

# Interpretation of Ethics in DeLillo's Fiction

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**Abstract:** As a postmodern novelist who emphasizes conscience and responsibility of writers, Don DeLillo, with his postmodern writing techniques, profoundly reveals the politics, economy, technologies, mass media, terrorism and the living conditions of the people in the post-industrial American society. Taking the perspective of ethics as the breakthrough point, this essay analyzes the imbalanced ethical relationships between man and nature, man and society, and man and himself in postmodern American society reflected in *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man* as well as DeLillo's thought of ethical care and ethical salvation. He posits that man, as an ethical subject, should return to his humanity as a human being in order to face the imbalanced relationships in this postmodern society and apply the goodness and love in human nature to solve the ethical problems of the postmodern era.

**Keywords:** DeLillo; Ethical Imbalances; Ethical Salvation; *White Noise*; *Libra*; *Cosmopolis*; *Falling Man*

## 1. Introduction

As a leading contemporary American writer, Don DeLillo (1936- ) has so far published 18 novels, 4 plays, and numerous short stories and essays since the publication of his first novel *Americana* (1971). His novels *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), and *Underworld* (1997) were ranked in the top 20 of the "Best American Novels of the Past 25 Years". He is the recipient of the National Book Award, the Jerusalem Prize, the Irish Times International Prize for Fiction, and the Faulkner PEN Award for Fiction. His works are known for their focus on the realities of contemporary American society and major historical events. His works cover topics such as politics, economy, culture, technologies, media, family, violence and terrorism in contemporary American society, and portray the state of life and spirituality of postmodern Americans in a post-modernist writing style.

As a postmodernist writer who emphasizes the writer's conscience and responsibility, DeLillo's fiction contains a rich ethical meaning. Each of his works portrays the ethical relationships in which people in postmodern society find themselves in imbalanced relationships. He raises Americans' awareness towards the current problems involving ecological disasters, terrorism, the side effects of media, loss of subjectivity, etc., as Paul Giaimo argues,

"Books like Samuel Clemens's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* brought up the issue of slavery and showed to readers many people and events that would lead them to believe that slavery was wrong. DeLillo, trained by the Jesuits (as I was) to unite a respect for knowledge with a drive to help and serve other people, seems to be concerned with performing a similar task. Though we don't have chattel slavery here in the United States, a host of other problems—including terrorism, the bursting of the housing bubble, tremendous national debt, weapons of mass destruction, and environmental catastrophes—still plague us. In his 16 novels written under his own name, Don DeLillo takes on all these issues as the earlier American writers did, not only to criticize these problems but to suggest the impact that these problems have had on individuals"<sup>[1]</sup>.

According to Nie Zhenzhao, the function of literature is to provide moral education to the reader<sup>[2]</sup>. "In specific literary works, the central element of ethics is the accepted and recognized ethical relationships that develop between man and man, man and society, and man and nature, as well as the moral order that forms on the basis of these relationships and the various norms that sustain them"<sup>[2]</sup>. Thus, what one needs to do in his life is to deal with the ethical relationships with nature, society and himself. Therefore, the perspective of ethical relationships between man and nature, man and society, and

man and himself can shed light on the interpretation of DeLillo's works. This essay takes the ethical perspective as an entry point to explore the ethics of DeLillo's works by analyzing the imbalanced ethical relationships between man and nature, man and society, and man and himself in postmodern American society displayed in his *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007) and then his ethical salvation ideas that as an ethical subject, man should return to his humanity in order to face the imbalanced ethical relationships in this postmodern society will be explored in the last part of this essay.

## 2. The Ethical Imbalance of Man and Nature

The ethical relationship between man and nature has existed since the emergence of man. "The historical evolution of the relationship between man and nature has undergone a process in which natural and human forces have been in opposition to each other"<sup>[3]</sup>. The ethical relationship between man and nature has evolved as man has come to know and transform nature. This ethical relationship ranged from nature-domination in primitive civilizations to relatively harmonious relationship in agricultural civilizations to antagonistic relationship in industrial civilizations. In the era of industrial civilization, especially in the postmodern era, under the influence of anthropocentric ideology, human beings treat the relationship between man and nature with a dichotomous attitude, viewing nature as an object to be conquered and exploited, making the relationship between man and nature in a state of antagonism and conflict, and this state of contradiction and antagonism has intensified in postmodern society.

