

# The Analysis of Family Ecology under the Toxic Smoke in DeLillo's *White Noise*

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**Abstract:** This paper takes the Gladneys in DeLillo's *White Noise* as the research object and examines their daily life. Ecocriticism theory is adopted to determine what factors might influence their family ecology and lead to the lack of communication and trust among family members. The results of this study have indicated that the dilemma of the Gladneys stems from the toxic smoke floating in the air and pervading in the sociocultural context. Changes in family structure, mass media and consumer culture all overshadow their family ecology. The Gladneys' dilemma also reflects the collective dilemma of the post-modern American society.

**Key words:** post-nuclear family; family ecology; toxic smoke; sociocultural context

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*White Noise*, Don DeLillo's eighth novel published in 1985, brought its author to the attention of both readers and critics. Among the numerous researches on this novel, ecological consciousness has always been one of the focuses. Frank Lentricchia was among the first critics to evaluate DeLillo's concern about human living conditions in post-modern society from the perspective of consumerism and ecologism in his *New Essays on White Noise*<sup>1</sup>. Douglas Keesey claimed each of DeLillo's works contained the theme of media, which showed a profound impact on the real society, threatening people to distance themselves from nature<sup>2</sup>. Jesse Kavadlo believed that DeLillo's work was primarily concerned with the spiritual crisis facing humanity<sup>3</sup>. Randy Laist also considered that technology has invaded every aspect of modern society and life in the protagonist's life of the novel was a continual

performance of death<sup>4</sup>. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between civilization and nature through literary texts, focusing not only on nature as the living environment of human beings, but also on human nature, including the confusion and crisis people face in the post-modern society. In this sense, the paper examines what the family, the smallest unit of society, confronts in the post-modern society from the perspective of family ecology. *White Noise* depicts mainly the daily life of the protagonist, Professor Jack Gladney, and his family. Superficially, Jack has a flourishing career and a harmonious family. He is currently living a healthy and happy life with Babette, his fourth wife, who is kind, gentle and caring, together with four children from their previous marriages. However, their family ecology has long been overshadowed by toxic sociocultural context, which emphasizes the acquisition of sensory stimulation from TV, radio, advertising, commodities, etc., although they do

avoid tobacco, alcohol and drugs. In fact, Jack evens wonders what people get from an artificial stimulus like nicotine because he has never smoked. "Never tried it. Never saw the need"<sup>5</sup>. However, a family ecosystem can be composed of members, their living environment, and the interactions between them. A good family ecology should attach greater importance to the mutual trust, communication, and integration among members, which is obviously missing in the Gladneys.

### THE POST-NUCLEAR FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILY ECOLOGY

Family structure has changed dramatically in recent years. Basically, the Gladneys do not represent the traditional nuclear family, consisting of a father, a mother, and their children. Jack has had four failed marriages (He married the same woman, Dana Breedlove, on his first and fourth marriages. His second wife was Janet Savory and third wife was Tweedy Browner), and Babette has been married twice. During their previous marriages, they had children separately, four of whom (Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder) they currently live with. These children are half brothers, half sisters or totally unrelated siblings. Let's call it the post-nuclear family, a blended household in which one or both spouses have children from prior relationships. The instability of family structure is the result of multiple divorces and remarriages that may lead to dysfunctional home environment, involving lack of communication, trust and intimacy. The home no longer functions as a harbor which symbolizes being safe and warm, and shelters everyone in the family.

Then who is/are suffering most? The children, probably. Divorces and remarriages of parents, in many cases, continue to have an impact on a child throughout his/her life. Adaptation can be a tough process in such families, considering each adjustment made to the new relationship among family members and their great efforts. In *White Noise*, interaction among children mainly occurs between Denise and Steffie. Despite a small degree of friction between them, they do seem to

