense of melancholy and displacement in the protagonist.

David Alworth argues that at its core, *White Noise* explores the complex interplay between humans and various "*nonhumans*" – technological devices like *televisions, clocks, radios*, and household appliances such as *refrigerators and garbage chutes*, along with larger environmental anomalies like the "*Airborne Toxic Event*." Within the post-industrial framework of the novel, objects gain disproportionate significance, while human presence is diminished, contributing to a pervasive subconscious unease (Alworth, 2010: 307).

The "*Mid-Village Mall*" *supermarket* is a central symbol of urban life in Blacksmith, serving as the heart of the community. Echoing Jean Baudrillard's theory on hypermarkets in capitalist societies, the supermarket becomes a space where all aspects of life – *work, leisure, food, media, and culture* – are integrated into a single homogeneous environment, reflecting

the operational simulation of social life. This setting functions almost as a temple, where residents of all backgrounds congregate, united by the continuous cycle of consumption, resembling a religious ritual. During his visit to the supermarket, Jack Gladney's colleague, Professor Murray Jay Siskind, embarks on a philosophical contemplation of the place's deeper meaning, asserting: "*This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway*" (DeLillo, 1999: 63); "*Look how well-lighted everything is. The place is sealed off, self-contained. It is timeless*" (DeLillo, 1999: 64).

The novel's linear structure, divided into three parts, hints at Christian apocalyptic themes, with each section highlighting a key event. The first part, "*Waves and Radiation*", explores the negative impact of these advancements on society. In the second, "*The Airborne Toxic Event*", DeLillo introduces a reckoning for humanity's reckless exploitation of scientific achievements. The final section, "*Dylarama*", ironically portrays the protagonist's return to normalcy after committing a crime, underscoring the novel's apocalyptic tone, where even disaster fails to prompt societal change.

The novel is permeated with a multitude of well-established brand names ("*The National Enquirer*", "*The National Express*", "*The Globe*", "*The World*", "*The Star*", a chewing-gum "*Mentho-Lyptus*", tooth paste "*Ipana family*", gas station "*Socony Mobil*"), acting as poignant symbols of a consumer-driven society. Furthermore, the motif of trash in the novel emerges as a critical symbol, reflecting the repercussions of unchecked consumerism. The Gladney family's home is inundated with an excess of superfluous possessions, yet this accumulation does little to curb their incessant desire for further material acquisitions. The impetus behind their purchases is not rooted in genuine necessity but in the act of monetary exchange for goods. Consumption becomes a source of false contentment and a semblance of life's meaning, providing the characters with a superficial sense of well-being and existential satisfaction: "*it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening*" (DeLillo, 1999: 36).

The pervasive effects of consumption, embodied in the form of waste, are starkly represented in the decaying landscapes of *Iron City's neglected railway*. At the stations, discarded plastic cups litter the ground, carelessly thrown out of train windows by passengers. Furthermore, the names of the towns – *Blacksmith* and *Iron City* – invite a deeper symbolic interpretation. The term "*Blacksmith*," which literally

refers to a craftsman, may allude to the idea that the Blacksmith is the creator of Iron City. Alternatively, this juxtaposition could suggest that the fate of Blacksmith is inextricably tied to that of Iron City, implying that the former, like the latter, is doomed to inevitable decline.

Altogether, Babette's use of the mysterious drug "*dilar*" reflects the futile pursuit of relief from existential fear. Despite being aware of the drug's health risks, she continues to take it, only to find that it does not quiet the internal noise of anxiety. However, its side effect – Willy Mink's inability to distinguish words from reality after an overdose – emphasizes the real consequences of attempting to escape from one's inner turmoil.

The main characters in the novel are defined by *symbolic details that critique their superficial lives*. Jack Gladney, for example, changes his name by adding letters (J. A. K. Gladney) as part of his career advancement, an allusion to President Harry S. Truman's invention of the initial "S" to lend gravitas to his name. Jack also presents a false persona by wearing a black academic robe and large dark sunglasses, which make him almost unrecognizable to his colleagues when he is not in his academic attire. As the head of the Department of Hitler Studies, despite lacking expertise in German, his research is shallow and does not address the origins or development of Nazism. In this way, Gladney exemplifies the idea of a simulacrum, constructing an identity that is far removed from his true self.

In the portrayal of Babette, particular emphasis is placed on her hair, highlighting it as a significant aspect of her character's visual identity: "*Her hair is a fanatical blond mop, a particular tawny hue that used to be called dirty blond*" (DeLillo, 1999: 36). The character's depiction evokes a clear allusion to Marilyn Monroe, with her blonde hair, the objectification and sexualized gaze from men, and her dependence on pills, all of which mirror aspects of the iconic American film star's persona.

Simultaneously, Heinrich, Jack's 14-year-old son, notably begins balding at a young age, which prompts Jack to consider the harmful effects of their environment. Jack also gives Heinrich a German name, hoping it will provide him with future success and protection. Meanwhile, Janet Savory, Jack's second wife and Heinrich's mother, is involved in a religious sect's financial affairs and adopts the name "*Mother Devi*," reflecting the Hindu symbol of the mother goddess. In the novel, most characters become simulacra, presenting constructed identities, with the exception of Wilder, Babette's young son, who remains untouched by the commodified world of adulthood.