In DeLillo's works, we see that this antagonistic and imbalanced relationship is very different from the antagonistic relationship between nature and man in primitive civilizations. In the postmodern era, man neglects the protection of nature and over-exploits nature, causing a serious deterioration of the natural ecology. This deterioration is not so much a natural disaster as a man-made one. The deterioration of the natural environment has caused incalculable damage to mankind and affected his survival as a species. Consequently, the ethical relationship between man and nature has become imbalanced. In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts the airborne toxic event which is caused by a toxic gas leak from a nearby derailed tank car. The toxic event causes all of the people in the town to evacuate during the windy and snowy night. In their daily life, the people in the novel who live in the town Blacksmith are surrounded by the pollution of various kinds. Industrial wastes from a chemical dump site near their home caused the hero Jack's 14-year-old son's scalp to degenerate. His daughter's school has to be closed due to the presence of toxic substances, and one of the masked and Mylex-suited men in charge of the inspection suddenly collapsed and died due to inhalation of toxic substances. These toxic substances and the contaminated air not only cause physical damage, but also create a psychological nightmare that is difficult for people to escape. But this is only in Blacksmith, a small town in the American West, far from the industrialized cities. Things are worse in big cities, as we can see in other novels written by him. In *Cosmopolis*, the setting of the story is New York, a representative of modern civilization, but it is also plagued by pollution. As we can see in the city, "The river was only two blocks away, bearing its daily inventory of chemicals and incidental trash, floatable household objects, the odd body bludgeoned or shot, all ghosting prosaically south to the tip of the island and the seamount beyond"<sup>[4]</sup>. According to the claims of ecoethics, "the ethical relationship between man and nature must and should be one of interconnectedness, interdependence, and mutually reinforcing harmonious development"<sup>[5]</sup>. However, in the postmodern society of the United States, the environment in which people live and survive is threatened and is deteriorating due to the ever-expanding human desires and the abandonment of the ethical norms of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature.

DeLillo's works reveal the ethical imbalance between man and nature in postmodern society, and his idea is similar to the proposition of modern ecological aesthetics which posits "a new eco-existential aesthetic view of man in a dynamic balance and harmony with nature and society in an eco-aesthetic state"<sup>[6]</sup>. It is guided by the ecological worldview in the postmodern context, and takes the exploration of the aesthetic relationship between man and nature as the starting point, involving multiple aesthetic relationships between man and society, man and the universe, and man and himself, aiming to establish an aesthetic state of existence in accordance with ecological laws. In DeLillo's writing, although people are extremely rich in terms of material wealth, they are in a "non-aesthetic" predicament with nature, and cannot really live a life of physical and mental comfort.

## 3. The Ethical Imbalance of Man and Society

The relationship between man and nature reflects the ethical relationship between man and his

external physical environment, now the ethical relationship between man and society in DeLillo's fiction will be analyzed, which can be understood as the relationship between man and his external cultural environment. The postmodern society delineated by DeLillo can be regarded as a consumer society full of sign value, a media-manipulated anthropomorphic society, an indifferent society with alienated interpersonal relations, and a dangerous society full of violence and terrorism. In this social context, man has been dominated by the society, has lost their autonomy and subjectivity, and has no control and freedom over their thoughts and behaviors.

