John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*  
and  
Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*:  
A Comparative Analysis  

John U. Olson  

Advisor: Associate Professor Erik Kielland-Lund  
A Thesis Presented to  
the Institute for Literature, Area Studies, and European Languages  
Department of Humanities  
University of Oslo  
Fall Term 2011
Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my wife Elin for her unconditional support. I would also like to thank my mother for teaching me the “home keys,” and my father for helping me see the humor in things. Lastly I thank my advisor Erik Kielland-Lund for his support in getting me across the finish line.
Contents

Introduction.................................................................4

Chapter 1: *Rabbit, Run*...............................................16

Chapter 2: *White Noise*...........................................39

Chapter 3: A Comparison.............................................63

Conclusion.................................................................79

Bibliography..............................................................84
Introduction

This thesis will look at John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* as commentaries on American society in the context of the time period each was written. I will point out that, outwardly, there have been many changes in American culture between the writing of the two works (published in 1960 and 1984 respectively), giving the reader two different vantage points for a discussion of America. The two authors make us aware of these differences in the way they describe mundane American life, which of course had changed over the twenty-four years that separate them. On closer inspection, however, these two works have at least as many similarities as differences. I will point out that, despite the large gap in time, the two novels share a wealth of themes. This suggests that perhaps not so much has changed in America after all.

There are innumerable works of fiction which are concerned with America. I picked these two novels for several reasons, one important reason being the way the authors have succeeded in portraying ordinary American life, albeit in different ways. The appeal of *Rabbit, Run* owes a great deal to its true-to-life portrait of an American man and his family. On the other hand, *White Noise* is more satirical, and engages the reader in a playful way in spite of its serious themes. Thus, on the surface the two works appear very different, and I hope to demonstrate the nature of some of these differences. However, I will also show that the works share
common themes, not least an outlook which is very much rooted in America, particularly the mundane aspects of daily American life. In an interview, DeLillo stated: “In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred” (DeCurtis 63). Both DeLillo and Updike were able, in their respective novels, to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Although many of the themes in *Rabbit, Run* also have a universal relevance, this story has obvious roots in the USA. Harry Angstrom is portrayed as a type of average American. While at first glance he may appear childish, pathetic, and not worthy of our attention, the situation he puts himself in raises questions that keep us interested. He is, despite his actions, not all bad, and he has a certain charm that allows us to identify with some aspects of his character. Updike manages to convey Rabbit’s feelings of being trapped in a cage, much like his nickname would suggest. He has nowhere to turn, and when he has a chance to escape his captivity, he runs. The America of *Rabbit, Run* is a stark alternative to the “American Dream” narrative, which presents America as a place where success is always right around the corner and failure is conveniently left out in favor of a happy ending. In Updike’s version, a more realistic one, happiness and fulfillment are harder to find.

The 1950’s in America are usually seen as relatively placid, at least on the surface. This is particularly true considering that it was bookended by the purpose-driven wartime forties and the social and political upheavals of the following decade. Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican president for the majority of the fifties, represented the conservative values which were predominant at the time. One can imagine that the culture in this time period felt suffocating to many people. There was a very rigid definition of what it meant to be a man (the same can, of course, be said for a woman). The man was supposed to get a respectable job, drive a decent car, and otherwise provide for his family. The woman was meant to cook, clean, take care of the children and otherwise not make many demands. Neither Rabbit nor his wife Janice seemed to be succeeding at this model of what it meant to be a good American citizen at this time.
The culture of America in general, and the 1950’s in particular, is an important reason for the story’s resonance. Brewer, Pennsylvania is a fictitious town which could be Anywhere, U.S.A. Harry is struggling to cope with an average life after his extraordinary success (and corresponding self-esteem) on the basketball court in high school. After all, nowhere is a sports hero, whether professional or high school, more idolized than in the United States. After these glory days, Harry has lost his direction in life. He seems to feel resentment rather than love for his pregnant wife, and his young son does not seem to provide any more satisfactory fulfillment either.

It is clear that Rabbit is either unwilling or unable to toe the line of what is expected of a family man of the time. Judging by his actions, we see that he has difficulty fitting into the mold which has been cast by society, and thus resists it through various affronts directed mostly at his family. Among his transgressions are verbal abuse, physical abandonment, and general neglect of his pregnant wife. In short, Harry is rebelling against the accepted norms of society in the 1950’s in America. Viewed in light of these norms, Rabbit spends a large part of the novel outside the accepted boundaries of where he should be (with his family). There is a constant push and pull between Rabbit’s need for individuality and the conformity which society requires.

This is not ideal behavior for a man at any time period, but it was perhaps more shocking behavior in the context of the conservative fifties than it is today. Updike is reminding us that the image projected by society does not always match the reality of what is happening behind closed doors. A perception of the 1950’s which has persisted over time includes a happy family with a white picket fence around a suburban home. This is simply not a realistic portrayal of most Americans of the period. Updike examines even the most intimate details of Rabbit’s predicament. If Updike were to use the commonly accepted codes of behavior of the fifties, then sex, adultery, and such uncomfortable issues would not be included at all.
Through Rabbit’s predicament Updike rhetorically asks the reader: What is more important, individual concerns or the ‘greater good’ of society? The two do not always coincide, and the answer is not always clear. Should we concern ourselves with what society considers to be the right thing to do, or should we rely on our own standards? Is it better to conform and give in to ‘normalcy,’ or to strike out on your own and try to be the unique individual you feel you really should be?

These are large issues, which are thinly veiled by Rabbit’s boorish behavior, and Updike does not attempt to provide us with any final answers. What he does is make us aware of the dilemmas. Again, not everything is as it seems, and this credo may have been particularly relevant in fifties America. Rabbit appears alternatively as a buffoon and a charmer. In Updike’s novel the essential ingredient is ambiguity. We are not meant to decide once and for all whether to condemn Rabbit for abandoning his family or admire him for standing up for himself. Nor are Tothero and Ruth model citizens either and yet, despite their faults, they are sympathetic as well. On the other hand, an otherwise upstanding member of society such as Mrs. Springer is not seen in such a kind light. While on the surface there is nothing wrong with her in terms of conventional values, she seems petty and vindictive towards her son-in-law Harry.

Updike manages to capture the mood of the times in America with remarkable precision. He created a realistic portrait of a certain middle-class American life, which apparently struck a chord with many people, if the popularity of the book is any indication. Perhaps many people in the 1950’s felt equally as trapped as Rabbit did? It is impossible to know, but Lawrence Broer goes so far as to say that “historians will consult these books as barometers of post-World War II American life” (4). Updike declared that his “fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books, just as there is more breathing history in archeology than in a list of declared wars and changes of governments.” (Picked-Up Pieces 501) Updike was able to combine realism and art in an appealing way.
The fact that Updike writes in a realist tradition enhances the New Historicism aspect of the work as well. This theory entails that a book is not only representative of the body of work from that time period, but contributes, after the fact, to the essence of the period as well. Updike himself said that Rabbit, Run “wasn’t really in a conscious way about the 50’s. It just was a product of the 50’s” (“Why Rabbit Had to Go”). In this criticism of American culture at the time, Updike is carving out a space in history for those who resisted the conservative, narrow mindset of the period. Although it may not have been Updike’s primary intent for his prose to be “historical,” his realistic portrayal makes it so.

The ordinariness of the characters in this story may trick the reader into thinking that the problems dealt with are inconsequential. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Rabbit is a seemingly ordinary person who happens to be dealing with extraordinary hurdles. It does not require an out-of-the-ordinary character to have an ethical, moral, or existential dilemma. “Regular” people can have these too, and as the constant moral push and pull in the story shows, the issues have universal relevance which help to give the book its appeal. It is a testament to Updike’s extraordinary creative abilities that he was able to create such a balance between the mundane and the existential.

Updike seems to be asking us, ‘Is Rabbit unique? Does he deserve more than the rest of us? Are these dilemmas that everyone faces in their lives?’ If we are to believe the often self-assured Rabbit, he is unique. Perhaps we all think we are unique. By putting Rabbit in compromising situations surrounded by shady personalities (Tothero the lecherous basketball coach, Ruth the prostitute), Updike is suggesting that perhaps this is where he fits in. Rabbit at times seems to identify with this seamier side of society. As we can see, Tothero and Ruth are not having such an easy time of it. For a time he thinks it is a great life to be on the outside looking in. However, an abandoned wife about to give birth is too much of a weight for Rabbit, and he feels it tug him towards home. This is indeed no surprise. However, this reunion does not last long and soon Rabbit is running again, refusing to give in to the pressure to conform.
Updike has stated that with this work he intended to show “the shadow of moral ambiguity.” (Trachtenberg 10) He is very adept at creating this ambiguity in his protagonist. It is meant to reflect the ambiguity of the times. Simply because there was a strict pattern which most people adhered to does not mean that it was the only way to live. This raises existential questions: If Rabbit is not normal, what is normal? What is right, what is wrong? Is Harry a hero or a villain? While Updike has no ultimate answers to these questions, he is pointing out that they deserve to be raised nonetheless. What Updike is reminding us is that there should be room for nuances in literature. He has not tried to provide us with any final answers. He wishes to show the contradictions inherent in Rabbit’s life (and, by extension, all of our lives).

Thus, those who would simply dismiss Rabbit’s actions as irresponsible are not seeing the larger picture. Rabbit is simply trying to regain some control over his life. Although he is often portrayed in the story as at best a simpleton and at worst a terrible husband and father, he is dealing with difficult, existential issues that many people have struggled with throughout history and will continue to struggle with in the future. Rabbit goes to greater lengths than many would consider “appropriate” to achieve his feeling of freedom and independence. However, if we deny that the feelings which drive him to these actions are real and universally relevant, then we are fooling ourselves.

It is obvious that this novel treats both the small, mundane aspects of everyday life (what music Rabbit heard in his car, what clothes and personal effects he took from his home when he left) as well as the big questions which are impossible to answer in any final way. Updike reminds us that we don’t need glamorous characters to introduce these issues to us, that they are just as relevant to Rabbit as anyone else. He may be ordinary on the surface, but this does not mean that he is incapable of feeling and struggling with these existential dilemmas.

*White Noise* is also an example of a book that is very rooted in America. Everything from the Gladneys’ obsession with the media to their shopping spree at the mall are representative of American life. The depictions of technology, with
various references to screens and interfaces, are also examples of commentary on American life. The television in particular is criticized as a postmodern box with little value besides the hum of white noise it creates as a distraction. There is no mistaking that America is under the microscope in this work. *White Noise* carries with it a great deal of criticism of America just as *Rabbit, Run* does.

As already mentioned, one of the similarities I see between *White Noise* and *Rabbit, Run* is the mundane American existence portrayed, despite the different methods and visions of the two authors. In Updike’s work, the reader gets a realistic look at Rabbit’s existence. On the other hand, much of *White Noise*, including the small, everyday aspects, is suffused with satire. One could argue that the mundane could be left out altogether in great works of fiction. The very definition implies trivial. However, I believe that it is precisely these small details which make the narrative approachable and appealing. While the reader may not strictly need to know what Rabbit buys at the store or what Jack and his family eat for lunch, these details make the characters more real for the reader.

*White Noise* was written some 25 years after *Rabbit, Run*, and there are many differences which highlight this fact. There is a saying, however, that the more things change, the more they stay the same. On the surface, the America of the 80’s was very different from that of the 50’s. However, these were often superficial changes, hiding the fact that many of the underlying problems Rabbit had with American society in the 1950’s were still present, under the surface, in the 1980’s. This is the time of the Reagan presidency, a booming economy leading to globalization, and, not least, MTV. To see these underlying issues, one needs to look under the surface of society, and this is what DeLillo is attempting to do in *White Noise*.

Some of the issues that DeLillo raises get quite a similar treatment in *Rabbit, Run*, while others are harder to compare. An example of the former is the lack of depth behind the façade of television culture. This is seen in the random outbursts heard from the television, which always appears to be on in the background in the Gladney household. The statements coming from the TV are shared with the
reader for effect. Also, the family is awed when watching natural disasters unfold in other parts of the world.

Through a close reading of the two novels we can see a similarity in the way individuals attempt to relate to their community. This often results in alienation of the individual. The characters in the two novels, particularly the male protagonists, are examples of an American paradox. They are very much individuals, yet at the same time they are expected to adhere to the norms of their community, something which can be constrictive and inhibiting. This is particularly evident in Rabbit’s character, but also in Jack’s. America is often associated with independence, liberty, and freedom. Why do the individuals we meet in the two novels, born and raised in the USA, have such a hard time attaining these ideals? There is something about the American culture which, despite being the self-declared “land of the free”, is restrictive and inhibiting. This is a central idea in both novels.

The struggle between conformity and individualism is one of the most significant themes in White Noise and gives it a strong kinship with Rabbit, Run. The satire in White Noise is a kind of mocking of the absurdity of American life in the 1980’s. In its attempt at capturing the mood of daily American life it exhibits themes and techniques that may seem typical of postmodernist literature. Included in this picture are copious references to American commercials and commercialization.

An interesting question when looking at the theme of the individual vs. society in the two novels is to what extent America has changed between the writing of Rabbit, Run and White Noise. A pessimistic view leads to the conclusion that few truly important things have changed; in 1984 there is still little room for individuality in the face of a widely shared view among Americans that conformity is the safe option and rebellion is frowned upon. The differences between 1984 and 1960 are simply superficial. The outward indications in the eighties would point to a society which is less strict and more open than in the fifties. However, it appears that it is easier for Rabbit to escape the pattern of society in Updike’s
fifties than it is for Jack and his family in DeLillo’s eighties. The Gladneys have little hope of escaping the secret codes, messages, and patterns that hover in the air around them at all times.