The "*Zumwalt*" pistol, given to Jack by Babette's father, serves as a key symbol in the narrative, invoking the dramatic principle of "*Chekhov's gun*," where a weapon introduced early on must eventually be fired. As Jack becomes increasingly paranoid, perceiving enemies around him, the pistol ultimately becomes a tool for crime. He shoots Willy Mink twice (intending three shots) and stages a suicide, but when Mink survives, Jack is struck by the third bullet. This unforeseen outcome forces Jack to confront reality and awakens his humanity, as he experiences compassion, remorse, and mercy. The pistol and the motif of mutual violence between characters symbolize nuclear weapons, reflecting humanity's dangerous dependence on them, where possession not only offers protection but also carries the imminent threat of retaliation, underscoring the uncontrollable nature of such power, capable of destroying even superpowers.

In *White Noise*, color functions as a significant artistic detail, with the dominant hues of white, black, and gray evoking a bleak post-industrial world reminiscent of black-and-white television. The color white, in particular, symbolizes multiple layers, primarily linked to the concept of white noise. As Irena Snihovska observes, white noise embodies both the static hum of media and the pervasive electric waves that characterize modern life (Snihovska, 2018). Color and light in the novel serve to reflect the characters' psychological states, representing their monotonous, colorless existence in a world dominated by technology. White, in this context, symbolizes the death of the soul, the looming threat of technology, and existential doom. This theme of "death" is further explored through the symbolic presence of a white swan, which appears throughout the text: "*Shouldn't death, I thought, be a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed?*" (DeLillo, 1999: 32). The white swan is a rich and multifaceted symbol across various mythologies and cultural traditions, often representing themes of death, transformation, and transcendence. In Greek mythology, the swan is associated with Apollo and the "swan song," symbolizing the soul's transition to a divine realm. Norse mythology connects swans to the Valkyries, representing the elevation of warriors to Valhalla. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the swan (hamsa) symbolizes the soul's ability to discern truth and navigate the journey of life and death. Celtic mythology links swans with the Otherworld, embodying endurance and the cyclical nature of life and death, while in Slavic folklore, swans serve as messengers between the living and the dead. Across these traditions, the white swan embodies beauty, purity,

and the soul's eternal journey, making it a potent symbol of mortality and transcendence. In the thirty-third chapter, death is personified through the figure of an extraordinarily pale (almost white) individual. Thus, *White Noise* takes on a metonymic quality, inviting a range of interpretations due to the evolving symbolic significance of the color white. In the context of the novel, white is not merely a color but a representation of the soul's decay, embodying a pervasive sense of inevitable fate brought about by the advancements of technological progress.

In the novel, black is contrasted with white, symbolized by Jack Gladney's attempt to mask his fear of death and lack of identity through dark sunglasses. The color gray, linked to Willy Mink, whom Babette calls Mr. Gray, represents his liminal state between life and death.

Additionally, the novel features vivid landscapes, notably scenes of unnaturally prolonged and bright sunsets, highlighting the surreal and unsettling atmosphere, as exemplified by Babette's reaction following an airborne toxic event: "*We're not at the edge of the ocean or desert. We ought to have timid winter sunsets. But look at the blazing sky. It's so beautiful and dramatic. Sunsets used to last five minutes. Now they last an hour*" (DeLillo, 1999: 267). Apocalyptic motifs emerge, especially through vivid sunsets reminiscent of explosions. In *White Noise*, anomalies reflect humanity's technological intrusion into nature, with beautiful yet ominous sunsets symbolizing an impending danger. Heinrich's fear of rain as radioactive fallout and his hair loss reinforce his bleak worldview. The transformation of the Gladneys' peaceful forest into a noisy highway further emphasizes the impact of technological progress. Overall, DeLillo's detailed character portrayals and contrasting landscapes underscore the dissonance of post-industrial American society.

**The conclusion and investigation perspectives.** Thus, in his *White Noise*, Don DeLillo intri-

cately employs microsymbology and the poetics of detail to explore the anxieties of modern / postmodern existence. The novel's nuanced use of color, particularly white, black, and gray, along with mythical motifs like the pale swan, serve as powerful metaphors for the characters' fragmented identities and existential struggles. The symbolism of color becomes a tool through which DeLillo explores themes of death, transcendence, and the liminal spaces between life and death, with the gray tones of characters such as Willy Mink reflecting a state of existential suspension. The recurring images of sunsets, while initially beautiful, conceal a deeper, apocalyptic undertone, suggesting the hidden dangers lurking beneath the surface of seemingly serene realities.

Through these carefully crafted details, DeLillo moves beyond the realm of plot and character to depict the pervasive disintegration of meaning and the collapse of boundaries between the tangible and intangible. These small symbols – whether they are the reflective surfaces of glass, the colors of the sky, or the transformation of landscapes – create a textured world where the very fabric of existence feels permeable, unstable, and threatened by the unknown. In doing so, the novel uses the poetics of detail to articulate the pervasive sense of doom and uncertainty that defines postmodern life, where the mythical and the ordinary coexist in a blurred, increasingly indistinguishable space.

DeLillo's focus on these subtle yet profound elements is central to understanding *White Noise* as more than a narrative of apocalyptic anxiety; it is a meditation on the erosion of meaning, the dissolution of traditional values, and the profound dislocation inherent in the human condition today. Analyzing the microsymbology and the poetics of detail provides essential insight into the novel's larger critique of postmodern existence, characterized by a loss of selfhood and an overwhelming sense of alienation.

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