First, DeLillo presents us with a consumer society in which sign value has replaced use value. Jean Baudrillard, a famous French thinker, once pointed out that "We are in a situation where 'consumption' controls the whole of our life"<sup>[7]</sup>. According to Baudrillard's consumption theory, the consumer "aims not at the thing, but at the value. The satisfaction of the demand lies in the attached value of commodities"<sup>[7]</sup>. The value is the sign value of the commodities instead of their use value, that is to say, commodity consumption does not lie in the use value of commodities, but the sign value which reflects the rights, identity and status of consumers who consume those commodities. The sign value of commodities, rather than the use value, has become the focus of attention of consumers. Rational consumption has evolved into conspicuous consumption, in which people derive a sense of presence and satisfaction from the process of possession and consumption of various kinds of commodities. "The value of commodities in the postmodern period comes from the sign value attached to the commodities in the system of exchange. The consumption of any commodity (including culture and art) becomes a cultural symbol for the consumer's social and psychological realization and for marking his or her social and cultural tastes and distinguishing between high and low standards of living"<sup>[8]</sup>. In *White Noise*, the supermarket is full of dazzling packaged items that inspire people to buy. By buying and possessing the luxurious goods even if they are useless to Jack and his family members, they can acquire a sense of well-being and superiority. On the first day when a new school year starts, Jack shows us the various items that students carry down from their station wagons as the story unfolds, "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 jurik 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>[9]</sup>.

No wonder the author calls the day as "the day of the station wagons"<sup>[9]</sup>. The assembly of station wagons is more powerful than formal liturgies or laws in that it enables the parents of these students understand that "they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation"<sup>[9]</sup>. This means that the consumption and possession of the same goods make them aware that they are of the same identity and status. Consumerism has become the bond that holds the American mind and spirit together.

The protagonist of *Cosmopolis* is Eric Parker, a financial magnate at the age of 28. He is a billionaire with millions of dollars and his apartment consists of 48 rooms, a swimming pool, a gym, a video room and a card room. He also owns a stretch limousine with all sorts of high-tech equipment in it. He takes advantage of technology to make huge profits by manipulating the stock market. "Ultimately, *Cosmopolis* offers a meditation on 'the dysfunctional nature of a [finance-dominated] social formation,' which places 'an acute strain on the social fabric' with potentially destructive consequences for the social body as a whole"<sup>[10]</sup>. In this postmodern society, people are obsessed with the possession of material possessions of all kinds, including money, and live in a sea of things and consumption. Only through the possession and consumption of things can people gain the dignity and value of their existence. In depicting this consumption-dominated world, DeLillo exposes to us the role of the mass media. The various commercials in *White Noise* bombard people's life, entering their subconsciousness to a certain extent and dominating their consumer behavior. Jack's daughter Steffi mimics the commercials on TV, and the ravings she makes in her sleep are also Toyota's advertising slogans. In *Libra*, "Lee sat there after the movie ended, with loud late-night commercials coming one after another, fast-talking men demonstrating blenders, demonstrating miracle shampoo"<sup>[11]</sup>. In these novels, we can see the influence of mass media is omnipresent, which cannot be avoided in people's daily life. Through the encoding of messages, commercials "falsify a consumer totality"<sup>[7]</sup> that stimulates consumers' desire to consume and thus the merchants can gain greater profits from the consumption.

Second, the influence of the mass media has not only had an impact on people's consumer consciousness and consumption behaviour, but has shaped a society of simulacra. In this society, the real world has been replaced by the hyper-reality shaped by the media. People are completely subject to the media and have completely lost their free will and subjectivity. As we can see in *White Noise*, when