The idea of this society as a sum of “packages” is integral to the Postmodern point of view adopted in White Noise. This is apparent from the very beginning of the book, when the parade of station wagons arrives on campus. These are a form of packaging, and to prove this they are unwrapped before our very eyes. This event resembles an assembly line and is carried out in the same fashion every year. What is really happening is that the students (Jack objectifies them as the vehicles in which they travel) are arriving for the fall term. This is, to be fair, a collection of various individuals who are arriving on campus to begin their studies. However, Jack, despite his position as an educator (who ideally should see them as a group of individuals), puts them all in the same “box,” classifying them as just another crop of students arriving in their parents’ cars together with their myriad possessions.

This idea of the box and the package is a hallmark of Postmodernism. It is no surprise that this is a theme at this time period, when so much time and attention is being paid to another box, the television set. Television, whether or not we like to admit it, has been a dominant cultural force (particularly in America) since its invention. Today is no exception. We spend much of our time in front of the screen, the only difference being that we have a much wider variety of screens and content to choose from. However, the narcissism of appearing on a screen (seeing one’s own Facebook profile online as compared with Babette’s image appearing on the television screen) is still exactly the same. Somehow, humans are exalted when we put ourselves on the screen. We become two-dimensional, thus losing the complexity which is inherent in “real” life. In White Noise DeLillo shows that he is attuned to the direction American society is headed and is aware, at quite an early date, of the challenges the Information Age has in store for us.

Television is a hugely important and complicating factor in the world of White Noise. TV is an example of an increasingly influential aspect of life in the 1980’s which, by comparison, was only a seedling in Rabbit’s world in the 50’s.
Aspects of the media which we take for granted today were just taking root in the eighties. These include CNN and MTV, both of which have had a huge impact on both American and international media. We can see in *White Noise* the role the media take in modern life. One need not look further than the “airborne toxic event” (merely one of the names given to it by the press) to see the effect the media have on the Gladney clan. There is an obsession with the media here which is not merely a coincidence in mid-80’s America.

Similarly, *White Noise* can be seen as a criticism of the incessant commercialization of society. Society, as a whole and in its own right, is also a package. Whether in the fifties or in the eighties, what is happening around us is undeniably an important factor in the decisions we make and the way we live our lives. To fit in is important, especially in a small city like Brewer, or a small town like Blacksmith, where life is much more transparent than in the bustle of a big city. The package is all-inclusive, take-it-or-leave-it. Yes, the individual can make certain choices offered by society, but only to a certain extent. Making choices which steer one away from one’s peers in society is done at the risk of being labelled an outsider. The package, in the end, squeezes out any potential individualism. It is thus highly ironic that it should be so difficult to be a unique individual in the land of freedom and opportunity.

Inside the package of society we can find smaller, bite-size packages which combine to create the whole. These are also given their due in *White Noise*, and vary from the more obscure to the very obvious. An example of the latter is the supermarket and the mall, institutions in America which receive a lot of attention in DeLillo’s work. The supermarket and the shopping mall are, for good or ill, the suppliers of American homes. They are hubs of capitalism and commercialism, where anything and everything is available at your fingertips. The packaging, marketing, and presentation of both everyday items and exotic fruits and vegetables wows the consumer. Perhaps not everyone is fooled, however. Murray, for example, buys the generic foods in white, nondescript packaging.
Perhaps Jack Gladney has couched his unorthodoxy in his profession as head of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. This is undeniably a unique line of study, and complete with the title comes his outfit of dark glasses and gown, which apparently create a certain aura while he is in his role on campus. However, this confident aura, in which he presents himself as an authority on his subject, is somewhat undermined by the fact that he cannot speak German. This is an example of a façade he has constructed in order to maintain his academic integrity. A second crack in his confident façade is his fear of death, which plagues him (and Babette) throughout the novel. This fear is also a major theme throughout the story.

What is the white noise that DeLillo refers to? Quite simply, it is the fluff, or filling, of modern existence which fills in the gaps between what is meaningful. Updike, for his part, summarized the eighties in this way: “It was quite easy to have a blank mind about the 80’s; there was a distinct fuzziness about it” (“Why Rabbit Had to Go”). The eighties in America saw a robust economy which translated into material wealth for many Americans. The decade is therefore often characterized as a “shallow” decade, and DeLillo appears to agree. It is particularly easy to say this from today’s perspective, in which the problems of the 1980’s seem trivial.

This thesis will look at the decidedly American aspects of Rabbit, Run and White Noise and show how these relate to the very foundation of the story. There would be no running Rabbit if there were no American expectations to run away from. Similarly, CNN and the radiance of the supermarket seem to be weighing on Jack and Babette. The struggle of the individual in the face of American conformity is central to both stories and will be explored. Central to a discussion of conformity is a look at what provides the framework for society's standards. Which values are most important, our own or those ordained by society? Religion is often used as a moral guide, and organized religion is addressed in Rabbit, Run while White Noise refers satirically to the spiritual aspects of television and the supermarket. These are the themes that will be focused on, while I will also touch on a number of other themes which are present in both novels. Meanwhile, I
believe that the most important common theme between the two works is the loss of individuality in America in favor of mass-produced conformity. These characteristics will first be explored in *Rabbit, Run*. This will be followed by a similar discussion of *White Noise*, and, finally, I will compare and contrast the two novels.
CHAPTER 1

The attention to detail with which John Updike has created *Rabbit, Run* demonstrates his preoccupation with quotidian American life. The protagonist Harry Angstrom is meant to be a type of American “everyman.” Through a reading of *Rabbit, Run* as well as from statements Updike himself has made we can see an obvious interest in middle America. In addition, he is pre-occupied with the idea of ambiguity (and ambivalence), that much of life is multi-faceted and can be subject to various interpretations. In Updike’s words: “My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is” (*Updike’s Novels* 50).

Much of Rabbit’s persona and demeanor stem from his surroundings. The essence of his dilemma, however, is existential and universal. It seems obvious now (possibly with the benefit of hindsight), that the American home provides abundant material for a writer. Why do you necessarily have to look any further than the home when it contains all the drama you could wish for? It is perhaps typical of the conservative time of the book’s publication that it was criticized for not taking on larger issues. It is ironic from today’s perspective that the problems Rabbit faced (existential crisis, breakdown of the family, alcohol problems, etc.)
were not considered important enough in the American fifties. Problems like these were meant to stay behind closed doors. Conformity was more important than individualism. Sanford Pinsker offers this summary of fifties America:

> During the 1950’s a revival of what can only be called ‘Victorian respectability’ made domesticity seem not only attractive, but downright desirable. Thus, the decade was marked by plummeting divorce rates and a significant rise in births, by a sense that organization men were in the boardroom, women were in appliance-filled kitchens, and Eisenhower (if not God himself) was in Washington, smiling benignly at it all. Social historians can add a welter of detail to this general outline, but they cannot tell us what it felt like to be formed by the fifties, a decade in which young men equated marriage with the respectability, the manhood, they so desperately sought, and who imagined pregnancy was the dream only to discover that children were the nightmare. (58)

We can see this attitude represented in Reverend Eccles, for example, who would love to simply usher Rabbit back home again and sweep the rest of the problems under the rug. What we have learned since this time, however, is that it is counterproductive to bury these issues. Updike did American society a service by pointing out that behind the white picket fence, there may be trouble lurking.

Rabbit (I will use Harry and Rabbit interchangeably) is convinced that life has something better in store for him, yet he is too immature and inarticulate to determine what it is or how to get hold of it. As an athlete, he was able to separate himself from the masses. Now that his golden days are over, he has lost his ability to feel special. No matter how hard he tries, Rabbit cannot break free from his fate as an average citizen, and this is at the heart of his frustration. We all want to be unique. While the vast majority of us do not get recognition for it, we are all unique. "Middleness" appropriately describes Rabbit and his situation. There is little except his basketball prowess which sets him apart. However, these achievements, much like his youth, are fading in the distance. Middleness is Updike’s way of presenting issues which pertain to the majority of Americans.

This quote from the novel is an example of Updike’s characterization of Rabbit’s environment as part of the “middle” of America:

> They approach the mountain through the city park. The trash baskets and movable metal benches have not been set out yet. On the concrete-and-plank benches fluffy old men sun like greater pigeons, dressed in patches of gray multiple as feathers. The trees in small leaf dust the half-bare ground with shadow. Sticks and strings protect the newly seeded
margins of the unraked gravel walks….A derelict stretches an arm along the back of a bench to dry, and out of a gouged face daintily sneezes like a cat. A few toughs, fourteen or younger, smoke and jab near the locked equipment shed of a play pavilion on whose yellow boards someone has painted in red TEX & JOSIE, RITA & JAY. Where would they get the red paint? (111)

To be in the ‘middle’ is to lack glamor and excitement. It is a credit to Updike that he has made the middle so palatable, presumably not only within, but outside this sphere as well. Philip Stevick has this comment on middle America:

What virtues the American small town displays are sustained in the face of repression, coarseness, bigotry, and ignorance. It is hard to think of another writer of the American twentieth century who responds to a recollection of small town origins with such lovingly detailed acceptance as Updike. (37)

Harry has an unease in him that is akin to a jumpy rabbit in a cage. Something has made him this way: it is the society in which he lives, it is America itself. If we take a look at the pieces of Rabbit’s life, we can easily see that he is a product of 1950’s America, a nation obsessed with Madison Avenue advertising, consumerism and productivity and without much room for free thinking. It is important to remember that Rabbit is only twenty-six years old. He has the problems of an adult without the maturity to deal with them. We can liken Updike’s account of Rabbit to a Bildungsroman in which we are witness to Rabbit’s growing pains. Admittedly, by the end of the book Rabbit is still running; it is thus debatable whether he has matured at all. He still wistfully recalls his glory days as a basketball star and can barely admit to himself that they are over. Suddenly, he is a mid-twenties father with a dead-end job and, from the looks of it, a dead-end marriage as well. These changes are apparently “crowding” (3) in on him.

It is worth noting as well that the road, and the automobile, are powerful and ubiquitous symbols of American freedom and ingenuity. They are often used to symbolize freedom, if not escape. One can supposedly find release on the endless stretch of highway leading in all directions. There is probably no country that is more obsessed with the automobile than the United States. Particularly vehicles from the 1950’s are recognizable and emblematic of their time period. As with almost any other possession, which car one drives carries with it a certain status as well, and in this way says something about Harry’s position in society:
He crosses around in front of the car, the ‘55 Ford that old man Springer with his little sandy Hitler mustache sold him for an even thousand in 1957 because the scared bastard was ashamed, cars being his business he was ashamed of his daughter marrying somebody who had nothing but a ‘36 Buick he bought for 125 dollars in the army in Texas in 1953....He pumps once, and glances aside to see the Springers’ living-room light flash on, and lets the clutch out, and the Ford bucks away from the curb. (23)

What is ironic is that the road does not end up representing freedom for Harry.

When Rabbit leaves his family at the beginning of the story, what better place to turn than the highway? This sequence is America in a nutshell. The American highway has always been a subject of fascination. It is as if Rabbit were drawn to it: “...the highway sucks him on” (25). Dilvo Ristoff has examined Updike’s use of American history and culture in Rabbit, Run. He states that “[w]ithout America Rabbit is inconceivable.” (xv). Similarly, middle America is inconceivable without the highway which connects point A to point B. Rabbit has a point A, but as he drives the car down the highway it becomes apparent that he has no specific destination, only a vague dream of the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. However, in America the road is a type of destination in itself, and we are treated to a wealth of Americana in this short sequence, from the gas station to the diner. Erik Kielland-Lund notes that “Harry's spontaneous flight from his world of frustration and boredom represents one of the most typically American sequences of the novel...The names of cities and towns, the highway numbers, the simple everyday actions of filling up with gas and eating a hamburger at the roadside diner, the new sounds and smells of another region, all add up to a satisfying density of texture that makes this sequence unmistakably American” (83).

Updike tempts the reader to believe in Rabbit’s plan for the road ahead of him as a logical escape. This could be a feasible solution in a Hollywood production, for example: Rabbit simply needs to escape in order for everything to turn out all right. Updike’s use of the car and the road in the book is a nod to an undeniably central aspect of American culture. However, instead of being a tribute, these references function more like a ruse. As stated, the road is no comfort to Rabbit. Instead of the road offering the much-hyped freedom and solitude as in the movies, his troubles are too complicated and ruin any hope of a
simple escape plan. All it offers him is a momentary distraction, and as time wears on, his mind returns to his problems. He realizes that his flight is no solution and retreats. As Donald Greiner notes (in comparing Harry to other American narrative “heroes”): “Leatherstocking can keep walking west, and Huck can take off down the river, but the highways of Harry’s American culture trap him.” (No Place to Run 13) His problems, many of which are rooted in the constraints of ordinary American life, will follow him wherever he goes, which makes his attempted escape a failure. If anything, the road trip shows Rabbit’s immature problem-solving techniques.

The automobile is not alone as a symbol of typical American culture in Rabbit, Run. Joining Updike’s treatment of the car in the novel, among other things, are such mundane aspects of American life as the grocery store, the television set, the golf course and, not least, the basketball court. Basketball, for Rabbit, is the source of his former glory, and he tries to hold on to this for all it is worth. At the very beginning of the book we meet him as he is watching some boys playing in an alley. He is drawn to the game like a magnet and convinces them to let him join in. This scene of boys scrambling after a ball in an alley is also very iconic of America. This was a clever method for Updike to begin the novel because, from the very first page of the book, we cheer for Harry. Although he may betray our confidence during the course of the novel, he always manages to charm us again. Talented athletes are worshiped, especially in the U.S. One of the boys Rabbit is playing with seems to be a natural: “Rabbit knows the way. You climb up through the little grades and then get to the top and everybody cheers; with the sweat in your eyebrows you can’t see very well and the noise swirls around you and lifts you up, and then you’re out, not forgotten at first, just out, and it feels good and cool and free.” (5) Rabbit’s success on the court as a boy was euphoric. Unfortunately these times are long gone.

