It could be said that in order for the individual to survive versus the family and community, it first must recognize itself as a part of both parties. This recognition of the mutual exclusivity from the world around a person is known as individualism. The concept of individualism in the United States is made up from aspects now commonly associated with Western society. Lukes (1973, p.26) notes that individualism in the United States primarily came to celebrate capitalism and liberal democracy. It became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that has at various times been implied in the philosophy of rights, the belief in free enterprise, and the American Dream. (1973, p.26)

The notion of the capitalist individual is one that presents itself as a motif in the novel, White Noise, as characters recall advertisement jingles in their heads and hear television ads in the background throughout the story. Cultural practices for survival come in these recollections as the purchasing of these goods could result in a higher state of well being for the purchaser and put them one step closer to the American dream. Jack is living his own American dream, having made a family for himself (the fact that he has had three other marriages becomes a moot point to this) and become a head of department at a college. This American dream is first seen as Jack watches the station wagons pull into the college bearing students and their parents. Jack likes to watch the “day of the station wagons” (White Noise, p.3) and note how the coloured wagons look and how they are packed, assessing the parents as they leave their children for the upcoming academic year. Right from the start Jack comes off as an elitist.

Jack’s elitism is fuelled by his status within the college. The department that he is head of is called Hitler Studies and perhaps the modelling of the course around the life of a dictator gives Jack a sense of power and authority that allows his high self-regard. An example of Jack’s elitism comes in the face of the toxic cloud and Jack’s reason for why he cannot die:

“I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fisheries are.” (p.117)

Elitism of a social nature such as this highlights how Jack thinks he is too important to die. People in lower classes are the ones who should be affected by this event and people like him should be left alone. This elitism, however, is just a cover for how Jack truly feels, which is scared. Scared of death.

Both Jack Gladney and his wife, Babette, possess an intense fear of death, which they disclose to each other later in the novel when Jack finds out about Babette’s experimenting with drugs designed to curb this fear. Babette does not tell Jack about the drugs because it involved her having an affair with the man running an experimental project in order to get the drugs. Babette’s struggle with the decision to tell Jack is called a tension point (Griff, 1960; cited in Stein, Vidich & White, 1960, p.220). Tension points may also be described as points of decision. Inter-relationships with others is a basis for what is known as social tension and is exemplified by Babette’s reluctance to tell Jack about her fear, affair and medication. It could be said that these tension points are involved in the construction or maintaining of identity in society. Jack and Babette, while attempting to maintain this identity, come to a question that is universally asked by all cognitive creatures – “What is the meaning of (my) life?”

As death comes near, an end may seem more and more unwelcome. But even if it becomes more and more acceptable, there is no doubt that its approach brings reason for further reflection on the meaning of life. (Britton, 1971, p.10)

Jack Gladney’s reflection on the meaning of his life leads him to his children, from all marriages and the thing that they make up, his family. His identity comes from the family and the community they live in and challenges its survival.

The family unit in White Noise holds a different dynamic to that of the individual and that of the community. Its survival depends on its ability to remain intact and maintain its identity against that of the two other influences. The visit by relatives to the Gladney household changed the way the family, especially Jack, looked at itself as a unit. Jack’s daughter, Bee, is the first to visit the house (Chapter 19) and her influence has Jack looking at the workings of his family and as discussed earlier, the meaning of their lives, not as individuals this time, but as a family:

Bee made us feel self-conscious at times, a punishment that visitors will unintentionally inflict upon their complacent hosts. Her presence seemed to radiate a surgical light. We began to see ourselves as a group that acted without design, avoided making decisions, took turns being stupid and emotionally unstable, left wet towels everywhere, mislaid our youngest member. Whatever we did was suddenly a thing that needed explaining. My wife was especially disconcerted. If Denise was a pint-sized commissar, nagging us to a higher conscience, then Bee was a silent witness, calling the very meaning of our lives into question. I watched Babette stare into her cupped hands, aghast. (p.94)

Family interaction is affected by Bee’s arrival. Jack sees her not as his daughter, but as an independent person, able to control her own life. He sees a part of himself in her, as one would expect of a parent concerning their offspring, but her role to that of his current family is a detached awkwardness. It is like Bee’s mind is too mature for her body. Moore (1959; cited in Stein et al, 1960, p.381) says that forces such as law, public opinion and the authority of the father is what once held the family together. However, now it is mutual affection and the comradeship of its members. Perhaps the survival of Jack and Babette’s family relies on the comprehension of the differences between their current family unit and other family members. Another example of this is Babette’s father, Vernon.