be on good terms with each other. While watching TV, Steffie feels shameful and would like to leave whenever something inappropriate seems about to occur. She waits until the scene is over. During these occasions, Denise often gives her some advice about being tough, mean and thick-skinned in the world. Denise also shares what's on her mind so that Steffie knows that her sister is worrying about the pill Babette takes and its side effects. When Steffie is going to fly to meet her mother, Denise worries "what if she doesn't send Steffie back". However, Heinrich, who is capricious in mood, seldom interacts with Denise and Steffie, and Wilder is still too young to talk. In terms of parent-child relationships, neither Jack nor Babette can be termed as a qualified communicator. When confronted with his son, Jack often seems at a loss. He can't figure out why Heinrich is sometimes quiet and compliant while he sometimes becomes an eloquent speaker. Their talk will evolve into either a meaningless argument or an awkward dialogue. Jack doesn't even know how to express his love for his son, and simply treat him in a protective manner, similar to the male animal protecting his cub. The talk between Jack and Denise mainly centers on Dylar (pills that Babette eats in order to counter her fear of death), while Babette tries to hide from the family the fact that she is taking the pills by lying, completely disregarding her daughter's worry about her health<sup>5</sup>. The only time in the novel that the whole family has a heated discussion is during the gas leakage and the evacuation.

In such a post-nuclear family, sometimes children need to pay visits to distant parents. Bee has to fly from Washington to spend Christmas with her father, with two stops and another connection on the way. During her stay, she has trouble integrating herself into the family, and everyone feels ill at ease as well. What should have been a close family seems more like a guest-host relationship, alienated and embarrassing. As for Steffie, she worries whether she could recognize her mother and what if her mother refuses to send her back before she is going to take a flight from Boston. She is not sure whether she has ever met her mother, and asks her father about her mother's age, specific job and even name. Denise seems to be experienced in visiting distant parents since Jack sensed in a subtle way that she has been offering some advice to Steffie. Besides,

Janet, Jack's second wife, would like Heinrich to come to the ashram this summer. When Vernon Dickey, Babette's father and Jack's father-in-law, visits his daughter without previous notice, Babette is so shocked that it takes hours before she finally becomes accustomed to her father's presence at home, though she takes delight in meeting her father. Let alone the children, they are cautious and extremely reluctant to Vernon's intimate actions such as kisses and hair-mussings. They find it difficult to feel intimacy with relatives, who may remind them of past experiences, of turbulence and anxiety. Relatives stimulate their sensitive and fragile memories. In this complex network of post-nuclear family, although no one can say for sure that distance will hinder affection between children and their distant parents, how familiar and close could these children be to their distant parents if they are not yet well integrated and intimate with each other between regular family members? The answer is obvious, at least in this novel.

The relationship between husband and wife is critical to the stability of a family. Effective communication lays the foundation for a good relationship, while the prerequisite for effective communication is mutual trust. Jack knows it and he believes that he has been doing so. "Babette and I tell each other everything"<sup>5</sup>. He believes he has been frank with each of his wives, which serves as a gesture of trust. However, here lies the irony. If Jack has in fact told everything, it means nothing should be excluded. What about the fact that he keeps his fear of death a secret? What's so special about fear of death? On the other hand, how does Jack know that Babette has told him everything? Despite Jack's portrayal of Babette as a simple woman, the facts prove otherwise. In fact, Babette turns out to be more complicated than Jack acknowledges. She is so overwhelmed by her fear of death that she answers an ad, receives many tests and eventually sells herself to Mr. Gray, the project manager to obtain an experimental drug. It is named Dylar, which claims to cure the fear of death. Babette has been keeping her fear of death and the Dylar thing a secret until Jack finds out the amber bottle of lightweight plastic in the bathroom and decides to talk to

her seriously. Both Jack and Babette are not as frank as they claim to be. Without mutual trust, their marriage will be in crisis sooner or later. This also leaves a clue that the failure to communicate openly and honestly might be one of the reasons for their previous divorces.

Moreover, talks between Jack and Babette seem to be plentiful, but effective communication is rare. One of their recurring topics is centering on death. The question of "who will die first" becomes an obsession, popping up at intervals of their conversation. Babette claims that she wants to die first, not because life is not worth cherishing, but because she will feel unbearably lonely and sad without her husband. While Jack tells his wife that his life will be incomplete without her, he also wants to die first. On the other hand, he also confesses the truth that he will be able to make a decision without hesitation if he has to choose between loneliness and death. Jack even expects them to live forever, even if one day they grow old, weak, and sick. It's a pity that all this is not dominated by his own will. Therefore, he is terrified when realizing his exposure in the toxic smoke can be life threatening. Besides, they both maintain that they would like to do whatever can please the other one, which seems to prove their mutual love. However, if they can't feel open to share feelings and thoughts deep inside, whatever they utter might prove to be false illusions, indicating they are not feeling comfortable and secure in their relationships.