they drove to “the most photographed barn in America”, Jack’s colleague Murray says that “no one sees the barn” and that “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn”<sup>[9]</sup>. What this means is that people are only concerned with the image of things that have been shaped by the media, and no one is concerned with the real and original things. People “are taking pictures of taking pictures” and “are part of the aura”<sup>[9]</sup>. No one wants to know what the barn is really like. Just as people are now obsessed with all sorts of videos and information on the internet, seeing these things as the ones that are more real, no one pays attention to what things are really like. “Modern media, with its vivid images and sound effects, have blurred the boundary between the real and the virtual, making the viewers more identified with the immediate pictures”<sup>[8]</sup>. People have lost the ability to perceive the real things and they live in a hyper-real world full of simulacra. In *White Noise*, although it is raining, Jack’s son, Heinrich, doesn’t believe it because the radio forecast says there is no rain. In the airborne toxic event, a man with a radio in his hand complains why there is no media coverage of such an accident. To the people living this simulacra society, without the media coverage, people will feel as if the accident didn’t happen. This is to say, people cannot sense what is happening but can only get information about what is happening from the media, and thus lose the ability to perceive the real world. In *Libra*, Oswald and his mother watched television in their basement when he was a child. Both of them were attracted by the images shown on their TV. Influenced by the television propaganda and some books he had read, Oswald aimed to mould himself as “a misplaced martyr”<sup>[11]</sup>. One of the stimuli that finally made him determined to assassinate the president was watching the films *Suddenly* and *We were strangers* on television, and his desire to emulate the characters in the films and become the focus of media coverage. Later, his shooting by Jack Ruby was televised live and he saw himself being shot on screen, but to him it was as if he was a viewer sitting in front of the TV, enjoying his own killing. One critic comments, “Since then, America has begun to truly move into a spectacular society. Oswald is no longer the original Lee Harvey Oswald, but the one created by the media, a media spawn”<sup>[12]</sup>. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric, in his in-car television, watches the assassination of Arthur Rapp, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund. The screen gives close-ups of Rapp’s pulpy face blowing outward in spasms of shock and pain as a way to attract viewers. Eric wants them to replay it. And, of course, he knows they will replay it until the sensation faded, or everyone in the world has seen it. And viewers can watch it again and again anytime they want by scan retrieval. The broadcast also features one of the more intriguing interludes for viewers: The female interviewer covering the story is being dragged down with her slit skirt running up to her thigh, and she becomes the pivotal point of observation instantly. People relish in the instant stimulation and enjoyment these media give to their senses in the spectacles shaped by the media, as Postman puts it. “The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death”<sup>[13]</sup>.

The mass media have also become an instrument of official discourse and an accomplice in the regulation of the public. In the post-Cold war era, the hegemony of the United States has penetrated all corners of the world, arousing the discontent of the Middle East and the Third World countries. However, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the mainstream media in the United States showed the crimes committed by the terrorists by repeatedly showing the images of the attacks and collapse of the Twin Towers to arouse people’s resentment. “Through carefully selected news facts, the American media not only give vent to the public mood, but also enhance the solidarity and patriotism of the United States”<sup>[14]</sup>. In this way, the U.S. justified the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and garnered the support of the American public and concealed its plot for global hegemony. In *Falling Man*, Nina, Lianne’s mother in the novel, argues with her lover Martin, whom she has dated for over 20 years, about the terrorist attacks. She believes the terrorist attacks are due to terrorists’ panic, while the current state of the Islamic world does not lie in “Western interference”, it lies in “their own history, their mentality”<sup>[15]</sup>. Apparently, manipulated by the media, she has become a representative of the official American propaganda. The mass media control people’s thoughts and actions all the time and keep them in the dark.

Third, the relationship between people and society is also expressed in the interpersonal relationships between people, and the postmodern society portrayed in DeLillo’s work is an alienated society where there is few love, trust, support and understanding. In *White Noise*, the protagonist, Jack, currently lives with his fourth wife Babette from his fifth marriage, in addition to their four children from their respective previous marriages. Mark Conroy comments that “One suspects its family tree would have many branches but no trunk”<sup>[16]</sup>. Readers will be bewildered by the complexity of the relationships between the family members. Indifference, betrayal, suspicion, and confrontation abound in this post-nuclear family. This is true of the relationship not only between the husband and the wife, but also of that between parents and children, children and their siblings. The children live with their respective father/stepmother or stepfather/stepmother. No two of them share the same parents. They are not close to each other and there is little communication between them only when they watch disasters on television,