Television is a quintessential American institution as well. One of the sources of Rabbit’s frustration with his married life is the fact that Janice is addicted to it, perhaps making her even more “dumb” with each episode she watches. In what seems to be a typical situation, Harry comes home to find Janice
in front of the television set, with a drink, in the middle of the messy house. When
the Mouseketeers come on, Rabbit also becomes absorbed. They both are quiet as
they absorb some words of wisdom over the television waves:

‘Know Thyself, a wise old Greek once said. Know Thyself. Now what does this mean, boys
and girls? It means, be what you are. Don’t try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be
yourself. God doesn’t want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to
each one of us a special talent.’ (9)

‘Be yourself.’ Perhaps Rabbit had this in mind when he made his sudden decision
to jump into his car and not look back. It is ironic, however, if Rabbit took this
important step in his life based on advice from the Mouseketeers. It is also
important to note that, if we take the advice literally to mean that God did give us
all a single special talent, Rabbit’s talent was used up when he stopped playing
basketball. Perhaps most importantly here, however, is the idea that the television
in the ‘50’s has taken pride of place in the living room. Since its invention,
television has been a focal point in the American household. A discussion of
middle America in the fifties would not be complete without a reference to it.
The TV is not only used for entertainment, but is also a cultural tool which
disseminates information. We see a combination of the two in the example of the
children’s program above. The Mouseketeers are primarily for entertainment, yet
they attempt to squeeze in some morality as well. It is ridiculous to think that the
Mouseketeers can effectively summarize Greek philosophy at the end of their song
and dance routine: “‘Proverbs, proverbs, they’re so true,’ Jimmie sings, strumming
his Mouseguitar, ‘proverbs tell us what to do; proverbs help us all to bee-better-
Mouse-ke-teers.’” (9) Rabbit, probably no different than many other Americans at
the time, sits attentively, taking it all in. Although he has dutifully paid attention,
presumably to learn some sales tricks, he is soon to turn his back on all of it; his
job, the values of society, and the worthlessness of the television, which he later
implicates as a cause of his leaving.

Although it is not stated outright, the television is given some responsibility
for Janice’s inertia, as she prioritizes this activity instead of cleaning the house:
He goes to the closet and takes out the coat he hung up so neatly. It seems to him he’s the only person around here who cares about neatness. The clutter behind him in the room—the Old-fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the choked ashtray balanced on the easy-chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of slippery newspapers, the kid’s toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bent cardboard that went with some breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators, the continual crisscrossing mess clings to his back like a tightening net. (14)

Rabbit’s attempts at keeping his house clean is symbolic of his desperation regarding his cluttered life. He longs for order, the kind of order he had when he was a child under the care of his parents, and an adored hero on the basketball court.

Harry Angstrom is caught between society’s markers of success (money, happy family, respectable job) and his own individual measures. Whereas some may characterize his dissatisfaction as selfish, I believe his unhappiness is based more on broad existential concerns which, to a greater or lesser degree are present within all of us. The time period in which the book was written provides the backdrop for these conflicting impulses. The 1950’s in America was a time characterized by conservative, conformist family life. The moderate, conservative Eisenhower presidency was perhaps emblematic of the staid American culture of the time, perhaps stifling to some. The gender roles were extremely confining and rigid; it was clear what was expected of a person and conformity was valued over individuality.

Rabbit is fed up with his mediocre existence, so he decides not to play by the rules any longer. He leaves his wife and takes up with Ruth, shortly afterwards making her pregnant. When he leaves Janice a second time, he indirectly causes the drowning of their baby daughter. With these circumstances in mind, it may be hard to accept the word good as a descriptive adjective for Rabbit. Updike has created, in his character Rabbit, an ambivalent individual who lacks drive and direction. It may be both easy and obvious to criticize him. However, the reader ends up with an ambivalent feeling towards Rabbit as well. Updike concerns himself more with the dialectic than with providing answers to questions like whether Rabbit is good or bad. Should we blame society for Rabbit’s inability to adapt? Should Rabbit do what is in his heart, or what is considered “good” by
society? We are left to answer these questions ourselves, to the best of our abilities. Donald Greiner notes: “Updike denies the possibility of satire and refuses to take sides for or against Rabbit.” Greiner goes on to quote Updike: “There is a certain necessary ambiguity. I don’t wish my fiction to be any clearer than life” (Updike’s Novels 48). On the issue of whether Rabbit is intended as a good person, Greiner continues: "Updike himself asks the key question in a preface to the 1977 edition: ‘Rabbit is the hero of this novel, but is he a good man? The question is meant to lead to another: What is goodness?’” (Updike’s Novels 49) By this statement I believe Updike is suggesting that the idea of goodness is by nature a subjective one, decided by a society which values conformity over individualism.

Greiner continues: “Updike refuses to answer his question directly, but he implies that goodness is a large part of Rabbit’s make-up when he calls him ‘fertile and fearful and not easy to catch...wild and timid, harmful and loving, hardhearted and open to the motions of Grace’” (Updike’s Novels 49). Despite Rabbit’s ability to disgust us with his actions, Updike is impressive in the way he counters Rabbit’s sometimes heartless ways with a description of a man who is earnestly searching for something better. From the moment we meet him he exudes a charm which makes us cheer for him despite the horrible things through which he puts his family. Updike does not provide us with any final answers. Instead, he provokes questions which cause the reader to think.

Ambivalence is everywhere in Rabbit, Run. There are no easy answers, no clear-cut heroes or villains. Quite to the contrary, Updike makes a point of creating a dialectic in which we ourselves must participate. This has been referred to as his ‘yes, but’ method. In Updike’s words: “Yes in Rabbit, Run to our inner urgent whispers, but- the social fabric collapses murderously” (Updike’s Novels 50). What is more important, that Rabbit be true to what is inside of him, regardless of the cost, or that he gives in to society’s prevailing idea of the “greater good?” He continues: “There is no reconciliation between the inner, intimate appetites and the external consolations of life...there is no way to reconcile these individual wants to the very real need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members” (Updike’s Novels 50). Rabbit evidently wishes to try to cast off dead weight (Janice) and go on his search alone. His time on his own, on the run in his
car, however, does not last very long. Soon he would be in the arms of another woman, and outwardly he does not seem to have any sustained direction in his life.

Rabbit’s whole persona was problematic considering the conservative times of the 1950’s. The book caused a stir among many critics when it was first published. The fact that Rabbit leaves his son and pregnant wife to take up with a prostitute was certainly enough to elicit negative reactions in the American fifties. In addition, Rabbit can be characterized as childish, indifferent, shameless, and immature. One of the most provocative aspects of the book, particularly at this conservative time, was its frank depiction of sex which contributed to a perception of the book among many people as shocking and lurid. Updike must have known that this would cause a stir. Yet it was about time that sex was given the same kind of scrutiny as other basic aspects of humanity. In response to a question about the use of sex in the book, Updike had this to say: “I think I might have known that I was putting my respectability at some risk. On the other hand, I was fresh from college and emboldened by the example of Ulysses, and I knew that this was the right thing to do- to write about sex on the same level, as explicitly and carefully and lovingly as one wrote about anything else” (Bragg 223). Whereas the sexuality may have stood out for sensitive readers at the time, it in fact makes up a relatively small part of the novel.

By attributing to Rabbit the lofty goal of finding a viable purpose in life, some may say I have given him too much credit. Lucy Eccles would certainly agree with that judgment, as she does not seem to see any value in Rabbit’s search. When the baby drowns, she blames Rabbit and suggests that Janice had been better off without him: "Well, he as good as [killed the baby]. Runs off and sends his idiot wife on a bender. You never should have brought them back together. The girl had adjusted and something like this never would have happened” (267). However, there are times, albeit less often, when we see Rabbit in a more tender light as well. For example, when Rabbit receives word that Janice is giving birth, he dutifully comes to her side. When he arrives outside the hospital, he says a little prayer: "Make it be all right" (194). The way he acts when no one is watching is often much more mature than the statements he makes otherwise. Rabbit is
utterly humbled by the birth of his second child, not least because of his own guilty conscience. When Mrs. Springer chastises him in the waiting room, he feels a sense of relief. He notes that it is the first thing anyone has said to him which fits the “enormity of the event” (200). Rabbit has recognized that he has acted badly. On this occasion of the birth of his child he feels he deserves to feel remorse and wants to face the full force of his actions. Over the past months that he has been away from his family, he has for the most part escaped any kind of recrimination. When Rabbit receives word from the doctor that both mother and child are well, he seems genuinely happy. In the face of the “enormity” of this event, the reader is tempted to think that Rabbit is on his way back to his family. However, no good deed in this novel comes without a corresponding negative one. In order to be with Janice, Rabbit has abandoned the pregnant Ruth. When Eccles asks him if he will return to Ruth, Rabbit, “horrified”, answers: “for Heaven’s sake. I can’t” (205). Again, Rabbit is stuck. In typical fashion, as we learn, he will not stay the course and will instead continue to waver.

Rabbit’s relatively young age is not to be forgotten. He was certainly not especially young to have children at this time period, but at the age of 26 he seems to have more than his fair share of responsibilities. It is quite clear that a heavy burden has been placed on his shoulders at a time when he is obviously not mature enough to handle it. It is evident that Rabbit is ill-prepared for the strains of adult life. At one point he even shows jealousy towards his son Nelson, longing for the time that he was the center of attention, the provided-for and not the provider. When he looks into the window of his childhood home, “a quick odd jealousy comes and passes. It is his son.” (RR, 21) Rabbit’s search for meaning in life, although it has catastrophic consequences, is essentially a positive one. He is searching for goodness, which he once had on the basketball court, although in a very shallow sense. In Rabbit’s words: “I played first-rate basketball. I really did. And after you’re first-rate at something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate” (RR, 107). After the glory days of his athletic success he has been mired in mediocrity, and unlike most of his contemporaries, he decides to do something about it. His crude and unsophisticated manner of self-expression, both in speech and in action, obstructs his desire for goodness in his life.
The church is generally regarded as an element of society with a moral authority over its members. It is easy to imagine Reverend Eccles as a kind of adversary to Rabbit, the force for “good” countering Rabbit’s misdeeds. The irony is that although Rabbit is far from a typical God-fearing man, he possesses a strong faith, though at times it would appear that he only believes in himself. Just before he abandons his family (again) at the end of the novel, he tells himself that “Goodness lies inside” (308). However, there are also occasions when he admits to having faith, if not in God then in something beyond the physical world (or in his own words simply “it”). One of these occasions is when he and Ruth discuss religion after their first night together. First he prays, yet this could be more for forgiveness because of his wayward night with Ruth than an expression of true faith. They ask each other if they believe in ‘anything’ (God). Ruth says no, whereas Rabbit replies, in typical ambiguous fashion, “Well yeah. I think so” (91). In the face of Ruth’s certainty that there is no God, Rabbit is timid and “wonders if he’s lying” (91). Outwardly, he is not the most convinced believer, and he certainly has trouble expressing his beliefs, whatever they may be. Eccles, in his attempts to steer Rabbit back to his wife and his former life, prompts this admission from Rabbit:

“Well, I don’t know all this about theology, but I’ll tell you, I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this— he gestures outward at the scenery; they are passing the housing development this side of the golf course, half-wood half-brick one-and-a-half stories in little flat bulldozed yards holding tricycles and spindly three-year-old trees, the un-grandest landscape in the world— ‘there’s something that wants me to find it.’” (127)

Eccles, as stated, is a kind of adversary to Rabbit, and a worthy one at that, because he represents Rabbit’s opposite: On the surface, he exudes stability and faith— this is, after all, his job as a minister. Inwardly, however, his faith has more to do with enforcing society’s codes than in some higher calling. He is more adept in his capacity as a do-gooder than a man of God, and Kruppenbach reminds him of this when the two meet. The domineering Lutheran minister admonishes Eccles in an attempt to remind him of where his priorities should lie:

‘...do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people’s lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don’t agree with it. You think now
your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth. I don’t think that. I don’t think that’s your job….It seems to you our role is to be cops, cops without handcuffs, without guns, without anything but our human good nature…’ (170)

Later in the novel, when we are witness to Eccles’ sermon, we can see that he seems to struggle in his role:

Eccles wrestles in the pulpit with the squeak in his voice. His eyebrows jiggle as if on fishhooks. It is an unpleasant and strained performance, contorted, somehow; he drives his car with an easier piety. In his robes he seems the sinister priest of a drab mystery. (237)

Early in the novel Eccles asks Rabbit for a match. When Rabbit answers that he doesn’t smoke, Eccles replies “You’re a better man than I am” (102). While this may be a typical response, the irony is not lost on Eccles: He “pauses and thinks, then looks at Harry startled, arched eyebrows” (102). Despite its innocence on the surface, this is a telling exchange between the two men. Rabbit, ironically, gives up the bad habit of smoking simultaneously with his neglect for the rules of society. It would seem that he associates smoking with his unhealthy life with Janice that he is running away from. However, when Rabbit comes to the hospital when the baby is being born, he accepts a cigarette from Eccles. This is symbolic of the fact that Rabbit is on his way back into the fold of society.

Despite the fact that Rabbit is hesitant, outwardly, in his devotion to God, he possesses more faith than Eccles, though Rabbit’s is not the traditional, church-going type of faith. In addition to his statements to this effect, it should be obvious to the reader that Rabbit is a man of faith, due to the ease in which he drops everything, his wife, his job, his standing in society. He would not have done this so readily had he not had faith that there was something better to be had. In his actions after leaving his family he does, admittedly, display an utter lack of judgment. However, his adultery with Ruth, to take one example, is not the end but the means of his search for a better life. In his search for “it,” he landed in the arms of Ruth. He may not be able to put this into words, but what Rabbit is searching for is not difficult for the reader to ascertain; “it” is a rewarding, meaningful life. Therefore “it” is not necessarily God, although he believes God could help him attain his goals. He proves this when he prays to God from Ruth’s bed. Rabbit genuinely believes that he is special, and that he deserves something special. He is
so certain of this that he is not afraid of whatever consequences his actions may have. Already at the very beginning of the novel, it is hinted that Rabbit is somehow a special case: “The ball, rocketing off the crotch of the rim, leaps over the heads of the six and lands at the feet of the one.” (4) The “one” may as well be in capitals. Rabbit is singled out as someone that stands out in a crowd. This is a reflection of Rabbit's opinion of himself, almost as if he has some higher destiny. However, simply because he is a believer does not make him ‘good’ in the eyes of society, quite to the contrary.