## **SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILY ECOLOGY**

Besides the post-nuclear family structure that leads to the dysfunctional home environment of the Gladneys, the rampant consumerism and media culture are by no means innocent. Living in this toxic social atmosphere, families, as a fundamental unit of the whole society, are the first to be poisoned. And what happens to the Gladneys exists simply as a microcosm.

The American essayist and stylist E.B. White once advocates that "television is going to be a test of the modern world"<sup>6</sup> when he served as a columnist for *Harper's Magazine* in 1938. The television, as an influential technology in everyday

life, has currently penetrated into all aspects of social life and has become a major source of information for people. It enables people to see beyond the range of their vision and know about the world. Despite its advantages of being timely, intuitive and catching, TV is also changing people's ideas, behaviors, and aesthetic tastes, intentionally or unintentionally. As is said by Alfonse, another colleague of Jack, many people can no longer see beyond their homes and TV sets. They are trapped there both physically and mentally. In the Gladneys' home, "television permeates the domestic scene almost subconsciously" and "intermittently 'speaks' in the background"<sup>7</sup>. The TV is always on, showing news of natural disasters and deaths, all kinds of advertisements, unconfirmed rumors and eye-catching news. Kids in this family seem to be extremely fascinated with it — Steffie sat in front of the TV, her lips moving, trying to follow the lines on TV; Denise "was in bed watching TV"; little as he is, Wilder stays in front of the TV. "The TV said" repeatedly occurs in the novel. Babette is clever enough to realize the harm of TV and the significance of strengthening the family bond, and she makes it a rule that the whole family will eat take-out Chinese food and watch TV together every Friday night. Through the group activity she intends to make it a healthy family sport, becomes a way to de-glamorize the medium, and undermine the narcotic and brainwashing power of television ultimately<sup>5</sup>.

Radio also plays a significant role in their family. In a talk between Heinrich and Jack, they argue over the weather condition:

"It's going to rain tonight."

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight."

There's another talk between Steffie and Babette:

"We have to boil our water," Steffie said.

"Why?"

"It's said on the radio."

Heinrich believes in the weather forecast on the radio rigidly so that he doesn't care about the current weather outside, while Steffie learns about boiling water on the radio without

considering why. Obviously, they are both so convinced by what is said on the radio that they are blind to the facts before them, or disdain to think further. The most significant role the radio plays in the novel is probably reflected in the airborne toxic event. At the very beginning, the Gladneys learn from the radio that "a tank car derailed". Later, all follow-up news, including what the leakage is and its possible harm, the measures already taken, and every change in the name of the toxic smoke hanging in the sky, comes from the radio.

Moreover, media culture and commercial interests are also interdependent. A wide range of commodities enter the vision of consumers through advertising, which has become an industry and brought terrifying messages constantly. A large number of advertisements from TV, radio, and newspaper keeps bombarding the Gladneys in turn. A sequence of brand names and advertising slogans intersperse within the novel:

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex;

MasterCard, Visa, American Express;

Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra;

Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded;

Clorets, Velamints, Freedent.

Jack accidentally heard Steffie utter in her dream "*Toyota Celica*" once:

"A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranatal names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence."<sup>5</sup>

It is from a tabloid ad that Babette learns about Dylar. Ironically, the newspaper doesn't care if it

makes false publicity, and Babette answers the ad at the cost of selling herself physically and spiritually. If we say this is totally resulted from Babette's overwhelming fear of death, the ad, undoubtedly, serves as an accomplice.

While TV, radio, and other forms of media help people integrate into a consumer culture, which enriches their family life, media culture has successfully blurred the line between virtual, real and hyper-real. Leonard Wilcox<sup>8</sup> compared the information world described by Baudrillard and DeLillo's *White Noise* and pointed out their striking similarity: They are both characterized by the loss of the real. Moreover, the concrete set of signs and meanings has been saturated by mass media. As people have been passively receiving a large amount of information from TV, radio, and newspapers, and now from other new media such as the Internet, media culture has greatly weakened people's ability to think and judge properly, and nurtured their desires for material abundance. People no longer consume simply for actual needs. In *White Noise*, brand names and advertising slogans appear like a trio, imperceptibly conveying "Jean Baudrillard's sense of consumption as a socially signifying practice that circulates coded values"<sup>9</sup>. To buy, or not to buy, this is not what they are tangled with. They are obsessed with consumption, instead. "I buy, therefore I am". Just considering the "domestic sport" involving all members in the Gladney family every Friday evening, shopping in malls and supermarkets constitutes a major part of their family activities. Taking a look at the shelves filled with varieties of commodities, and their fancy packaging, what prosperity! With their fully loaded shopping cart, Jack and Barbette feel intensely safe, fulfilled and happy. It is an important way for them to prove that they exist, a fullness unknown to those who have fewer needs and expectations, and that they are capable of planning their lives and being at ease. Jack describes his shopping habits like this: he shops for its own sake, for what he needs right now, for what he doesn't need in the short term, or even for what he doesn't intend to buy originally. Shopping gives him a sense of self-worth, as he puts it, "I filled myself out, found