they will come together and want to see more of those disasters. Unfortunately, the media dull people's senses and deprive them of their compassion. They only get a sense of relief and security from these images of disasters as long as those disasters happen elsewhere. Alphonse, the head of the U.S. Department of the Environment in the novel, comments "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information"<sup>[9]</sup>. In *Libra*, Oswald's tragedy actually has a lot to do with the incompleteness of his family. His mother has gone through several marriages, in the last of which she was not only betrayed by her husband but was cheated out of her house as well. There was little effective communication between the mother and the son, and the lack of warmth and love led Oswald to develop a withdrawn personality and he was incompatible with his peers at school. And in *Cosmopolis*, Eric views all his subordinates as tools to achieve his dream of a financial empire. In his eyes, his driver, his chief of security, his chief of technology, his chief of finance, and his wife are as much impersonal objects as his car and the devices inside it. According to literary ethical criticism, ethical identity is a prerequisite for moral behavior and moral norms, and different ethical identities require one to take on the responsibilities and duties assigned by the identity<sup>[2]</sup>. However, Eric is not conscious of his identity as a man, manager or husband, either at his conscious or subconscious level. He does not believe there is an intimate relationship with any other person, including his newly-married wife. Although he is married, he has two mistresses at the same time. Throughout the novel, he dates and has sex with his two mistresses in succession, completely disregarding ethics and morality as a husband.

Finally, America's postmodern society is one rife with violence and terrorism. "DeLillo's novels are deeply seamed with moments of senseless violence and deliberate acts of terrorism"<sup>[17]</sup>. The violence and terror in both *Libra* and *Falling Man* are written based on historical events that have had significant impacts on American history. *Libra* deals with the assassination of JFK on November 22, 1963, while *Falling Man* is based on the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In *Libra* we see a society of intrigue, secrecy and subterfuge, where former CIA agents and Cuban exiles use Oswald as a pawn in a plot to assassinate President Kennedy for their own benefits. DeLillo focuses on the feelings of the American public during that historical event which "brought traumatic memories that are ingrained in American memory"<sup>[18]</sup>. In *Falling Man*, instead of directly describing 9/11 attacks, DeLillo's focuses on the survivors of the disaster and others in the aftermath of the attacks to reveal the trauma that the attacks brought to American society. In *White Noise*, Jack's wife deals sexually with the project manager, Mink, in order to obtain a drug that allegedly eliminates the fear of death. To take revenge on Mink, Jack decides to shoot Mink. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric encounters a demonstration against globalization as he goes to get a haircut. Protesters throw bombs, set fire to cars in the street, build barricades with burning tires, and throw bottles at Eric's stretch limo. There is also a man who immolates himself on the sidewalk. Former employee Benno Levine, having been fired from his job, is looking for an opportunity to shoot Eric and eventually carries out the atrocity at a hotel. In this postmodern American society filled with violence and fear in the midst of Cold War mentality, global capitalism, and a hegemonic culture, the safety of people living in it, both physical and mental, is threatened.

To sum up, postmodern Americans live in a consumer society full of sign value, a media-manipulated simulacra society, an indifferent society with alienated human relationships, and a dangerous society with violence and terrorism. And we should be clear that these aspects are interconnected and influence each other. In such a social context, postmodern people are in a passive and negative position and find it difficult to maintain an interactive and harmonious ethical relationship with society.

#### 4. The Ethical Imbalance of Man and Himself

Literary ethical criticism holds that "man's relationship with himself is, at the ultimate level, a relationship of seeking sanctity"<sup>[19]</sup>. In terms of the ultimate meaning, the individual as an ethical subject should have a clear sense of himself in the ethical relationship with himself, identify himself, be pleased with himself, and strive to transcend the defects in one's thinking and behavior to develop himself and realize the value of his life. This is similar to the need for self-actualization, the highest level in the hierarchy of needs, a theory initiated by American humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943. The characters in DeLillo's fiction are caught in an ethical predicament with nature and with society and do not seem to have reached the level of self-actualization. They are trapped at the levels of the need for psychological safety and the need for love and belonging. From an ethical perspective, the ethical imbalance of DeLillo's postmodern man and himself are mainly manifested in spiritual emptiness, loss of faith, and fear of death.