By society's standards Eccles is good on the surface, yet lacks the instinctive faith that Rabbit has in that “something” that wants to be found. Eccles is more occupied with keeping an aesthetic, literal order in society than in a pursuit of a higher order, like Rabbit. His first instinct is to reunite Rabbit with Janice in order to retain the symmetry of marriage. Donald Greiner has this to say about Eccles: “He sees that Harry is a man who does not know what he wants and does not like what he has, but rather than guide Rabbit toward the motions of grace, he urges him toward the apartment. A humanist who believes that all involved should share the guilt, the minister is more interested in Harry's reconciliation with his wife than in his reconciliation with the something Rabbit calls “it” (Updike's Novels 57). Eccles can be forgiven for wanting to give her husband back to the pregnant Janice—after all, it can safely be said that most people during this period would have wanted to do the same thing. However, Eccles' appeal to Rabbit's sense of order is to no avail, precisely because what Rabbit is going through is not to be taken lightly. He did not simply need to sleep with someone else, nor to have a few days of freedom from his apparently dead-end existence in order to feel better. He is in the middle of a deep existential crisis which has no quick fix.

Rabbit, as stated, is a man of faith. However, although he professes to have a belief in (presumably) God, he seems to confuse, on the one hand, a humble faith in something greater than oneself with, on the other hand, greatness in oneself. He seems to believe that greatness exists because he himself was once great. Rabbit’s achievements on the basketball court are not to be ignored, as we are reminded of them regularly throughout the novel. Sports heroes are held in high esteem by
adoring fans who place their hopes and expectations in the hands of those chosen few. Therefore gifted athletes carry on their shoulders the weight of peoples’ hopes and expectations. Rabbit was able, like few other people, to be treated as a hero. In this sense, he experienced what it was like to be great. This is perhaps the most important reason why he is so determined to find greatness once again; he knows that it exists. Every day that he gets older, however, it becomes more difficult to find. To make matters worse, his glory days on the basketball court, although they act as the source of his search for something better, get in the way of a more realistic quest for meaning in Rabbit’s adult life. One could imagine that if he were better able to identify what was ailing him, he would find it easier to express himself to the world (and not least to his wife and family) and thus his crisis might have been averted. The course of his life went dramatically downhill after his glory days on the court, and he is desperate to regain some of that magic. “He tries to think of something pleasant. He imagines himself about to shoot a long one-hander; but he feels he’s on a cliff, there is an abyss he will fall into when the ball leaves his hands” (24). Harry has, in fact, already fallen into the abyss and he has limited resources to climb out again. He confuses his physical gifts from the past with the more enduring qualities that might make him a constructive member of society.

Updike employs realism in the novel, which has a way of countering the fictional aspects. Realism can be described quite simply as a way of describing the action that is as close as possible to “real life.” In fact, Updike is so true to life in his writing that much of the text can almost function like a historical record in itself. It is possible to use the text as a basis for pinpointing the exact dates for the action. This is a testament to the diligent research Updike put into the process of composition. Referring to the Rabbit trilogy (Rabbit at Rest had not yet been published), Dilvo Ristoff notes that “[n]ot only do we know, for example, the exact year these novels start and end, but we also know the exact month, the exact day, and almost the exact hour in which the actions start unfolding and, in due course, end”(1). Updike himself has observed that “My fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books” (“No Place to Run” 14).
An example of this type of documentation can be seen as Rabbit flees Brewer in his car. He is listening to the radio, and what he hears is taken straight out of the historical record, which Updike researched and documented. This includes popular songs, advertisements, as well as news stories:

On the radio he hears “No Other Arms, No Other Lips,” “Stagger Lee,” a commercial for Rayco Clear Plastic Seat Covers, “If I Didn’t Care” by Connie Francis, a commercial for Radio-Controlled Garage Door Operators, “I Ran All the Way Home Just to Say I’m Sorry,” “That Old Feeling” by Mel Torme, a commercial for Big Screen Westinghouse TV Set with One-Finger Automatic Tuning, “needle-sharp pictures a nose away from the screen,” “The Italian Cowboy Song,” “Yep” by Duane Eddy, a commercial for Papermate Pens, “Almost Grown,” a commercial for Tame Cream Rinse, “Let’s Stroll,” news (President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg, Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa, the whereabouts of the Dalai Lama, spiritual ruler of this remote and backward land, are unknown, a $250,000 trust fund has been left to a Park Avenue maid, Spring scheduled to arrive tomorrow), sports news (Yanks over Braves in Miami, somebody tied with somebody in St. Petersburg Open, scores in a local basketball tournament)… (31)

It is clear that these elements provide associations which readers from the period relate to, obviously making the story more real to them. For readers who are too young for this period and do not relate to, for example, the music, there are other historical associations to be made. Examples include when Updike names historical figures (Eisenhower, Macmillan) as well as familiar sports teams (the Yanks, the Braves).

While Updike’s research into American cultural history is impressive, it is not the only contribution which gives the book its quality of being a work of realism. Updike has been criticized, mostly when the book first came out, for not going deeply enough in his writing, perhaps because of this extensive attention to historical detail. It seems to me that this criticism is unfair, because Updike is also true to life in his depiction of the fictional elements in the work as well. His approach is two-fold. First, he uses both historical facts and mundane details of daily life to validate the story. Secondly, he adds the fictional layer which concentrates on Rabbit’s inner thoughts. The following example, when Rabbit is walking through his neighborhood, is an objective description of Rabbit’s world at this moment in time:

The mountain brings dusk early to the town. Now, just a few minutes after six a day before the vernal equinox, all the houses and gravel-roofed factories and diagonal hillside streets
are in the shadow that washes deep into the valley of farmland east of the mountain. Huts on the shadow’s shore, twin rows of ranch-houses blare from their picture windows the reflection of the setting sun. One by one, as suddenly as lamps, these windows dim as the sunlight ebbs, drawing across the development and across the tan fenced land waiting for planting and a golf course that at the distance could be a long pasture except for the yellow beans of sand: traps; drawing upward into the opposing hills on whose westward slopes it still burns with afternoon pride. Rabbit pauses at the end of the alley, where he has an open view. He used to caddy over there. (18)

However, not much later we get an example of Rabbit’s inner world when he tries to recapture the image he has just witnessed of his mother and sister feeding his son: “...(T)he boy is crying in backward vision, his forehead red and his mouth stretched wide and his helpless breath hot”(24). Rabbit is trying to think of something that will put his mind at ease. This is pure fiction, on several levels. First, and most obvious, Nelson and Rabbit are fictional characters, not historical ones. Secondly, even if Rabbit were a historical figure, we cannot know what he was thinking at any given time. Third, Nelson was not crying when Rabbit peered at him through the window. This is a figment of Rabbit’s imagination, and in this way it provides an interesting contrast to the passages in the book which are based in reality. Rabbit attempts to “think of something pleasant” (24) but whatever it is seems to wind its way back to his problems. Like many people in his situation would be, he is unable to take real things at face value. We are witness to Rabbit’s subjective thoughts and experiences. When he thinks of the water from the ice plant in the gutter, “yellowish, the way it curled on stones and ran in diagonal wrinkles, waving the fragile threads of slime attached to its edges” (24), he thinks of Janice. He subsequently tries to submerge images of Janice in memories of his sister Mim, yet he seems to have difficulties separating the two. The irony is that Updike’s “hero” evidently has trouble keeping his mind focused on what is real and what is imagined.

These elements demonstrate that Updike was adept in the novel at mixing face-value descriptions with subjective ones. The excellent description of Rabbit’s inner life and thoughts, real to Rabbit but non-existent to recorded history, deserve just as much credit as the objective historical detail in the novel. Sandford Pinsker notes: “Which contemporary American writer gets us closer to the grit of surface reality and, more important, to the subtle ways that objects and emotions interact?”(60) Therefore the term realism, when applied as a general descriptive
term to *Rabbit Run*, can be misleading. Despite Updike’s impressive proficiency at documenting history in his texts (not only in *Rabbit, Run* but also in all of the *Rabbit* tetralogy), the excellent fiction he creates in the novel is a much greater feat. The history in the novel, I believe, is a supportive element which strengthens the fictional narrative. It is these aspects which deserve the greater fanfare. The real matter at hand is Rabbit’s inner life and how his struggle represents the human condition in general, but in an unmistakably American setting. Short of autobiography or philosophy, this type of subject matter is impossible to describe in a factual manner. Some people may have a difficult time relating to Rabbit, but we must admit that his struggle to find “something,” or “it,” although clumsily expressed, has implications beyond his own personal predicament. He is searching for meaning in life, although to try to find it he seems to cast away much of what gives his life meaning in the first place.

Ristoff argues that Updike’s use of history is essential to the novel’s legacy: “This concern with placing the stories so precisely in time and space is Updike’s open invitation to the audience to read, along with the novels, a text which parallels and complements them, becoming in the process so actively participant in the literary text that to ignore it is not only difficult but impossible” (1). I tend to disagree, because I think the text would be equally impossible to ignore if the historical facts had been left out. The narrative is much stronger in itself than the fact that this happened at a particular time. Rabbit’s actions (sleeping with a prostitute, abandoning his wife resulting in the death of their baby) were shocking events that are based in the fictional world, and I believe that this is where the novel’s strong points lie. Updike sets us up with the mundane details of Rabbit’s middle American life, only to bowl us over with his fictional deeds, which stand in stark contrast to his ordinary life. We need only look at the three families which stand closest to Rabbit and Janice in the novel, Rabbit’s family (the Angstroms), Janice’s (the Springers) and the Eccleses to see the chasm between Rabbit and Janice’s situation and what was “normal” for the time period. This is not to say that Rabbit and Janice’s situation was necessarily atypical. It is more the length that Rabbit goes to in order to address the situation that is unusual. Rabbit exists in the grey area between the way a father should be, according to society’s prevailing
values (Eccles’ order and symmetry), and someone who society disdains (Ruth, Tothero). Therefore I would argue that *Rabbit, Run* is a book which breaks away from its time (with its scandals) as much as represents it (with its detailed historical accounts).

In his re-examination of Renaissance theater using a New Historicist perspective, Stephen Greenblatt digs for the “social energy” which he believes circulates at all times and in all cultures. This is in contrast to, for example, a New Critical approach in which the text was argued to have a life of its own outside of cultural influence. I believe the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Greenblatt underlines that literature is by nature a collective endeavor. “Language itself, which is at the heart of literary power, is the supreme instance of a collective creation” (4). Greenblatt goes on to argue that all authors rely on the conventions of the day in order to produce their works. I do not dispute this claim. It would be impossible for Updike to suddenly shed his identity as an author of the late ‘50’s and *all* the conventions that brings with it, for example the use of language. The vocabulary and manner of speech often dates the work to the fifties: When Rabbit and Ruth are eating in the restaurant, Ruth wonders if Rabbit is “wise” to the fact that she is a prostitute. Rabbit thinks to himself “So this is the drift.” (72) This language is reflective of everyday usage at the time. However, if Updike were completely conventional, there would be no social criticism in the work, which is clearly not the case.

In an attempt to define the social energy that is being circulated, Greenblatt offers this list: “Power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience.” (19) We can find all of these qualities in *Rabbit, Run: Power* (Rabbit’s struggle as a man in the rigid 1950’s), *charisma* (Rabbit’s charm and his skills on the basketball court), *sexual excitement* (Rabbit in the arms of a new lover), *collective dreams* (Rabbit and Ruth’s potential new life together), *wonder* (Rabbit’s musings on the ways of the world), *desire* (Rabbit’s sexual appetite), *anxiety* (what makes Rabbit who he is), *religious awe* (“it”), and *free-floating intensities of experience* (Rabbit’s existential crisis). The difference, however, is that not all of these themes were picked out of
everyday American life in the late 1950's. Many of these were repressed at the time, not merely ideas that Updike took up without any controversy. His frank depiction of sex, for example, did not go unnoticed in a society which was much more comfortable keeping this topic below the surface. Updike himself referred to this in an interview, stating that sex must be “taken out of the closet and off the altar and put (in) the continuum of human behavior” (DeBellis 403). Therefore I would argue that many of these social energies are below the surface in society and need a catalyst in order to bring them to the surface. That is the author's task, and without the author many of these topics would remain hidden behind what was considered proper in society. Seen in this light, Updike the author resembles his character Rabbit because he is challenging the status quo. Without the repressive society, there would be nothing for Rabbit or Updike to rebel against. Thus, as Greenblatt suggests, we must give some credit to society for providing the friction which inspires the author. We must not overlook, however, the skills Updike displays in eloquently presenting such a dialectic to the public.