new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed"<sup>5</sup>. According to Susana S. Martins, Jack's description of his roles as a consumer is an irony. He consumes mostly the experience as a consumer, which brings far more significance than what he actually buys<sup>7</sup>. Far above the need to gain the use value of the commodities themselves, they attach more importance to the social identity, psychological satisfaction and symbolic values represented by the commodities. After each shopping completed, the pleasure of shopping is gone as well. Therefore, they drive home in silence and go back to their respective rooms in hopes of being left alone. The satisfaction brought by consumption is but temporary, and the subsequent sense of loss may last for a long time. They need a private space where they can calm down and accept the fact. To some extent, mass media and consumer culture lead to estrangement and dilution, and greatly reduce the breadth, scope and frequency of interpersonal communication. People are trapped in a limited space, engaged in a few things and interacting with a few people.

Though people like the Gladneys can afford to consume, to consume blindly and excessively can cause waste in the aftermath. In their house, the kitchen is over-crowded, with food, kitchenware, discarded packaging and household items scattered all everywhere. The compactor is also an interesting image which reflects how much waste they have created. When Jack opens the compactor drawer to check the trash bags, all varieties of domestic waste can be found inside: uneaten food, leftovers, peels, bones, fats, juices, hangers, broken bottles, used paper, flat cartons, and heavy sludges. "Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it?"<sup>5</sup> The three consecutive questions reflect that excessive consumption and excessive waste have almost become part of the post-modern lifestyle, whether Jack has realized it or not.

The Gladneys' life represents the everyday life of countless American families. The crisis they face is not an individual case, but a collective plight of the whole society. As Packer claims, the crisis represented in *White Noise* is significant in that it is public, and collective<sup>10</sup>. Human beings have to depend on certain environments for survival, both natural environment and social environment. The natural environment is made up of the atmosphere,

water, soil, climate, plants, and microorganisms that support life, while the social environment refers to the man-built nature, involving political, economic, cultural and informational factors. Nowadays, in the living environment of human beings, the "white noise", from nuclear plants, from streams of vehicles in streets, from TV and radio, and from murmuring people and loudspeakers in supermarkets, are polluting human health both physically and spiritually.

From the perspective of ecocriticism, the novel "offers insight into a culture's shifting relation to nature and to the environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imagination"<sup>11</sup>. In the postmodern era, the natural environment is being destroyed by modern technology and civilization. Man-made disasters threaten people's life day by day. In *White Noise*, the receding hairline of Heinrich causes his father's confusion. Jack is puzzled whether this relates to the gene-piercing food his mother consumed when she was pregnant, or the fact that there is a chemical dump site nearby, and the industrial wastes carried by air currents may cause problems with his son's hairline. His suspicion is well founded, since after the gas leakage and the toxic smoke, the sunsets becomes "almost unbearably beautiful"<sup>5</sup>. Though no one can prove a measurable connection whether Nyodene Derivative has caused the aesthetic leap, it is suspected that the remains of microorganisms which have devoured the toxic smoke are responsible for this magnificent sunset. And when the family are talking about toxic spills at dinner, "Forget these spills," Heinrich says. "These spills are nothing." In his opinion, what people should really worry about is the radiation from radio, television, and radar on the highway. People are surrounded by radiation and that is the big problem. Indeed, the by-products of technological advance are not only destroying the living space of mankind and their health, but also casting a shadow over their mind. DeLillo puts it directed in the novel that "Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death"<sup>5</sup>.