In *White Noise* the imbalance between man and himself is the fear of death in the minds of the hero

and heroine, Jack and Babette. The two are haunted by death everyday. Jack is a professor at the College-on-the-Hill, famous for founding the Department of Hitler studies. One of his main purposes in studying Hitler, besides his desire to achieve fame and fortune, is to alleviate the fear of death by using Hitler. He often talks with his wife about who will die first. Jack's body is implanted with a toxin in the midst of the airborne toxic event described in the second part of the novel, which causes him to live in a state of even greater trepidation. Babette, deals sexually with the project manager, Willie Mink, in order to obtain an unapproved drug called "Dylar" which is said to be able to eliminate the fear of death. When Jack learns of that, he tries to take his revenge, but more importantly, to obtain the drug in order to alleviate his fear of death. Ironically, the project manager, Willie Mink, puts handfuls of "Dylar" into his mouth. This shows that people in this postmodern society have lost their faith and have nowhere to put their wandering souls. Jack also finds out that the nuns in the church hospital do not believe in God at all, but pretend to believe in God in order to provide people with a spiritual comfort. And although Eric in *Cosmopolis* is a billionaire with hundreds of millions of dollars, he feels mentally anxious at times and suffers from insomnia. Again, medication does not solve his problem. In *Falling Man*, the spiritual emptiness of people after 9/11 is even more evident. The terrorist attacks have deprived those who still believe in God in postmodern society of their last hope. Because they wonder "How could God let this happen? Where was God when this happened?"<sup>[15]</sup> Keith, the protagonist, is injured in the attack and his best friend is killed in the terrorist attack. Despite his efforts, he is not able to come out of the shadow of the terrorist attack and becomes addicted to poker, becoming a semi-professional poker player, trying to forget his pain and grief in poker, but in vain. In *Libra*, "Oswald was a figure on the margins of society, even though he struggled with this state of exclusion"<sup>[20]</sup>. As a member of the lower class and a marginal figure in society, Oswald has been fighting for his identity and the meaning of existence. But it turns out to be a painful experience and a tragedy in the end.

## 5. Ethical Salvation—Return to Humanity

The above analysis shows that people in postmodern American society are living in imbalanced ethical relationships with nature, society and themselves, and they can never find a way out. As a responsible writer with acute insight and conscience, DeLillo always emphasizes that writers should be outsiders of society, maintaining a kind of independent personality, but at the same time take up the responsibility of writers, expressing their own thoughts and correcting the ills of society with their works. His works aim to bring "a transformation or awakening of moral conscience through a deepening of social consciousness"<sup>[1]</sup>. Although his works generally give readers a gloomy feeling, we can still feel the power of ethical and moral salvation under this gloomy picture, that is, as an ethical subject, man should return to his humanity as a human being in order to face the imbalanced relationships in this postmodern society and apply the goodness and love in human nature to solve the ethical problems of the postmodern era.

In *White Noise*, Jack tries to put the gun in Mink's hand after shooting him to show Mink has committed suicide, but Mink pulls the trigger and shoots Jack, and it is only after Jack feels the pain of bleeding that he feels the true meaning of life. He feels "The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy"<sup>[9]</sup>. He eventually conquers his anger and sends Mink to a nearby church hospital. Also in *Cosmopolis*, Eric feels painful after being shot by his former employee Benno Levine. "The hand went hot. It was all scald and flash"<sup>[4]</sup>. It was at this time that he began to regain his humanity as a human being and that he began to really communicate with other human beings instead of viewing them as objects. In talking with Benno, "Eric didn't think he'd ever known such relief, hearing these words from a man who shared his condition. He felt a sweep of well-being"<sup>[4]</sup>. As a matter of fact, DeLillo expressed a similar theme in his *Point Omega* (2010). The novel's protagonist, Richard Elster, who served as an advisor to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and is a representative of American hegemony politics. He believes that the war on terrorism waged by the US is just, even if thousands of innocent lives lost in the wars. However, it is after his own daughter disappears that he learns the pain of losing a loved one. So in these works, DeLillo intends to show that only when one has experienced the pain in person, can one understand the pain of others. This is compassion and sympathy, shared by all men in the world, regardless of their different races, countries and religions. That is the true human nature. With these descriptions, DeLillo attempts to show that only by experiencing pains and sorrows in person can one be able to understand others' similar pains and trauma.

