

Existential Absurdity in Contemporary Literary Works: Camus and DeLillo Contemplate the Human Condition in *White Noise* (1985) and *Point Omega* (2010)

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Abstract

This article focuses on existential emptiness and the desire for meaning that are core issues for human nature and existence in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and *Point Omega* (2010), using Albert Camus' philosophical ideas in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts a hyper-real society suffused with consumerism, whose characters are faced with the meaninglessness and absurdity of modern life. Existential anxiety is pervasive, and by applying Camus' idea of meaninglessness, we see that Jack Gladney strives to find significance in a world filled by technology, the media, and fear of death. Similarly, in *Point Omega* DeLillo ingeniously explores the complexities of time, death, and consciousness; here nothing prevents the omega point from occurring, and everything revolves around aimlessness and absurdity. This existential emptiness manifests itself in the character of Richard Elster; a former veteran who has now sited himself in the desert and isolation, looking forward the arrival of his final point. Camus believes that confronting the meaninglessness of life is possible for humanity; he proposes espousing lofty goals and taking responsibility. The parallels between DeLillo and Camus are that both authors illustrate the human condition, and the constant effort to find meaning in a turbulent and complex world.

Key terms: Meaninglessness, the Absurd, Authenticity, Existential alienation, Existential anxiety, Freedom, Nihilism, Rebellion.

Introduction

Don DeLillo's¹ novels *White Noise*² and *Point Omega*³ are considered as prime examples of the postmodern in both style and tone, they also delineate into themes of Existentialism. Existentialism emerged as a theory in the twentieth century, concentrating on the exploration of meaning of individual existence, primarily focused on ideas such as freedom, death, and free will;⁴

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¹ Donald Richard DeLillo (b. 1936) is an American novelist, playwright, screenwriter and essayist.

² *White Noise* (New York: Viking Press, 1985) won the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction.

³ *Point Omega* is a short novel by Don DeLillo that was published in hardcover by Scribner's on 2 February 2010. It is DeLillo's fifteenth novel and first published work of fiction since his 2007 novel *Falling Man*.

⁴ Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 1–2.

existentialism argues primarily that individual decisions and choices regarding their life create a tailored (and therefore personal) existence.⁵ These personalized existences are also imbued by the negatives of existence, angst, uncertainty, and insecurity, with those who swell on thoughts surrounding decisions or choices that were made possibly incorrectly.⁶ For many, the concepts that lay behind existentialism is that death is the ultimate endpoint, and that with death comes nonexistence, so therefore the responsibility to find meaning and fulfillment of life is up to those who live it, regardless of the absurdities that may come with existence.⁷ French philosopher and author Albert Camus examines the concepts and concerns of existence within his work, most notably within *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁸ Camus viewed the punishment meted out to Sisyphus (doomed to an eternity of ceaselessly pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down again) as symbolic of human existence, in that the act itself was absurd and meaningless, and therefore seeking active meaning in one's life whilst being aware of consequences of actions helped create a meaning of life.⁹ Camus argues that the indifferent attitudes of the world towards humanity help to push these anxieties and persistent feelings of angst.¹⁰

Methodological Framework

For Camus the world holds no intrinsic meaning, purpose, or value and indeed this stems from the indifference it holds.¹¹ Such challenges between human desire and the indifferent world prompts individuals to ask questions such as “is life worth living?”¹² and “What does it mean to live in this world?”¹³ The absurdity of life consequently arises from the struggle between man's ambition to obtain meaning and an indifferent world that grants him no meaning.¹⁴ Camus's argument of life's meaningfulness and the eternal soul are illusions that man lives with, with everyone fulfilling their assigned role while imitating a meaningful life, with some being aware of the absurdity of their pretending.¹⁵ The acceptance of such absurdity, according to Camus, is that the acceptance allows for a form of freedom, and also rebellion against failure and societal norms, which allow for both the creation of identity and meaning, or in mythological terms deciding to embrace pushing the boulder up that hill.¹⁶

⁵ Albert Camus, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. vii.