People are troubled with the fear of death caused by technology. Technology is the representation of desire. It is something that distorts human morality and help cover up the evils they have committed. Therefore, confronted with "death made in the laboratory", they seem to be quite optimistic about technology and believe that it can also be resolved by the laboratory. "Everybody takes some kind of medication". Jack is taking many drugs that help relieve blood pressure, stress, and allergy. He also takes eye drops and aspirin that people may take on a daily basis. After the exposure in the toxic smoke for about two and a half minutes during the evacuation, which was considered fatal by the SIMUVAC man as well as the computer verdict, Jack takes several physicals to check his status to make sure he is still all right. Babette takes a dangerous step forward with her over-reliance on drugs, and she believes the fear of death can be cured with one pill of Dylar every day. Dr. Chakravarty is so optimistic about the brand -new medical equipment in Glassboro that he would like to send Jack there for further tests. The doctor in Glassboro is also quite confident about the power of their devices. Even when Jack tells Murray that he is already "technically dead", the latter comforts him that "you could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology". Jack used to pin his hopes on Dylar to solve his problem, but from the pharmacological aspect, Dylar never works on Babette and Mr. Gray. If it could work someday, it would represent a triumph of technology over nature. The primitive fears of humans can indeed fuel technological progress. However, people should never ignore the fact that the greater the progress of science, the greater its destructive power.

Furthermore, with technology as the carrier, media culture has boosted the development of consumerism. "Consumption has grasped the whole of life"<sup>12</sup>. The postmodern environment is full of commercialized spectacles. In the first chapter of the novel, the author depicts a spectacle that Jack is said to witness every September for twenty-one years:

"Suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs

and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags--onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints.”<sup>5</sup>

It is odd enough that being surrounded by those commodities and stuff enables students to feel recognized by the public and a sense of belonging. Consumption is a carnival of groups, and no one is left out. Almost every time the Gladneys go shopping in a supermarket or in a mall, they can run into Murray, or other acquaintances. “This immersion in the power of the dollar and in the community of fellow consumers restores their sense of personal worth on more than a merely monetary level”<sup>13</sup>. The Gladneys, along with everyone else in the town, are immersed in shopping. Murray thinks that “this (shopping) place recharges us spiritually”<sup>5</sup>. Besides, commodities are not the only things that can be consumed. It is mentioned in the novel that Jack and Murray once drive to a barn which is said to be the most photographed in America. Why the most photographed? What attracts visitors is obviously not its charming scenery, cultural or historic connections, because no one “sees” the barn. Tourists from all directions come here with their cameras and take countless photos, which makes them part of the group, because all tourists are doing the same thing and they are all subservient to some kind of collective perception.

In this social-cultural atmosphere, people may feel bitterly lonely and fearful. Consequently, they are eager to find a way out of their predicament and seek a sense of belonging. Consumerism and media culture cater to people's need to some extent. Shopping means more than spending money to get what you need, “this is  
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y because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle”<sup>12</sup>. People get relieved spiritually. The media, on the other hand, provide “remedies” for loneliness. People are immersed in the symbolic world of TV, radio, and advertisements, unconsciously intoxicated by the carnival of media culture. As Murray says, “the medium is a primal force in the American home”<sup>5</sup>, with the power to enclose people in the living room and subtly influence their behavior and thinking. Consumerism and media culture, in reality, have permeated every corner of postmodern society. They can't truly resolve people's mental distress and enrich their spiritual emptiness. What they call belonging, identity, and collective perception are just illusions. They are never feeling safe. Instead, consumerism and media culture are either part of, or contributing to the man-made disasters.

This is what we call the postmodern American society, full of “white noise”, briefly speaking. According to Lentricchia<sup>1</sup>, “white noise” could refer to something “actual and metaphoric”, and it became the background “music” of postmodern life, while Bonca called the noise of modern technology the white noise of consumer culture<sup>14</sup>. Wilcox maintained that “white noise” indicated both a neutral and specific media discourse and the information surplus and terrifying data caused by media society<sup>8</sup>. Timothy Aubry summed up “white noise” as any inevitable background noise around people who may or may not be aware of it<sup>15</sup>. Generally, “white noise” can cover all audible and inaudible noise produced by modern civilization. It can be a disturbing sound, a dull roar, humming machines, buzzing traffic, unmuted TV or radio programs, or the toneless systems. The “white noise” represents a symbol of modern life. People do not need to understand it, accept it, or even reject it, as it is already a kind of natural existence.