Vernon’s unexpected arrival upsets the workings of the family just as much. The dialogue between family members is different and the children’s reaction to their grandfather is different to that way they speak to their parents:

He liked to tease the kids in his deadpan way. They answered his bantering remarks reluctantly. They were suspicious of all relatives. Relatives were a sensitive issue, part of the murky and complex past, the divided lives, the memories that could be refloated by a word or a name. (p.249)

Babette also changed in the presence of her father. She became doting and almost childlike around him. This differs to her more methodical approach to the running of her own family, as it is structured to keep the family moving, progressing through the routines that makes up their day. When these other members are not there, the family seems to operate as a single unit, as a group of individuals yet a part from the rest of the community or in a way that promotes growth within the family. An example of the family’s ability to work as a single unit, is their meal in the car outside a fast food restaurant (Ch. 31). It describes how the family works together in a situation. Denise brought the food to the car, the family then sits and eats not just the meals handed to them, but each others in a way that is satisfactory to the whole family.

Pieces of the chicken are exchanged amongst the children, wings are passed to the youngest child, Wilder, as it is common knowledge that the wings are his preferred part of the chicken. This understanding through the
members. The talk between the family is changed when these visitors come from deep discussions of the world to matters that would be of most importance to keep the family working. Moore (1959: cited in Stein et al., 1960, p.391) sees that the family is now more specialised for the purpose of other functions such as the socialisation of the children and the stabilisation of adult personalities. This could be quite pertinent to the Gladney family in the novel. The adults' personality become more stable as they pass their knowledge onto the children while the exchange of ideas in the children allow for their social development. Growth within the family comes in an experience that Jack and his eldest son, Heinrich, share. The night the asylum burns down (p.239) is a bonding experience for father and son to share, along with other father and sons of the town. They take this time to affirm their masculinity by assessing the fire equipment and discussing and scrutinising the techniques used by the firemen. This transaction between father and son provides just one opportunity to allow a family to survive as a unit. The survival of the community has similar practices to keep it together.

Community survival becomes important in White Noise in the face of the threat posed by the toxic cloud. A community that shares a common belief in social order as a communal, ascribed and traditional is said to be exhibiting what is known as Collectivism (Kim, Transidi, Kagitoobasi, Choi and Yoon, 1994, p.7). Rather than being the opposite of Individualism, Collectivism is like an extension of Individualism in its beliefs and understandings. The community could be said to show Collectivism in the way that it wants the best for the community's residents. It displays this by the way it handled the first toxic event with shelters, evacuations and such, and by the number of simulations it holds in case of another event. These simulations are used to reinforce to the public that the authorities are in control of any further situations that occur. By allowing members of the public to participate in the simulations, the sense of community is achieved and thus, if another event occurs, it will survive. Another method of this sense of community is through the media.

The media, more specifically television, is used in White Noise to promote a sense of community in consumers through the sense of capitalist conformism. Characters remember jingles, hear advertisements in the background of their lives and even chant product names in their sleep all in the name of maintaining a community, even if it is an imagined one. This bombardment of slogans forms the white noise that becomes involved in the lives of the people of the novel's community. Meaning is interpreted by the characters into something that they design themselves. Slusser and Shippey (1992, p.25) believe that commercials are “often the most high-tech, energising, visually stunning, information-packed and most soulless programs on television.” For example, Jack hears his daughter, Steffie, mutter the name of a sports car in her sleep (p.155). While this could be just the recollection of a child who watches too much television, Jack feels something that could be akin to epiphany:

The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like a name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. (p155)

Jack seems to occupy a space offered by the term capitalist realism. Schutzman (1998: cited in MacDougall & Yoder, 1998, p192) states that people become “incarnations of social categories” in capitalist realism: “All troubles are absorbed and resolved within the world of the particular product and the style it guarantees” (Schutzman, 1998: cited in MacDougall & Yoder, 1998, p192). Jack has taken the words chanted by his daughter and with the style she was chanting the words in, turned it around and taken it as something else, something more spiritual than what it really was. Perhaps this was the intended reaction to the advertisement. The imagined community for the advertisers was people who remembered the name of the product and had a moving inclination to feel something about it, which in turn results in a purchase of the product. As Schutzman notes:

[Advertisements] fool people into believing they are exercising free will – making self-directed choices within the plethora of possibilities – when in fact they are complying with a culture of sameness devoted to the obliteration of diversity and criticality. (1998 cited in MacDougall & Yoder 1998 n 193)

The cultural practice of survival in the novel would then be oriented around capitalism. This would no doubt maintain the survival of the new capitalist community. The community in the novel would be capitalist based on the purchasing of survival items in case of further toxic events. In a way, the two communities would integrate: the community is survival capitalist based but retains portions of the old community, before the toxic event.

While individual, family and community are mutually exclusive, the integration of some, if not all, of these levels provide an opportunity for survival that may not exist if the factors were independent of each other. Self-reflection for the individual allows him/her to see what makes them be themselves and, perhaps like in Jack’s case, see what is important to them. Family was important to Jack and the way he connected with them shows this. The Gladney’s independence from the rest of the community allowed them to grow and learn about each other and the world around them, thus surviving. The toxic event brought them back to the community and shows that while they are individuals, they, like everyone else, fears death. Fear of death is natural, it just depends on how one handles it.

REFERENCES