Yes, Updike wrote realistically about everyday life in the fifties. However, some qualifiers need to be added to this equation. He writes about everyday American life, something which seems to be near his heart, despite all the criticism he has for it. Writers reflect the culture they come from. This idea is highlighted in New Historicist criticism. New Historicism is an answer to the New Critical idea that a text is an entity unto itself, independent of its surroundings. The New Historicist method is to examine the cultural and historical surroundings within which the text was created. This mindset says that the text is both a product of the time period and a commentary on it. However, by the very fact of its existence, it is an ineradicable element of, and a link to, that time period as well. Thus, a New Historicist view is that Rabbit, Run is simultaneously a comment on American culture as well as a participant in it. Above all, New Historicism claims that it is impossible for history to be objective, both for those (in the past) who have told a story, and for those (in the present) who analyze it. Therefore, we can no more look back at a text from the past and say 'this is how the world was’ than we can say the same thing, in the present tense, about a contemporary work.
I believe that a New Historicist approach to *Rabbit, Run* leaves something to be desired, however. Despite the fact that the novel is undoubtedly a product of its time, I believe that a New Historicist account goes too far in taking credit away from the author. Updike was not simply a vehicle for a historical account of the fifties in America. If we take New Historicism to its full conclusion, then *Rabbit, Run* was all but destined to emerge from this point in time. This is not so. In writing *Rabbit, Run* Updike was informed by the society and culture around him. This much is true, yet the writer still has to decide what to put on the page. Updike chose to write a novel which, despite his fact-based historical account of American life, is to a much larger extent concerned with Rabbit's inner life. Rabbit's personal struggles represent the greater issue of an individual's needs versus the demands of society. Updike includes so much detail because, naturally, Rabbit's inner life is influenced by his surroundings, in addition to the fact that the realism acts as a balance for the fiction. But these historical details are secondary to Rabbit's existential dilemma of the meaning in his life. This is a universal human condition more than a historical, or just an American one.

As further proof of the fact that the author is not simply a direct channel of the issues of a certain time, many of Rabbit's inner thoughts and feelings are expressed in a manner that are far beyond Rabbit's ordinary mind and vocabulary. Rabbit, as stated, is intended by Updike to be portrayed as a typical middle-American man. He may not be very well spoken, yet if Updike wished, he could have left Rabbit's inner feelings unaltered as a true expression of an average member of society. Instead, Updike embellishes these moments with language that seems more his own than Rabbit's. An example is when Rabbit is sitting at a diner with a map, planning his next move: “Bird in Hand, Paradise: his eyes keep going back to this dainty lettering on the map. He has an impulse, amid the oil-filmed shimmer of this synthetic and desultory diner, to drive there” (30). The *impulse* Rabbit has is completely his own, as all impulses are. However, the words dainty and desultory are used, words which in all likelihood Rabbit would not have used. *Rabbit, Run* would have been a very different book if it were not for Updike’s sophisticated language which adds depth to Rabbit’s feelings.
Whether Updike is the facilitator or the architect in conveying some of American society’s proverbial “skeletons in the closet” is open for debate. On the other hand, it can be safely said that such a book is a positive force in such a society. Whether it is in the name of tradition, custom, morality, religion, or values, conformity in society has a tendency to dominate the way people behave. The conservative 1950’s were obviously no exception. It is only natural that not everyone was pleased with Updike’s often frank depictions of Rabbit’s life. Yet with this book Updike was able to offer a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel for those people who, like Rabbit, did not fit the rigid mold required for acceptance in America.

Updike is a master of the dialectic. Should we side with Rabbit or with society? It is as if the author has weighted each side perfectly so that it is impossible to make a judgment. Most people have, at times, probably felt like Rabbit does. If that is indeed the case, then shouldn’t we have some sympathy for him? History has shown that readers do, in fact, sympathize with him. Why else would the books be as popular as they have been and still are? However, it is to Updike’s credit that he gave us so sympathetic a character that, at the same time, has so many problems. In this way, Updike has been very true to life in his writing of *Rabbit, Run*. On the surface, Rabbit is selfish, thoughtless, and chauvinist. However, he always manages to persuade us to give him a second chance. I would argue that the popularity of the book proves that many readers find something in the protagonist which resonates with them. He is reminiscent of a child, and he states that he doesn’t have any desire for maturity. However, it is his child-like qualities which also cause us, if not to sympathize with him, then to pity him. Rabbit’s feelings of being an outsider are summed up when he feels like a stranger in the diner on his road trip: “Is it just these people I’m outside, or is it all America?” (33)

Erik Kielland-Lund has examined Rabbit’s immaturity and found similarities in other American protagonists. Whereas Rabbit may claim to be searching for something grand just beyond his reach, Kielland-Lund argues that he is often “simply lost in the fog of his own insecurity” (81). Another famous
American character, Holden Caulfield, appears at times to be equally lost. I believe that a little bit of Holden’s reckless abandon has made its way from Salinger’s character to the older, though equally immature Rabbit. There are a number of similarities not only between the two characters, but other aspects of the novels as well. Published in 1951, *The Catcher in the Rye* pushed the limits with its use of language, much like Updike pushed the limits with the content of his novel. The melancholic aspect of the work is similar as well. We pity Holden just as we pity Rabbit. The two protagonists are both dissatisfied with their lot in life, and are looking for something better. Holden comes from a wealthier background, which may make his unhappiness harder for the reader to swallow. However, though Rabbit is strictly middle class, his economic situation as well is far from dire. Like Rabbit, Holden has something inside of him that he wants to express to the world, yet has a tendency to sabotage his inner goodwill with his need to rebel. This inability to express themselves in a satisfactory way causes a frustration which compounds their problems. In addition, each has a distrust of the mature world. Holden protests against the “phoniness” of society. Rabbit also reveals a cynical skepticism when he remarks on Jimmie the Mouseketeer’s wink:

> That was good. Rabbit tries it, pinching the mouth together and then the wink, getting the audience out front with you against some enemy behind, Walt Disney or the MagiPeel Peeler Company, admitting it’s all a fraud but, what the hell, making it likable. We’re all in it together. Fraud makes the world go round. The base of our economy. Vitaconomy, the modern housewife’s password, the one-word expression for economizing vitamins by the MagiPeel Method. (10)

Despite the pessimism of these statements, Rabbit seems to display here a kind of acceptance of his role in society. He is a salesman, like Jimmie, who helps him to see clearly what he needs to do to become better, namely gain the customers’ trust. Rabbit seems at first to be pragmatic about his choice of livelihood. Everyone needs to make a living. Yet in reality we are witness to Rabbit’s realization that this whole exercise is a trick, a sham. He is someone who doesn’t believe in what he is doing (can one believe in the MagiPeel?), someone who is toiling away at a job which he has realized is a fraud. By association, he is a fraud. Rabbit, despite his crudeness, cannot live with his “fraudulent” job. He is stuck between his
limitations and his desires. This is an example where we get to see, if only for a moment, Rabbit’s idealism.

Holden’s history teacher insists to him that “[l]ife is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.” Holden is skeptical to this line of thinking: “Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right- I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game” (7). Rabbit’s life was a game at first, in which he played by the rules and excelled, because he was a “hot-shot”. However, after the rules of basketball, the rules of life are much more ambiguous. Holden rejects society’s rules just as Rabbit does. These two iconic American novels are similar in the rebellion the protagonists conduct against their culture. Both Holden and Rabbit have a need for approval by society, yet are unwilling to “play by the rules” in order to get it.
CHAPTER 2

In the first passage of White Noise, a very orderly American town is described, where cars turn left for the supermarket and a policewoman patrols. DeLillo is, of course, setting the scene for the novel, exactly as any other writer would. Yet he is also doing more than that. He is also setting up his target. He is telling us that whatever commentaries he has in this novel are aimed squarely at “middle,” run-of-the-mill America. While his comments are most immediately related to Jack and Babette, their family, the College-on-the-Hill, and Blacksmith, they are also directed at America in general. The town of Blacksmith, where Jack lives with his family, is grounded in the mundane American way of life. From the way it is described by DeLillo, Blacksmith seems to be a typical American college town. Jack teaches at the University, his children go to school, and his wife performs various social volunteer duties and exercises at the local school. DeLillo had a definite purpose when selecting this setting; he chose the broadest target possible, ‘Anywhere, USA’ in order to drive home his message.

White Noise has a cheery (satirical) façade which hides a dark underbelly. DeLillo is able to be both humorous and serious in his account of everyday American life. While the Gladneys (with an assortment of kids from various marriages) are not necessarily the “average” American family, they have a stable nest in small-town America. The family gathers around the TV set on weekends, they go to the supermarket, the shopping mall, and Jack goes to work on the
college campus. While Jack may not show much outward anxiety, he has quite a bit of it built up beneath the surface. This is a reflection of the times. Jack has a very good life as a college professor in middle America. He worries about death because this is something, despite the Dylar pills, that he can’t avoid. He has very little to worry about otherwise.

From the very beginning of White Noise we are faced with American culture. We are meant to chuckle at DeLillo’s description of the students making their way to the College-on-the-Hill with their overstuffed cars filled with ridiculous wares, such as “English and Western saddles, inflated rafts” (3). While he describes the event as “brilliant,” it doesn’t take long before his thinly veiled (or perhaps not veiled at all?) critique of American culture comes into play. As Jack continues to describe Blacksmith, the church and the insane asylum are mentioned virtually in the same breath, which does not seem to be a coincidence.

In White Noise the reader is faced with a postmodern critique of American society in the 1980’s. The title suggests a constant murmur of meaninglessness in society. Themes we are faced with include many facets of life which distract us. Among these are such outwardly mundane aspects as television (a major source of noise), shopping, and the omnipresent media, including tabloids as the shopper makes his way to the “last purchase point” (40), a clear reference to death.

In White Noise, the characters live in a society that is full of mystery and danger. There is an element of foreboding in the telling of the story. This is partly a postmodern, mechanical world of automation, and neither Jack Gladney nor the author seems to appreciate being “authenticated” (46) by machines. Television screens purvey useless information, ATM screens “bless” us (46) (or not), and modern medical equipment evaluates and gives a final score. DeLillo laments a loss of substance and human contact in favor of automation. Jack and Babette’s world is colored by uncertainty, unease, fear, and a threatening chaos.

The 1980’s in America was a time of relative peace, and the economy was undergoing major growth. The 1960’s and seventies had each had their fair share
of upheaval, including the Vietnam War and its opponents, the Civil Rights movement, Watergate, and the oil crisis. It would appear that the nation had had enough turmoil and needed a decade to lick its wounds and pamper itself with conspicuous consumption. Postmodernism adhered to a pluralistic agenda. However, *White Noise* shows us that the cultural menu in 1980’s America was lacking in many respects. Apparently the social crises of the previous two decades, together with economic success, had left a kind of ideological vacuum. This void was filled with the ‘white noise’ of technology, most pervasively exemplified by television. This lull was a perfect opportunity for capitalist ideology to be disseminated at every available opportunity, of course using television (among other media) as a primary vehicle. This type of existence was a perfect target for Postmodernist thought, which prided itself on its opposition to consumerism and corporate ideology.

The prosperous eighties, with the former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan in the White House and the economy booming, was friendly to the average American. However, in *White Noise* DeLillo seems to lament a dearth of culture at this time. One of the characteristics of Postmodernism was a focus on ideological emptiness and lack of substance. This includes the chaos, angst, and uncertainty which are displayed in *White Noise*. Chaos, or at the very least complexity, can be found in the Gladney family tree and not least in the depiction of the “airborne toxic event.” Angst and uncertainty are found in the behavior of many of the principal players in the book. Heinrich, for example, wishes to question the reality of something as tangible as the rain coming out of the sky, whereas Jack and Babette are pre-occupied with their shared fear of death.

*White Noise* can be placed firmly in the Postmodern tradition. In his work on Postmodernism, Frederic Jameson claims that it can be categorized as a period having little depth, or one in which history carries less relevance. Jameson believes that this tradition was caused by two historical factors: globalization and the seeping of capital into areas which had before been immune to such developments, such as nature and the unconscious (Olster 80). A result of this trend is that art becomes more mundane. Beauty becomes more mainstream as
the boundary between art and manufacturing, or “commodity production” (Olster 80), dissolves. The pop artist Andy Warhol illustrated this trend when he produced, among other popular images, his paintings and silkscreens of popular images such as Campbell’s soup cans. The creation of these works of art could be likened to an assembly line (created at “The Factory”), in addition to the fact that the subject matter was taken straight out of the popular consciousness, as opposed to the artist’s creative imagination.

The aesthetic components of postmodernism provide an interesting angle to the discussion of White Noise as well. Bright colors and an insistence on pluralism were hallmarks of the postmodern style often resulting in “kitsch.” A trait of kitsch is that it is mass-produced, which fits well with DeLillo’s take on the culture of the time which he portrays as lacking substance. For his part, DeLillo uses the term “bright” often in the text. Kitsch is well-represented in the text, for example when Jack and Murray go to see “the most-photographed barn in America.” The resulting pictures of the barn can be considered examples of kitsch because they are mass-produced, and there is very little that is original or authentic about them.

When Jack and Murray go to see the barn, Murray explains that it is impossible to really see the barn because of the hype and expectations surrounding it. The image of the barn (in the photographs people take of it) turns out to be the most important thing. This is symptomatic of American superficiality, with an obsession over the way things appear to be, without any necessary importance attached to their contents. Jack and Murray marvel at the spectacle of the tourists who slavishly go to the barn to take a picture (like millions of other people before them):

Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides- pictures of the barn taken
from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book. 'No one sees the barn,' he said finally. A long silence followed. 'Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.' (12)

This of course turns into a perpetual ritual of people mindlessly taking pictures of a barn without knowing (or caring) if there is anything really special about this barn. What color is the barn, how big is it, when was it constructed? There is a certain meaninglessness in a barn which has this type of designation. DeLillo is telling us to take a step away from the crowd, to take a closer look at what surrounds us, and to not be satisfied with what satisfies everyone else. The meaninglessness of the barn is reinforced when the family is fleeing from the airborne toxic event. As we witness the frightening escape from this menacing disaster, the family passes a sign for the barn. The spectacle of the barn has nothing to offer them at this point.