⁶ Kevin Aho, “Existentialism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023). At: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/existentialism/>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

⁷ Thomas Wartenberg, *Existentialism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2008).

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979 [1955]).

⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 28, 59.

¹⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 32.

¹¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 32.

¹² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 11.

¹³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 59.

¹⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 57.

¹⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 109.

For Camus, authenticity is a decisive answer to absurdity of existence, stating that authentic self-perception is the only way to freedom, believing that “a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses.”¹⁷ By embracing the absurdity of existence, an individual is therefore embracing a performative action of rebellion thereby creating their own meaning of life, with Camus inviting those with these rebellious streaks to participate in existence with “an act of lucidity as one performs an act of faith.”¹⁸ Those who do engage with existence in this way though may find themselves suffering from existential alienation, when faced with the absurd meaninglessness of existence, and a possible lack of intrinsic meaning then a profound sense of isolation and detachment from themselves and their surrounding world may follow.¹⁹ Erich Fromm defines alienation as:

a state of being where a person feels estranged from themselves. He believed that alienation is apparent in consumer culture, where people base their lives on having rather than being.²⁰

Søren Kierkegaard argues that “freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility,” is the cause of an immense “dizziness of freedom” which triggers immense feelings of dread.²¹ In spite of such feeling of anxiety Camus posits that it afford an opportunity for humanity to find their own life's meaning and value, and to confront the meaninglessness with fortitude.²²

According to Camus, inauthenticity can be expressed in the form of absurdity and man's quest for meaning, arguing that the human condition is essentially absurd due to the conflict between the indifferent world and the human need to achieve meaning.²³ Jean Paul Sartre calls inauthenticity “Bad Faith” defining it as:

one's self-deception about the human reality. It can take two forms: the first one is making oneself falsely believe not to be what one actually is. The second one is conceiving oneself as an object (e.g., being identical to a job) and thereby denying freedom.²⁴

The search for meaning is obvious in *White Noise* and *Point Omega* where the characters struggle against a meaningless and insignificant world. *White Noise* Shows the struggles of those who exist within a dystopic world in which identity is immersed within a quagmire of commodification, technology and the media, in which the absurdity of their situations and existence is countered by

¹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.127.

¹⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 24.

²⁰ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (London: Holt Rinehart & Winston Inc., 1947).

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980 [1844]).

²² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 29.

²³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 13.

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), pp. 107-108.

their proliferation of consumeristic tendencies.²⁵ The characters of the novel suffer from the existential dread of their mortality, knowing that death itself not only has no meaning, but there is no cause or ability to stop it from being prescient in their lives, in what Sigmund Freud argues are intense feelings of fear and anxieties towards death that can limit daily activities.²⁶

In *Point Omega* DeLillo portrays characters constantly challenged by time, absurdity, the emptiness of existence, and mortality. Some individuals, who live an isolated life, obtain meaning via personal exploration, but are unable to communicate the results to others. Such isolation is parallel with the conditions of the modern world where people are strangers to themselves, others, and the natural world. Language restricts communication, and human inability to perceive the complex world are themes in this novel. It also explores philosophical ideas regarding metaphysical issues such ultimate consciousness, the unity of awareness and reality, and the extraterrestrial notions of time and space.²⁷

Existential Alienation, Existential Anxiety, Inauthenticity

White Noise revolves around Jack Gladney, his wife Babette, and their children from both current and previous marriages. Gladney is a professor whose mind is preoccupied issues of mortality, whilst utilized by DeLillo as a symbol for the world of academia and the obsession with death that DeLillo seeks to satirize. The story is set in Blacksmith, a fictional town plagued by environmental disasters and leaked toxic materials causing the characters to suffer from the effects of paranoia and anxiety. Jack's relationships and his actions are driven by his obsession with a distinct fear of death and his quest for immortality. Babette also suffers from these same fears, and seeks out a drug that will provide immortality (albeit it a drug that either is a fantasist ideal, or does not work as intended). Experiencing a sense of separation and strangeness in the face of an absurd and meaninglessness existence creates existential alienation allowing for individuals to be separated from not only themselves, but also others, and the surrounding world.²⁸ Such isolation arises from the awareness that the traditional sources that promise meaning are themselves ineffective in providing a framework for a coherent meaning. According to Camus, isolation shows itself in different ways since people struggle with the basic questions of existence, they try to build their identity and purpose in a meaningless world. These same people also have difficulty in building relationships and generally see the world as insignificant, indifferent, and incomprehensible. Camus emphasizes the importance of authenticity, with ultimately rebellion and the struggle against absurdity as the way to save humanity from isolation.²⁹