Different from the descriptions of Jack in *White Noise* and Eric in *Cosmopolis*, which tinged with black humor, the idea of ethical salvation in *Falling Man* is more obvious and genuine. As one critic points out, "The work reveals a literary picture of everyday life, highlighting the significance of

returning home, family and family affection, and expressing ethical concern and calm reflection on social issues in witnessing history and characterizing trauma”<sup>[21]</sup>. This is mainly reflected in the heroine, Lianne. Although her father committed suicide when she was 20 years old because he could not bear Alzheimer’s, leaving her with a kind of psychological trauma, she takes good care of her mother, Nina. She is entrusted by a psychiatrist to organize a writing group with elderly people suffering from early symptoms of Alzheimer’s. She encourages the elderly people in the writing group to write about their feelings about the terrorist attacks so as to relieve their sorrows. When her own estranged husband, Keith, arrives at her apartment after the terrorist attack, she takes him in and takes him to hospital for treatment. In the following days, she tries to resume her life together with her husband and attempts to reestablish a complete family. She tells Keith that they need each other and need to stay together to get through the hard times. Lianne sees Keith’s return to her apartment after the terrorist attack as a sign of his love and responsibility for his family. Throughout the novel, we also see many heartwarming scenes of their family: Keith picking up Lianne with his son Justin; they taking the kid on a museum tour; Keith playing baseball with his son, etc. Although Keith does not take Lianne’s advice to keep himself from indulging in poker, we can still feel that this human love and family warmth are good recipe to cope with the trauma caused by the terrorist attack.

Similarly, we can see the power of this humanity in the portrayal of the terrorist Hammad. Although Hammad ends up crashing his plane into the Twin Towers under the brainwashing of extremist ideology, DeLillo does not portray him as a demonic figure as propagated by the mainstream media, rather he is a flesh-and-blood human being with feelings and emotions, and he questions Amir’s preach. He argues “But does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world?” “What about the lives of the others he takes with him?”<sup>[15]</sup> Although Hammad commits the act of crashing the building in the end, he is a victim, too. Therefore, Callie Ingram, after analyzing *Falling Man* by applying Levinas’ ethical philosophy, concludes, “DeLillo’s counter-narrative asks that the audience reckon with their ethical accountability to all others and with the ethical dimension that all humans face, even or especially when encountering violence or bias”<sup>[22]</sup>. Levinas’ ethical philosophy posits that man is an ethical subject, a subject who is responsible for the Other. Before one becomes an individual, he has already assumed responsibilities for the Other. “I am responsible for the Other, treating the Other as a unique and respectable subject, thereby showing my own subjectivity, humanity, ethicality and ineradicability, thus exalts my subjectivity”<sup>[23]</sup>. Obviously, Levinas retrieves the ethical subjectivity of man in postmodern society in the field of ethics, while DeLillo emphasizes the return to love and care in humanity with his postmodern writing.

## 6. Conclusion

From his first book *Americana* (1971) to his latest novel *The Silence* (2020), each of DeLillo’s fiction has dealt with many themes of postmodern society. While examining the increasing commercialization of contemporary American society and the flattening of people’s spiritual world, DeLillo actively contemplates about the ways out of the predicaments. He does not resort to the revival of traditional religious beliefs, but to find solutions in humanity. Through the analysis of his four representative works, *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, we find that DeLillo writes about the kaleidoscopic social reality of contemporary America through the narrative technique of postmodernism, criticizing the imbalanced ethical relationships between man and nature, man and society, and man and himself in the postmodern American society and the ethical dilemma where people are living, and proposing the ethical salvation idea of returning to humanity to solve the ethical problems. Reading DeLillo’s fiction from this perspective will not only help us to locate the ethical predicaments faced by us, but also explore the ethical significance of his fiction and know the radiance of true human nature.

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