There is a dichotomy between illusion and reality which is exhibited here that can be linked to Postmodernist critique as well. This is symptomatic of a culture in which appearance is more important than reality, and representations (photographs, images) are interchangeable with the real thing. Again, this mindset can be looked at as a throwback to Warhol’s silkscreen prints which he churned out endlessly. Warhol challenged the notion of the “original.” What is more real, the barn itself or the photographic image of the barn, which reinforces its aura as “the most photographed barn in America?” This scene also involves America’s obsession with fame and celebrity. If you have taken a picture of this barn, you have really been somewhere, not just seen any old anonymous barn.

The absence of cultural coherence which Postmodernism cultivates is a boon, perhaps, to the avant-garde. But where does this leave the typical American family? The Gladneys are a prime example of this disjointed culture. They contain within their ranks a loose band of children from various marriages who are at times furtive and suspicious of one another. The television is a culprit in this fragmented life. It seems that it is always on in the Gladney household, relaying forgettable information. It is this filling of the cultural void with junk which causes
the family to act in this way. At one point in the novel, Jack says to his daughter Denise “We couldn’t have television without (Hitler)” (63). One would think that television already has enough stigma attached to it, yet Jack heaps more on with this statement. That television is somehow tied to such a personage as Hitler is an alarming thought. What is meant by this statement? There are several possibilities. One is a direct association between Hitler and television, that he, in a way, was part of the creation of television. If we are to follow this line of thought, what comparisons can be made between Hitler’s ideology and television? An example would be the way Hitler, through propaganda, was adept at promoting himself to the masses. This can be likened to the hypnotic effects television has, and in the way television can be seen to have a certain power over the watcher: “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it” (51). As evidenced on many occasions throughout the book, the characters (as representatives of America) are obsessed with ogling human suffering on the TV through the likes of tragedies as reported by dedicated news channels such as CNN. Heinrich reinforces this idea when he comes running to announce: “Come on, hurry up, plane crash footage” (64). It goes without saying that Hitler’s atrocities can safely be placed in the category of what disaster-crazed viewers want to watch.

_White Noise_ is full of references to machines, which may also be seen as a nod to Postmodernism. DeLillo is obviously skeptical of many forms of modern technology. Besides the numerous television references which will be discussed later, there are plenty of examples of the extent to which life has become automated, and hence out of our control. “The refrigerator throbbed massively. I flipped a switch and somewhere beneath the sink a grinding mechanism reduced parings, rinds, and animal fats to tiny drainable fragments, with a motorized surge that made me retreat two paces” (101). DeLillo may be seen to decry a lack of humanity in favor of automation. As further proof of the machines’ relevance to the story, they are an integral part of the chorus which gives the work its name. The refrigerator, kitchen grinder, trash compactor, and coffeemaker all contribute to the “white noise” of modern life.

Heinrich laments a loss of basic substance in society:
'It's like we're flung back in time,' he said. 'Here we are in the Stone Age, knowing all these great things after centuries of progress but what can we do to make life easier for the Stone Agers? Can we make a refrigerator? Can we even explain how it works? What is electricity? What is light? We experience these things every day of our lives but what good does it do if we find ourselves hurled back in time and we can't even tell people the basic principles much less actually make something that would improve conditions'(147).

He is calling into question the knowledge base and competence of his peers in relation to the progress society has made. He is saying that American society has too much focus on technical progress and not enough on the human level.

Much of White Noise can be described as being irreverent and even comic. There is no doubt that DeLillo uses a mocking tone and a satirical method here which some readers may feel undermines the seriousness of his criticism of American society. However, the reader needs to look beyond DeLillo's humorous tone to see that he is not merely poking fun, but has genuine concerns about American society. I believe his concerns are not without merit. Paradoxically, DeLillo seems to employ the same kind of superficiality in the writing of White Noise that he sets out to criticize. In effect he is using the same methods that he is decrying in order to make a point. The more pitiful and laughable the world he creates in the work, the more scorn he is heaping on society as a whole. In this way, DeLillo can be ruthless in his criticism. The advantage of using satire is that it is easier for an author to hide behind this method than, for example, straightforward realism.

In fact, many of the aspects of the book which amuse the reader are (when examined more closely) often serious reflections on a postmodern society. How should we deal with the ever-increasing presence of technology in our lives? While television had been around for many years, by the eighties it was assuming a more and more dominant role in the cultural arena. White Noise advises us to be wary of the TV, as well as the other machines that we are increasingly dependent on.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is that it is still seems relevant as social criticism 27 years after its publication. There are certainly differing opinions today on the direction society is headed with regard to the
technological revolution which has occurred in our society over the past 20 years. While many people cannot wait for the next digital innovation, others are skeptical. The naysayers are often characterized as standing in the way of change, yet there are often real concerns which cause skepticism in people, akin to the skepticism portrayed in the novel. Among these concerns is an increasing reliance on technology in favor of human contact. Why talk to the person next to you when you can send an instant message? Further concerns are a lack of privacy when a large part of our lives are lived, and can therefore be documented, through a digital device. Technology continues its march and the chorus of jubilant supporters largely drowns out the skeptics. It is clear from reading the story that DeLillo exemplifies some of these fears at a time when media and digitization are, relatively, in their infant stages. He is therefore prescient in his concerns, whether one agrees with them or not. Among his primary concerns are that people need to make an active effort to not become part of the “crowd.” Otherwise one runs the risk of succumbing to a mob mentality in which people are manipulated by fear and commercialism. Again, DeLillo seems to value the role of the outsider, the figure who would rather not join the crowd, but instead chooses to remain as independent as possible. He has said, “The writer stands outside society. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins” (Nel 24).

Another aspect which has relevance to this discussion of trends in society is what to do with the “old people” (167) who do not keep up with the times. Jack is middle-aged, not ‘old’, yet he expresses dismay at the direction society is headed. What about older people? The disconnect people feel with their surroundings may be greatest for the oldest members of society. The people who grew up with other types of entertainment than TV and shopping at the mall (in effect people that had a greater connection with reality) are the ones who get left behind. DeLillo punctuates this idea with his description of the fate of the elderly Treadwell couple. The couple goes missing and a search is organized for them. They drag the river, fearing the worst. However,

...word came that the Treadwells had been found alive but shaken in an abandoned cookie shack at the Mid-Village Mall, a vast shopping center out on the interstate. Apparently they’d been wandering through the mall for two days, lost, confused and frightened, before taking refuge in the littered kiosk....No one knew at this point why they didn’t ask for help.
It was probably just the vastness and strangeness of the place and their own advanced age that made them feel helpless and adrift in a landscape of remote and menacing figures. (59)

The society of 1985 has no time to waste on coddling the elderly. It is symbolic that the Treadwells get lost in the middle of the mall, the meeting place of millions of Americans and a sham of a cultural hub. The mall is the focal point of consumer America, yet it is a dangerous place for an old couple who presumably have lost their standing in society together with their purchasing power. The Treadwells have no business being there. They must take shelter in a failed beacon of capitalism, a cookie shack. The elderly are also particularly susceptible to the distress which emanates from the television. “Older people in particular were susceptible to news of impending calamity as it was forecast on TV by grave men standing before digital radar maps or pulsing photographs of the planet. Whipped into a frenzy, they hurried to the supermarket to stock up before the weather mass moved in....The old people shopped in a panic” (167).

These ‘old people’ are, in fact, the current society’s forebears, and they probably deserve better attention and care than they are getting. Babette reads tabloids to the elderly, as well as teaching a class on correct posture. As a representative of the society of the eighties, Babette is teaching her elders how to sit up properly. It is ironic that the most active members of society, those DeLillo is critical of, are teaching basic elements of life to their elders who are in comparison more “upstanding” citizens. The message is clear: old is out, it has no place in today’s fast-paced times. These people should simply get out of the way to make room for the new. It is simply out of the kindness of Babette’s heart as a community volunteer that they get any attention whatsoever.

The Gladney clan is a loose affiliation of two parents and a mix of children from previous marriages. On the surface, the family seems to be very content with this arrangement. The kids bounce back and forth between their various guardians with no outward appearance of unease. For example, Jack's twelve-year-old daughter Bee flies from Indonesia to Iron City, alone. This is a suggestion of the “modernity” of the White Noise eighties. However, what first may seem to be a well-adjusted, modern family upon closer examination reveals some weaknesses.
Heinrich displays some strange behavior in the novel, for example when the family
witnesses a car wreck as they are fleeing the ‘airborne toxic event’:

Heinrich kept watching through the rear window, taking up his binoculars as the scene
dwindled in the distance. He described for us in detail the number and placement of
bodies, the skid marks, the vehicular damage. When the wreck was no longer visible, he
talked about everything that had happened since the air-raid siren at dinner. He spoke
enthusiastically, with a sense of appreciation for the vivid and unexpected. I thought we’d
all occupied the same mental state, subdued, worried, confused. It hadn’t occurred to me
that one of us might find these events brilliantly stimulating. (122)

The decisions Heinrich makes during the course of the novel are often
questionable. His friend is a snake-charmer, he plays chess with a convicted felon,
and he is at times plagued by self-doubt and uncertainty. We are invited into
Heinrich’s decision-making process when he is considering visiting his mother at
her ashram in Montana. Jack asks him if he wants to go. “Who knows what I want
to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about
something like that? Isn’t it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back
and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is
really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain?” (45)
The trouble Heinrich has making a decision, as well as his confusion in general,
could very well have been brought on by the television set and the culture of
technology. He has forgotten how to make decisions on his own. Instead he relies
on the media to do it for him.

A discussion between Jack and Heinrich reflects the push and pull between
illusion and reality. Heinrich remarks that “It’s going to rain tonight” (22).
However, it already is raining. Heinrich insists that the radio stated that it would
happen tonight, not now. In other words, he puts more trust in the radio than in
his own senses. Jack reminds him that “Just because it’s on the radio doesn’t mean
we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses”(22). The argument goes
on, with Heinrich becoming more and more philosophical. He even questions the
reality of sense experience- “…nothing is what it seems. There’s no past, present or
future outside our own mind”(23). When pressed, he even questions what ‘truth’
is: “What truth does he want”(23)? The doubt continues: “Is there such a thing as
now”(23)?
Significantly, Heinrich comes into his stride when the airborne toxic event strikes. When the rest of the population is fearful of all of the unknown quantities of the disaster, Heinrich steps up and takes charge as an informal disseminator of information. Jack observes: "What a surprise it was to ease my way between people at the outer edges of one of the largest clusters and discover that my own son was at the center of things, speaking in his new-found voice, his tone of enthusiasm for runaway calamity" (130). It would appear that Heinrich, perhaps because of his youth in this odd setting, feels at home when the disaster strikes when the rest of the population feels completely alienated. The hours spent in front of the television must have actually taught him something. Not only is he relatively comfortable in the midst of the chaos, but he knows all the answers to the scientific questions (probably also gleaned from the television). Heinrich has found his element. This could be considered another example of DeLillo’s satire. It is only in the most improbable situations that Heinrich shows his mettle.

Heinrich is obviously a member of the new generation of the eighties who worship television and the media in general. If the media say that it will rain tonight, that is when it will rain. It is more important for him to be tuned into the media than to reality (as most would define it). DeLillo exaggerates this sequence to good effect. Heinrich, through his devotion to the modern media, refuses to acknowledge that it is, in fact, raining outside. He won’t trust his senses, nor will he admit to the existence of conventional truth, and he questions the nature of time. He is perhaps one of the first victims of the television generation of the eighties, in which CNN and MTV were among the first actors (launched 1980 and 1981, respectively). Each brought its own form of drama into the American home. CNN brought news, and especially disaster footage from across the globe, while MTV offered a modernization (no doubt considered mindless by many adults) of both music and television by combining the two. In White Noise DeLillo satirizes and mocks both the product spilling out of the TV, as well as the consequences for an entire generation of Americans. DeLillo likens this obsession with media to a kind of religion. In his essay on White Noise, Mark Osteen reveals that the original working title of the book was The American Book of the Dead. Osteen argues that
DeLillo, through his description of television-watching, amongst other things, “reveals the presence of the sacred in postmodern life” (165). Implied in this argument, presumably, is the absence of God.

Murray Jay Siskind is a professor in 'living icons' at the college, a member of the staff of the American environments department. He and Jack discuss Jack and Babette’s various progeny, and the discussion turns to television:

‘TV is a problem only if you’ve forgotten how to look and listen,’ Murray said. ‘My students and I discuss this all the time. They’re beginning to feel they ought to turn against the medium, exactly as an earlier generation turned against their parents and their country. I tell them they have to learn to look as children again. Root out content. Find the codes and messages, to use your phrase, Jack….I’ve come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home.’ (50)

However, his students are apparently not convinced. They liken TV to the death of human consciousness. It is ironic that a member of the older generation is telling the younger generation how to watch television.

Television is a typical element of the Postmodern world. The TV set is what brings commercialism to the masses. “In White Noise, product names yield a form of magic; but to perform these rites one needs a prayer book or archive of spells, and TV fulfills this function in both White Noise and in our world” (Osteen 173). Murray reminds us that “Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it”(51). This triad is one of many throughout the novel relating to America’s addiction to consumerism, and can be likened to a form of religion. Americans have replaced their worship of a deity with reverence for slick consumerism. The almighty dollar has a unique hold over American society.

Television is one of the main culprits responsible for the disconnection in postmodern society. We are able to “connect” all across the world in terms of current events with the help of CNN (today, the internet/facebook) yet the more time we spend in front of the screen, the less we are, in fact, connected to what is really going on around us. The Gladney clan gathers in front of the TV to watch natural disasters. While it is positive that they like to be tuned in to what is going on in other parts of the world, they are always secure in knowing that the danger is
not an immediate threat to them (this changes with the onslaught of the airborne toxic event).

The television and the media are where one often hears the news first about disasters; one need look no further than the “airborne toxic event” to illustrate this. However, it is not only for this reason that we have an uneasy association with the TV set. In Jack's words, “If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires”(85).