²⁵ Mark Brown, "'The Boundary We Need': Death and the Challenge of Postmodernity in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*", *Journal of English Studies*, vol. 18 (2020), pp. 17-36.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" (1915).

²⁷ Mina Ghafoori and Zohreh Ramin, "Collapsing Time, Chaotic Consciousness: Reading Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* from the Perspective of Postmodern Gothic", *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences Online*, vol. 64, pp. 143-149.

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 24.

²⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 56.

Due to Gladney's role as the protagonist of *White Noise*, searching for authenticity in his actions is obvious and prominent, with Gladney directly quoting "I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies," a department he founded, and that no one else wants to run, nor the fact he cannot even speak or read German (details which border on the absurd).³⁰ Gladney feels a sense of absurdity and so is drawn to finding the authentic within the middle of the unnatural milieu surrounding him, whilst also seeking out those fleeting moments of authentic and meaningful connection with his family. He perceives the depth of his isolation, and this increases his fear of death, as such he tries to make meaning of the world.³¹ He strives to create meaning within his marriage, and to create a bond with his wife and communicate with this children, and seeks intellectual escapism through conversations with his colleagues in order to break through his isolationist zeal.

Jack's friend and colleague at College-on-the-Hill, Murray J. Siskind, is an academic seeking certainty through rational pursuit, considering theories and philosophies deeply, and trying to find justification for world's perplexities.³² Heinrich, Jack's fourteen-year-old son from a previous marriage, expresses his desire for certainty with his obsession with security and preparation for probable or certain disasters, following news and weather conditions that give him a sense of certainty and control in critical situations that might otherwise threaten them.³³ In a world of unpredictability Heinrich's inclination for security and self-assurance testify his desire for certainty. If someone realizes that they have no control over such events, they will endure alienation due the understanding that their life controlled by forces and factors that are beyond their sphere of control and influence. Randomness poses a challenge to efforts searching for meaning and understanding within a chaotic, and indifferent world.

Gladney feels a lack of control over his own existence, he suffers from separation anxiety when away from his family, and suffers from the dread of his own mortality. Despite his lack of knowledge of the German language, his department of Hitler studies is a success. His decision to attend a German language class is his attempt to endeavor to give meaning to not only his actions, but for him to attempt to control his own existence.³⁴ Like Jack, Babette struggles with an obsessive fear of death, despite her efforts to do her daily routines either inside or outside of home, she still has no control over her fear and anxiety. In an attempt to claim her own power over her anxiety Babette seeks out a product known as Dylar, a substance that is known for stopping death, with Babette eventually doing whatever she needs to do in order to procure the substance.³⁵

Despite such feelings of dread and anxiety, Camus would refer to it as a valuable opportunity for humanity to find a new direction in the search meaning and that it should be confronted with strength, not fear.³⁶ Whilst death is, obviously, inevitable, by accepting death as

³⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 1.

³¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 7.

³² DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 16

³³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 48

³⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 13.

³⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 86.

³⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 29.

an obvious reality of life it can be catered to or it can be disregarded as humanity make their own meanings, without the specter of death looming above them.