### **THE SELF-HEALING APPROACHES OF THE GLADNEYS**

A good family ecology not only concerns the well-being of family members, but also provides guarantee for the harmonious, stable and healthy development of the society as a whole. However,

with repeated changes in family structure, the Gladneys is actually no longer a natural family. Instead, it is an artificial one, with stepparents, half-brothers, half-sisters, and totally unrelated siblings. Under such circumstances, it becomes more difficult for family members to better communicate with each other, although they fully understand that the quality and quantity of communication can help improve a relationship. Besides, the "white noise" from modern technology, consumerism, and media culture, is blocking all possible communication, thus endangering the family ecology. No child or adult can get a sense of belonging and protection from it. On the contrary, this post-nuclear family will be kept in a lasting turmoil. Fortunately, the Gladneys seem to find a way out so that they may survive the trap made by postmodern society.

Communication is obviously difficult. There were frequent pauses during the conversation. Sometimes they even prefer to be in silence. "We finished our lunch in silence"; "We drove home in silence". But deep inside, they know the importance to talk, to let out the emotion accumulated over time. They are still trying. Heinrich uses the shock tactics when he wants attention from parents. There is still the laconic dialogue between Jack and Heinrich. The family members can talk during their gatherings which occur mainly in the kitchen, supermarkets, and a car to and from the shopping venues. Jack and Babette also discuss about "father-son thing" and she realizes that stepparents can play an important role in mediating conflicts between blood relatives. There is no reason to doubt her sincerity and love for children, not just her own children. When told over the phone that Steffie has broken a bone in the hand accidentally at camp, Babette burst into tears. Babette also works out the idea of "domestic sport" every Friday evening, though everyone in the family seems to be enduring a subtle punishment all evening.

All family members frequent to various shopping malls, supermarkets, restaurants, or gather in front of the TV, to some extent, may be helpful for strengthening the family bond, according to Lentricchia<sup>1</sup>. Shopping serves as a way for

them to maintain their daily family life. They feel abundant on both material and spiritual levels through consumption. Jack never goes shopping alone. He is always accompanied by Babette and the children. A trip to the supermarket is a good chance to improve the relationship between parents and children, husband and wife and neighbors. "It provides community"<sup>13</sup>. People need material abundance as well as community. But other than that, everything else they need is on the shelf of tabloids. Celebrity anecdotes, absurd stories and magical drugs fully meet people's excess desires, fantasies and kill the leisure time. In shopping, they cast off loneliness and get integrated. Shopping has become their usual way of life, and once something changes, they panic. As in the last chapter of the novel, on one occasion the supermarket rearranges the shelves without previous warning. The shoppers couldn't help but confused and anxious. The familiar environment becomes strange, and these changes make them at a loss.

After ups and downs in life, both Babette and Jack have "grown up". Babette gets rid of her obsession with Dylar and gains new insights into advertising and the product itself, which can be shown when she comments on the use of sunscreen gel. Babette concludes that "it's all a corporate tie-in". Advertising, as an effective tool in marketing, promotes the intrinsic relationship between sunscreen and disease, arouses consumer fear, and thus the products become popular. Advertising, products, marketing and consumer psychology are closely linked. Jack is finally relieved after trying to kill Mr. Gray, but saving his life at the last minute. He probably won't try to gain Dylar anymore. He also deliberately stays away from the computer verdict of his health status and refuses to answer the phone from Dr. Chakravarty when the latter intends to talk to him. Life is still as usual. Nothing seems to have happened. No leakage, no betrayal, no plot, and no attempted killing. The husband and wife, together with other people in town, climbed the hill to watch the spectacular sunset while men in Mylex suits are busy monitoring and collecting data that may be related to the remains of the toxic fog in the soil and the air with the help of a variety of sophisticated instruments.

## CONCLUSION

In short, the Gladneys are living a typical but not very satisfactory life. They enjoy material abundance while mental distress haunts everyone, like fear of death, lack of mutual trust and communication difficulties, etc. This is also true of many other American families, no matter whether they belong to nuclear families, single parent families, extended families, childless families, or post-nuclear families. They are all confronted with similar problems, which have been created by the post-industrial age and sociocultural context. Toxic smoke haunts everywhere, floating in the air, touching the skin, entering the lungs, and infecting the soul. Despite all the problems, the Gladneys strive to gather strength and stability from their daily life, develop a healthy lifestyle and ensure everything is running properly at some point, so that they can survive in this society as a complete family structure. And perhaps, this is the greatest humor the post-modern society has given people.

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