The rise in importance of TV in the American 80's is a genuine cause of concern for DeLillo. He is indirectly accusing the medium of “dumbing down” the general public. DeLillo is afraid that the onslaught of information is having the opposite effect of its intention: it is making people less informed. It is easy to understand the sense of dislocation facing the characters in the book when one considers both the calamity footage the family is addicted to, and the otherwise inane content coming out of the TV: “And other trends that can dramatically impact your portfolio”(61). On Fridays the family gets together in front of the television. Jack describes the thought process behind the family's Friday night get-togethers, and in so doing reveals that he does have a prejudice against the TV:

Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced. I felt vaguely slighted by this reasoning. The evening in fact was a subtle form of punishment for us all. (16)

On one particular end of week séance, “There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly”(64). The fact that disaster footage can be seen as a form of entertainment is bad enough. However, it is only entertainment, of course, when it is happening to someone else. Jack gets together with some colleagues to try to get to the bottom of this obsession with catastrophes: “Why is it, Alfonse, that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?” Alfonse, one of the American Environments professors, answers, “Because we’re suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information”
He continues: “We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else.” These disasters often happen halfway across the world (or at least California, also far away from Blacksmith). While this is a good excuse for sitting on the couch instead of doing anything, there must be something one can do which is more constructive than sitting and ogling other people’s suffering. This is an example of an apparent lack of empathy, with the television (again) being implicated as a facilitator. The TV turns suffering into entertainment:

Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (64)

Not only do disasters happen in faraway places, but they are most likely to happen to people who are in a different economic category as well.

White Noise is uncompromising in its criticism of the direction the country is headed. Many of the eighties’ phenomena that are satirized in this book are still relevant today. For example, a dependence on television and screens in general. Today social networking via the internet is all the rage. Have we really changed so much since the days of feeling “connected” via CNN and MTV? Seen from our own vantage point, with what we know about the importance Facebook (as well as other social media and networking tools) have attained, the description of technology in White Noise is prescient. That DeLillo picked up on these themes already in the mid-‘80’s makes White Noise resonate even more with modern readers.

A central question DeLillo asks in the novel is if modern American society has any morality. The population seems to be made up of people who do not necessarily have a specific direction, guidelines, or principles to live by. Religion is often a source of values and morality for people. However, religion is hard to find in this society. Rather, it is not where you would expect to find it. Instead, a type
of worship is found at the supermarket, the shopping mall, and anywhere else exchange of goods and services takes place. In this culture, spending money at the mall is a type of self-affirmation. This is clearly illustrated when Jack runs into a colleague at the hardware store. "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). Jack’s response to this affront is that he wants to go shopping. What results is a kind of religious experience at the mall. Jack is presented with everything from shirts to pretzels, cologne to salami, organ music to cheese graters. He observes “I began to grow in value and self-regard” (84).

New Historicism can help us to understand the reason why American consumerism has a way of affecting the ideology of a time period. The relation of power to ideology is a central concern of this way of thinking. This dynamic has its roots in Marxism. John Brannigan, in his examination of New Historicism, states: “…ideology is a self-perpetuating force, and becomes known in New Historicism as ‘power’... (28) Marxism holds that the ruling mode of economic production (in this case capitalism) dictates the ideology of the period. If ideology is power, and capitalism dictates ideology, then we can conclude that capitalism is power. This theory is upheld in White Noise. The way consumers act in White Noise reflects the way they see the world. We can perhaps draw a link between the strange messages floating through the air (the commercial triads) and the strange behavior of the characters in the novel.

The occasion of the family’s shopping spree at the mall is a good example of the cult of commercialism in America and touches on many of the most important themes in White Noise. The mall resembles a church where American consumers come to worship. Capitalism is the religion, empowering shoppers with the opportunity to spend their money at will at an almost unlimited number of outlets. “We moved from store to store, rejecting not only items in certain departments, not only entire departments but whole stores, mammoth corporations that did not strike our fancy for one reason or another” (83).

During the shopping extravaganza, Jack mentions that "I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface” (83). This can be likened to seeing himself
on a screen, something which most people aspire to. As we know from other examples in the book, screens are not to be trusted in DeLillo’s world, and this is a sign that the shopping trip is not as deeply fulfilling as it might seem. This is a fleeting moment for Jack, one in which despite being a member of a crowd, he feels uplifted and validated. He even feels closer to his family here among his fellow consumers: “My family glорied in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last” (83). To them, the shopping was intoxication, yet the high fades away as soon as the family returns home: “We drove home in silence. We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone”(84). Another concern with this sequence is the reason why Jack feels compelled to go on the shopping orgy in the first place. He has been slighted by a colleague who says he looks “harmless,” “indistinct,” and “aging”(83). Apparently, all one needs to do when faced with such accusations is to take a trip to the mall. If this is the case then Jack is living a very shallow existence.

Materialism was perhaps at its zenith in 1980’s America. The economy was extremely robust, money flowed, and the population consumed with reckless abandon. What gets left behind in this environment is common sense. Jack did not go shopping because he needed anything; he just wanted to feel better. “I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it”(84). By partaking in the circus of consumerism, he was in fact able to feel better. DeLillo is effective in his criticism of this type of behavior with Jack’s comic extravaganza at the mall. The cavalier attitude towards money in this episode is symptomatic of the materialistic 1980’s. “I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain.” However, it is the next sentence which is truly damning: “These sums came back to me in the form of existential credit”(84). Yes, perhaps Jack has made himself feel better by going to the mall, yet he has not become a new person through his purchasing exercises. He offers to buy his family their Christmas presents, which is met with elation on their part. Further allusions are made to the white noise of society: “A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers,
with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction.” (84)

The eighties in America was a freewheeling decade which saw the economy soar to new heights. Times were so good at home that people were preoccupied spending money. Whereas the late eighties saw the end of the drawn-out Cold War which meant an end to a threat that had long persisted, the booming economy will perhaps be just as well remembered when speaking of domestic affairs. After all, the status of the economy most often dictates the American mood. The booming American economy can be seen as a result of globalization. What may seem like a newfound cultural exchange as the world gets smaller proves often to be a material exchange. As Howard Zinn notes in his A People’s History of the United States, “American corporations were active all over the world on a scale never seen before. There were, by the early seventies, about three hundred U.S. corporations, including the seven largest banks, which earned 40 percent of their net profits outside the United States. They were called ‘multinationals,’ but actually 98 percent of their top executives were Americans. As a group, they now constituted the third-largest economy in the world, next to the United States and the Soviet Union”(568). This development did not bring cultures together but instead made gaps, particularly economic ones, wider: “The relationship of these global corporations with the poorer countries had long been an exploiting one, it was clear from U.S. Department of Commerce figures. Whereas U.S. corporations in Europe between 1950 and 1965 invested $8.1 billion and made $5.5 billion in profits, in Latin America they invested $3.8 billion and made $11.2 billion in profits, and in Africa they invested $5.2 billion and made $14.3 billion in profits” (569).

Nowhere is globalization more apparent in White Noise than in the supermarket. As Jack enters the supermarket, he states: “There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright”(36). It is, of course, because of the global economy that we are provided with the illusion that produce is always in season. The shelves of American supermarkets are stacked with brand-name goods which
compete for consumers' attention on the basis of such variables as quality, price, image, and design. Millions of dollars are spent on precisely this hunt for market share. After countless trips to the grocery store, the choice often becomes automatic, with shoppers displaying a form of "loyalty" to the brand they "trust." However, do these kinds of emotions really have a place in the grocery store? When Jack's colleague Murray buys generic products in the supermarket, he negates the usual process of choosing a brand, and thus the corporate wars in which money is essentially wasted in the pursuit of consumers. The products he buys have plain white packages. No money has been spent in attempting to lure him into buying this package, nor has a cent been spent in advertising it: "'This is the new austerity,' he said. 'Flavorless packaging. It appeals to me. I feel I'm not only saving money but contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus. It's like World War III. Everything is white. They'll take our bright colors away and use them in the war effort'"(18). The consumer does have the option, despite all the circus-like distractions around him or her, of cutting through the noise and making a sensible decision (buying a generic product at a low price). If the entire American population were content to simply buy generic beans, for example, then the purpose of advertising (a significant expense for manufacturers as well as an influence on consumers) would be eliminated. Is it really so strange that a consumer wants "generic" food? Perhaps it is more strange that consumers seek out the food with the most appealing label. The label is simply another façade. DeLillo characterizes this debate in typical satirical fashion when he compares Murray's more modest generic purchases to the load he and Babette have accumulated at the store:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls- it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (20)

DeLillo's message here is that the average American is very impressionable. We are very much affected by the advertising around us- it is, after all, almost impossible to escape. There are various figures regarding how many commercials
the average American is exposed to per day, but the most conservative estimates are in the hundreds. Advertising and consumerism are very much at home in America. DeLillo reminds us of this in a lighthearted way, yet makes a very serious point. As if to illustrate the ubiquitous presence of advertising in our lives, DeLillo peppers the text with tidbits of commercial products, in an allusion to the influence of capitalism on our daily lives. Early in the book, a thoughtful interlude on the subject of death ends with: “The airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference center” (15). Other examples include: “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” (52) and “Mastercard, Visa, American Express” (100). Solicitation in the form of commercials on billboards or through the media constantly vie for the attention of the American populace. It can often seem that everything has a corporate sponsor. The endless stream of “buy now” is a prime example of the white noise of the title.

Why do all of these examples come in threes? These examples are the holy trinity of American daily life. Consumption is the one religion all Americans have in common. The supermarket, the hardware store, and the mall are the places where people congregate in a kind of quasi-religion. As we will see, Jack sees gathering in crowds as a way of keeping death at arm’s length. Although he joins the crowd when he goes to the supermarket and the mall (and seems to enjoy it very much, at times), he paradoxically distrusts crowds and seeks to avoid them. Jack also reveals a kind of superstition: “Is death odd-numbered?” (47) The commercial triads throughout the novel are like spiritual chants. In addition, Jack’s “Advanced Nazism” class deals with crowds:

Crowd scenes predominated. Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing, bursting through the traffic. Halls hung with swastika banners, with mortuary wreaths and death’s-head insignia. Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights aimed straight up- a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire. There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks. (26)

The death chants at Hitler’s rallies can be likened to the advertizing slogans that are so pervasive in the novel. By emphasizing crowds and chants both in the
American everyday experience and at Hitler’s rallies, DeLillo is making parallels between them.

_White Noise_ is full of references to death. Jack and Babette are, by all accounts, obsessed with death. They are constantly plagued by the thought of it. “Who will die first? This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys” (15). Where does this fear of death come from? In his capacity as a professor in Hitler studies, Jack surrounds himself with this topic. The question then arises, which came first, his profession or his obsession with death? On the other hand, we all share a fear of death as our final destination. After all, death is something which all of us have in common. However, I would argue that in this instance Jack and Babette’s fear of death is also a consequence of the society in which they live. As stated, the mechanization of society dehumanizes the people in it. When we can no longer trust our senses, but instead rely on the media to do it, what can we rely on? (is it raining?, is it a ‘feathery plume’ or an ‘airborne toxic event?’) What is the antidote to this fear? Babette trusts in Dylar, a drug she is taking on a trial basis which purports to ease the fear of death.

DeLillo makes a very strong connection in the book between crowds and death. Jack and Babette have what appears to be a constant fear of death. It is no wonder Jack is pre-occupied with death when he teaches a class on Hitler and the Nazis. In fact, he emphasizes crowds in his “Advanced Nazism” class. The crowds were “assembled in the name of death.” According to Jack, they were there to “attend tributes to the dead” (73). This is ironic, and therefore fitting for postmodernism, in two ways. To begin with, Jack’s emphasis on German crowds gathering to pay respect to the dead is an amazing disconnect from what really was important to remember about the Second World War. Furthermore, although the people were gathering “in the name of death,” it was death which they gathered in a crowd to escape. “To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd” (73). What should not be overlooked, however, is that once one is part of the crowd, one loses all sense of oneself, of individuality. This is a central theme to the novel as a whole.
America is, arguably, the birthplace of mindless distraction. It is the home of entertainment, much of which is devoid of any more lastingly valuable qualities. “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set” (66). As already observed, DeLillo digs into this lifestyle with a sarcastic, satirical form of criticism. It is, however, a love/hate relationship. The humor in the telling of the story lessens the bluntness of DeLillo’s message. If we were to try to find one culprit in this work for the problems faced by the protagonists, it would have to be conformity. DeLillo is trying to remind us to continue to be individuals despite society’s encouragements to the contrary. We may not be able to stem the tide of useless information bombarding us from all sides, but we don’t have to partake in it. Likewise, DeLillo can’t negate the influence of advertising and television in American society, but he can make fun of it. He has expressed this attitude not only in this work but also in his general belief that “American writers ought to stand and live in the margins” (Nel 24). Many of the characters in the story distinguish themselves through their resistance to being ‘regular’ people. Seen from society’s conformist perspective, they are, in a word, weird.

Jack’s place in society, for example, is outside the mainstream. His obsession with Hitler, for one, assures him of this. Also, if he can be judged by the company he keeps, then the women in his life illustrate it as well. Tweedy, mother of Bee, is married to a CIA agent and wears gloves, eyeshades and socks to bed. Janet, Heinrich’s mother, spends her time in an ashram in Montana. “The usual rumors abound of sexual freedom, sexual slavery, drugs, nudity, mind control, poor hygiene, tax evasion, monkey-worship, torture, prolonged and hideous death” (24). Besides the protagonist Jack and his previous wives, there are many other characters in White Noise who do not seem to adhere to any regular, run-of-the-mill American existence.