The characters in *White Noise* suffer from this existential angst and continued anxieties so seriously that their daily lives are uprooted through these fears. Many of these characters are so afraid of the meaninglessness of their existence that they destroy themselves and others in order to ascertain meaning and to affect their own lives thus creating their own sense of immortality. Both Jack and Babette seek to create their own versions of immortality, with their own creeping sense of impending doom stalking them as they celebrate birthdays thus getting older, but this also exasperates the general feeling of anxieties around aging, growing old and outliving those people that you love; thus, having the world become an even more lonely and isolating place.³⁷

It could be argued that many of the characters within the story are suffering from hypochondria, constantly worrying that they have some form of illness or serious disease while being completely obsessed with doctor appointments and the over zealousness of self-diagnosis. Jack is obsessed with his health, more so after an Airborne Toxic Event, when he starts to consider the possibility of something abnormal within his body and even considers waking up with night sweats as instead some variation of death sweats.³⁸ Even the children are not immune to this irrational discourse, Wilder, the youngest child of Jack and Babette, starts to cry compulsively which leads to Jack and Babette considering taking Wilder to numerous doctors to find a diagnosis that they themselves can live with.

Camus argues that by the time humanity has discovered the innate indifference of the world, and therefore we do not have any inherent meaning, that is when the absurdity of the world generalizes as a bleak anxiety. Humanity, it would seem, strives to create a sense of certainty within existence, hidden mysterious and reality become objects to seek out in an attempt at inevitable understanding, but ultimately not every mystery will ever be solved nor understood. Camus would suggest that these ultimate unsolvable mysteries should be accepted for what they are, by embracing both the absurdness of the world, and the uncertainty of existence, anxiety should be reduced. Camus goes on to further argue that there is a severe degree of inauthenticity within the human experience, particularly marked when this absurdity of reality is acknowledged when flagged between the indifferent world, and the human need for meaning.³⁹ These feelings of inauthenticity are found in various modes, from the mundane acceptance of societal norms, to acting differently in order to fit a particular mold in order to achieve validation from others, primarily by delimiting their own wants and needs in order to better affect their changes.⁴⁰ Camus argues that true authenticity comes from the acceptance of ones own actions and the choices that they make, in this vein it allows for consumerism, concepts of identity, and even academic prowess to be delegated as inauthentic roles within *White Noise*.

Consumeristic tendencies are on display within *White Noise* as the Gladney family attempt to obfuscate their lack of control over existence by controlling and managing the products and

³⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 45.

³⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 124-126.

³⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 35.

commodities they have surrounding them in attempts to control at least a portion of their own lives.⁴¹ Jack even panic buys several iterations of the same shirt when confronted by a colleague while out shopping at the local mall, his rationale to deal and control the uncomfortableness is to buy the exact same shirt in various colours.⁴² Even Murray displays his extreme attachment to commodity culture, showing his interest in the latest models of electronic devices, displaying his knowledge of them to any and sundry who might listen to him.⁴³

These characters, Jack, Babette, Murray, and even the children, occupy different levels of identity, situating themselves dangerously close to the edge of their inauthentic selves. Jack, while a bundle of nerves and anxious worries regarding not only his own mortality and existence, throws himself into his role as a teacher, a father, and a husband in order to help suppress his growing fears. Babette uses her appearance to distract from her growing concerns regarding the world, her obsession of healthy eating, exercise, and fashionable trends are qualities that she has control over. Even Henrich hides his authentic caring and sensitive self, through his inauthentic superiority complex where he must be the smartest person in the room.⁴⁴

The Absence of Ultimate Meaning, The Absurd, Authenticity

Point Omega (2010) deals with the concepts of time, human existence, and perception as told through the lens of three main characters, Richard Elster, Jim Finley and Jessie Elster (Richard's daughter). Elster is a veteran of Desert Storm, who has made the decision to sequester himself away from society in the desert as he contemplates and attempts to reconcile with his past. Finley is a filmmaker who joins Elster as he attempts to deal with his past, as Elster awaits what he terms as the 'omega point,' the end of both human consciousness and more importantly the end of his own existence. Ultimately De Lillo shows that what is of the utmost concern is not only other connections with people but having meanings for existence, even for those who are aloof and detached from society. Camus states that oft-desired search for meaning is one of the ultimate struggles for reality, but often only bitter reality is found. These bitter realities lead to questions of whether or not the struggle is worth the agony it provides, and if it would just be easier to cease participation (in one way or another). While humanity may be enthusiastic to explore the confines of their reality and the truth (subjective or not), the search for these ultimate meanings corresponds to a foundational need to perceive the surroundings they find themselves in, but ultimately this search does not guarantee to find any type of meaning. Camus argues that one should not endeavor to escape the lack of meaning, but instead humanity should rebel against the absurd by taking control of life.

Point Omega manifests absurdity through the exploration of Elster and his voluntary self removal into the desert. The desert stands in as a character within the novel, as a prominent symbol of the utmost vastness that surrounds humanity, but that contains a multitude of unknowns and

⁴¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 8.

⁴² DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 37.

⁴³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 7.

⁴⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 9.

mysteries that will never be known by those who occupy it. De Lillo utilizes the vast expanse and the silence it contains as a narrative device in order to drive the story forward, where there is very little in the way of dialogue between characters, their expressed silences posit the argument that authentic communication is difficult within a world of barren meaning.⁴⁵ Elster's wait for his omega point and entrance into non-existence highlights Camus's own argument of death being the ultimate final point between being, and then ultimately, nothingness. This is doubled by DeLillo writing an ending in which nothing is answered, the ending simply brings about it a sense of total uncertainty and ultimately a sense of the absurd.

Elster, for all his failings and contemplative nature, is presented within two dichotomies, the Elster of the present alone in the desert, haunted by his past, and the Elster that inhabits the past, a man of war, and of certainty. The present Elster argues that his past self was more authentic, as it was a life that was lived 'in the moment' rather than thought about. Elster's removal from society allows for him to contemplate the ultimate meaning of existence, and of life, that of death, his past self was the cause of the deaths of others, his present self is now waiting for his own moment, perhaps his one own authentic choice in his life is his choice to die as an act of rebellion. For Camus, authenticity is the decisive answer to absurdity of existence, an individual should be aware of absurdity, and make meaning of their life by rebellion. Camus criticizes the inauthentic (like adopting the societal roles, compliance to peoples' expectations, and cultural norms); instead arguing that individuals should try to be aware of their own genuine talents, values, and free will. Rebellion against the condition of the world, its meaninglessness and its indifferent attitude toward human beings is an authentic response that enables humans to confront the absurdity of existence. Self-awareness will arise from comprehensive knowledge of true values, purposes, and talents that lead to authentic life.

Conclusion

The Existentialism presented by Albert Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus* and its traces can be seen prominently in the novels *White Noise* and *Point Omega* by Don DeLillo; both reveal the conditions of human existence and the absurdity of his life. Camus sees absurdity as a result of the tension between human desire and the indifferent world, which is devoid of importance and does not bring any meaning. Humanity experiences isolation in the vast world that is the outcome of awareness of such tension, causing anxiety and fear, and occasionally an inability to act. Such tension is clearly obvious among the characters in DeLillo's novels; they find all their actions meaningless and are in constant conflict with themselves to escape from meaninglessness. Sisyphus can be seen as the hero of the absurd, doomed in an infinite and meaningless cycle of pushing a boulder to the top of the hill and watching its fall to the bottom of the valley for the rest of his life. Humanity also acts like this, seeking to find the main purpose and meaning of life, in an ultimately fruitless effort.

⁴⁵ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 39.

Camus argues that the best way to deal with absurdity is for a person to take responsibility for their own actions and choices with free will. Camus writes regarding recognition of genuine talents and values that are meaningful to him and give direction to his actions and goals. Although human actions seem absurd and meaningless, akin to what Sisyphus was condemned to do, it is humanity's duty to overcome the absurdity of his existence by rebelling and performing his actions with joy and imagine that Sisyphus was also happy to do so.

In the post-modern era and the themes of death and absurdity are among its key concepts, many literary works have emerged that express the basic questions of existence and the constant struggle of human beings. It is suggested for further studies to scholars to concentrate on the ways that individuals invent to solace for their existential tensions, Ben Yacobi argues "Nevertheless the world has no specific inclination for either good or evil: it is what it is. No value judgments can be attached to it, even if life does not make sense from a human perspective."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ben G. Yacobi, "The Limits of Authenticity," *Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas* (2012). At: https://philosophynow.org/issues/92/The_Limits_of_Authenticity.