Murray is an example of someone who does not fit into the mainstream. Despite, or quite possibly because of his quirkiness, he can be looked at as someone who is free from the constraints that the “typical” American has, whether he or she is aware of these or not. An example is the fact that Murray doesn’t feel
the need to buy the flashy brand-name packages in the grocery store, opting instead for the generic products. Murray seems to be able to see right through the façade of television, and, in turn the commercialism that comes with it. However, instead of seeing the television as a conduit for worthless information and commercialism, he is strangely fascinated by it, claiming to be able to pick out deeper messages:

You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of wild birth, it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students, ‘What more do you want?’ Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. ‘Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.’ The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust. (51)

True to form, DeLillo is giving us pure satire here. We should not marvel at the “wealth of data” contained in the commercials but instead at the length producers are willing to go to in order to sell us things (products hurtling out of darkness). In effect, we can reverse Murray's reverence: TV is junk. Further, when the various professors are discussing the appeal of disaster footage on TV, Murray continues in this vein: “In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things” (67). Apparently Murray thinks that commercials deserve more attention than disasters. At times Murray acts like an advisor to Jack, expressing his opinions on everything from the most-photographed barn in America to the meaning of the supermarket to American society. His mystical pronouncements paint him as a kind of unique individual in the narrative. As stated, his statements are often extremely satirical, leaving us to wonder whether we should take them at face value or to assume that the opposite is true. However, we are always treated to his opinion, and he is often the character through which we see some of the most important issues of the day, whether it be the television, the supermarket, or the barn.
Jack's profession also solidifies him as someone outside the mainstream. After all, Jack is not an ordinary history professor. He is Chairman of the Department of Hitler Studies. In fact, he has “invented” Hitler studies in North America (4). This is not a mainstream career. What is it that draws Jack to Hitler studies? Jack explains that Hitler “gave me something to grow into and develop toward” (17). Though such a comparison may at first seem unlikely, similarities can be drawn between Nazi propaganda and American commercialism. The Nazis needed to market themselves just like consumer products do. Also, Jack seems to be fascinated by the way the Nazis congregated. When he speaks of the class he teaches, he refers to the “special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms” (25). He also screens background footage in which “Crowd scenes predominated” (25). Whereas Hitler organized huge rallies, Americans gather at the mall. The circumstances for gathering may be different, yet in the world dominated by propaganda and advertising, do the details (the fine print) really matter?

When asked by Denise how Heinrich got his name, Jack implies that he wanted his son to have a name that separates him from the crowd, and at the same time he believes a German name would give his son some security:

I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive and I still do. I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid. People were naming their children Kim, Kelly, and Tracy…There's something about German names, the German language, German things. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course. (63)

Jack is conflicted by the idea of crowds. His obsession with Nazi rallies lead to his career in Hitler studies, and yet he shies away from the crowd himself and wants his son to do the same.

DeLillo is concerned, above all, that the noise of life in the eighties is getting the better of individuals such as Jack and Babette, and, in turn, all of American society. He turns a critical eye on commercialism, which is inherent in the capitalist economy and is apparent on the television, at the shopping mall, and not least the supermarket. These underlying elements in the novel are portrayed with
much the same fear as the more visible threat, the toxic spill from which the Gladneys flee.
Chapter 3

On the surface, *Rabbit, Run* and *White Noise* may not have so much in common. Each novel is strongly rooted in the time period in which it was created, and twenty-four years separate them. However, the two novels share elements which tie them strongly together. One of the most basic of these elements is the way they represent ordinary American life. There is an edge to the proceedings in *Rabbit* which is less apparent in *White Noise*. This is due to the realism in the novel, as compared to DeLillo’s satire. These methods were used effectively by the two authors for one common goal: to make the reader aware of disturbing trends in society and to counter American conformity. The precise ills which the protagonists Harry and Jack are fighting are different in the two time periods, but the trap is the same: losing one’s individuality in the midst of the “crowd.”

Despite their different approaches, the two novels share a strong foundation in America. The adage is that a writer should write what he (or she) *knows*. These two authors know America, and it shows in the way they portray everyday life. If they can be criticized, it would be for the fact that they draw attention to problems more than provide solutions. To be fair, Updike and DeLillo are taking on large issues in their respective works, reflecting the times they were writing. The fact that they do have a strong connection with their time reinforces the New Historian perspective in their work. However, the problems I have with
a New Historicist take on Rabbit, Run, as mentioned in the chapter devoted to the book, apply to White Noise as well. Updike and DeLillo's respective works are wonderfully creative works of art (a credit to their talents) which are fundamentally based in truisms of their time periods. I will now take a closer look at the similarities between these two works as well as what makes them unique. In addition I will add several works to the discussion which deal with similar issues.

DeLillo's use of satire in White Noise is a perfect way to attack the increasing absurdity of life in eighties America. Behind the humor one finds incisive, topical criticism of materialism, a loss of humanity in favor of technology, industry, and globalization. In the novel the characters are almost constantly in a haze, whether wandering the aisles in the supermarket or day-dreaming about who will die first. DeLillo is very effective in creating this impression. The haze is due to a constant bombardment of inane information coming from the airwaves. The airwaves that seem innocent (though brainless) as they carry information coming from the TV and the radio, turn out to be deadly in the form of the airborne toxic event. The toxic spill and the way the Gladneys and the community react to it include many of the important themes of the novel. The media coverage of the disaster is a collision course of hard reality (a real live event!) and a media coverage which wants desperately to be relevant, yet is constantly undermined by its own ridiculous terminology. When a tank car derails, the result is first called “a feathery plume” (111). When asked why they call it a plume, Heinrich replies that “Air time is valuable. They can’t go into long tortured descriptions” (111). The implication is that the advertising space allotted must not be sacrificed: “Available for a limited time only with optional megabyte hard disk” (112).

The airborne toxic event is both comical and disturbing. It is interesting to look at the Gladneys’ scramble for information from today’s perspective. What is different today is, of course, easy access to news and information just a click away. Though we may laugh as the Gladneys are glued to the television and the radio, our increasing need for up-to-date information makes us all the more dependent on being connected at all times. In addition, the free access to information does not translate into this information being correct at all times. It is important to retain a
healthy skepticism, just as the Gladneys needed to in their interpretation of the news about the “event.” DeLillo seems to be sending a message that one needs to trust oneself and one’s own instincts above all.

Jack’s response to the airborne toxic event is also telling in its implications of American inequality. When pressed, and worried for his own safety, his true feelings are revealed, namely that disasters are supposed to happen to other people, not college professors:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I’m a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith. (114)

Perhaps the worst fate in White Noise is when a disaster happens, yet no-one notices, because there are no media representatives to capture the event. We are witness to this when there is a narrowly averted plane crash in the story. When Jack goes to pick up his ex-wife Tweedy and daughter Bee at the Iron City airport, he is greeted by the passengers who survived an engine-failure on their flight, narrowly avoiding imminent death. The following is an exchange between Jack and Bee:

“Where’s the media?” she said.
“There is no media in Iron City.”
“They went through all that for nothing?” (92)

Class differences are also brought out in this episode. As the plane is hurtling nose first towards the ground, the first-class passengers rush into the coach section in order to avoid being the first ones to hit the ground. The people sitting in coach, naturally, protested.

Also examined in this “event” is the theme of illusion vs. reality. The real disaster seems to get in the way of the preparation for disaster:

“That’s quite an armband you’ve got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important.”
“Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they’re still battling over funds for.”
“But this evacuation isn’t simulated. It’s real.”
“We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.”
“A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?”
“We took it right into the streets.” (139)

SIMUVAC’s training during the toxic spill is symbolic of the absurdity of “radiant” American life, where everything is brightly lit and the packaging in the supermarket is gaudy with “vivid lettering.” This boundary between illusion and reality is crossed with virtually every advertisement. In order to catch our attention, the advertisement must have a selling point which will hook the consumer. Can all the claims of the commercials be true? Not likely!

Whereas DeLillo teases the reader with his descriptions of a perky, bright America, there are evidently other ways of looking at everyday America. In “A Supermarket in California” Allen Ginsberg seems to concentrate on the shadows instead, with his reference to “penumbras,” as well as: “Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we’ll both be lonely.” This is a darker picture of America. Ginsberg seems to be searching more for what is absent than what is present; he is reaching out to Walt Whitman, who is long gone but has left an important American legacy. Ginsberg refers to the “Lost America” of Whitman’s time. He asks, “Where are we going, Walt Whitman?” Ginsberg is questioning the direction the country is headed. DeLillo, Updike, and Ginsberg all have very different literary profiles. However, what they share is an important questioning of the role of the individual in American society. Through their works they encourage us also to ask questions and not give up our ideals. Ginsberg’s poem (published 1956) comes from the same fifties background as Rabbit, Run. Ginsberg is presumably reacting to some of the same aspects of society that Updike did.

In Updike’s novel there is a sense of foreboding around every turn for Rabbit. There seems to be a dark cloud hanging over him at all times. There is a certain melancholic tone to the novel, in contrast to DeLillo’s brightness. We feel Rabbit’s sense of disappointment that he and Janice do not measure up to the model of the industrious man off at work and the prim wife in her gleaming
The 50’s were a period marked by stability in America. WWII was beginning to recede into the collective memory, and stasis and conformity were seemingly the order of the day. This neat and tidy idea of a perfect society is perhaps what Ginsberg refers to when he speaks of the “Lost America.” Neither Ginsberg nor Updike bought into this idyll.

One of the themes that is prevalent in *Rabbit, Run*, primarily, but also to some extent in *White Noise*, is the theme of no escape. As I have observed earlier, Rabbit tries to run in his car but ends up getting nowhere. The metaphor of a “net” is used at various times in the text, one which always catches Rabbit. The mess in his house “clings to his back like a tightening net” (14), and when the doubts start creeping into his late-night drive “the net seems thicker now” (34). This utter inability to escape brings to mind George Orwell’s novel *1984*. Despite the more political nature of this book, and its roots in the UK as opposed to America, both Winston and Rabbit experience a feeling of entrapment and a strong desire for independence. When Eccles questions why Rabbit has left his wife, Rabbit responds: “I don’t know, it seemed like I was glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses and television going and meals late and no way of getting out. Then all of a sudden it hit me how easy it was to get out, just walk out, and by damn it was easy.” (105) Winston, on the other hand, is monitored at all times by Big Brother to the point where he does not dare think thoughts which are not approved by the authorities, for fear of committing thoughtcrime. Big Brother is symbolic of a totalitarian Socialist regime, yet the way in which society is controlled in 1984 can be likened to the pressure Rabbit feels that his society exerts, which for him proves to be equally impossible to escape. Rabbit mistakenly thinks that his physical “walking out” is enough to sever ties with his wife, family, and the expectations of society as represented by his watchdog Eccles. By the end of the book, however, he is still running, still dissatisfied. Rabbit is free to run to his heart’s content, yet his guilt always follows.

*1984* is also interesting to compare to *White Noise*, with this year being the publication date for DeLillo’s novel. In some respects, Orwell’s vision of the future is not so far off the mark. An example of this is the invasion of technology into the
home in both works. In 1984, the telescreen is a necessary evil for Winston. It cannot be turned off, it blurts propaganda endlessly in the background, and in addition, it records his every movement. The television in *White Noise*, always on and ready with a new commercial, is not so different. Whereas the television in today’s world might seem innocent, it can be argued that it is also a controlling aspect of society as envisioned by Orwell. It would seem that DeLillo shares Orwell’s skepticism of the invasion of TV in the home. Unlike Winston, the Gladneys have the power to turn their box off, yet choose not to do so.

Updike has professed his affinity for the “middle” of American life. I take this to mean both his use of the middle as “average” and “ordinary” (as evidenced in his realist portrayal of Rabbit’s American scene), as well as where extremes meet (Rabbit’s ambivalence). I will discuss these two interpretations separately. The first is exemplified in everything from Rabbit’s flight in his car, in which the fabled American highway is depicted, to Rabbit’s heroics on the basketball court in high school, to his middle-class neighborhood. Dilvo Ristoff explains that the setting of the novel (including Updike’s attention to historical detail) is the center around which everything else in the novel revolves:

> It is precisely this emphasis on the ‘scene’ of the drama which allows us to perceive Updike’s Harry as so, almost deterministically, moved by the events and circumstances that surround his life. And it also this focus which makes us realize that the Rabbit trilogy is not only a story of Harry but of all those who, like him, were and are exposed to similar forces. (8)

If we look closely at the first section of the novel, we can see that Ristoff’s claims about the importance of setting are accurate. Rabbit is exhilarated by the game of basketball that he joins in the alley, although he must stop because he realizes his limitations. His high spirits come crashing down, however, when he returns home. His son is not there to greet him, only Janice who has been drinking and watching television. The house is a mess. Rabbit, who once knew greatness on the basketball court, is now surrounded by a web of middleness, and his inability to deal with the situation causes him to run.
In *White Noise*, on the other hand, there is a kind of brightness to the ordinary. Whereas Updike is concerned with middleness, DeLillo has stated that he intended to portray everyday life in America in a different light:

*I would call it a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments. In White Noise, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost holy or sacred. Is it really there? Well, yes...Imagine someone from the third world who has never set foot in a place like that suddenly transported to an A&P in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Wouldn’t he be elated or frightened? Wouldn’t he sense that something transcending is about to happen to him in the midst of all this brightness? So I think that’s something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision.* (DeCurtis 63)

I don’t believe that we are meant to take this “radiance” entirely seriously. Instead, it is part of the satire in the novel, in that a lot of meaning is, ironically, attached to meaningless things. This technique resembles the way advertisements attempt to glorify products which are really ordinary. The book is full of such examples: “The radio said: ‘It’s the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue”’(122).

*The word bright (as similar to radiant) is found frequently in the text, echoing our temptation to look away from whatever troubling aspects of society there are:*

> Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing. Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip. (170)

As long as the brightest aspects of society remain bright, the glare will keep us from seeing the decay elsewhere. The supermarket in the novel is an indispensable source of radiance.

*In an interview, DeLillo is asked if there are “some specific American realities” which have a draw for him. While the interview dealt mainly with DeLillo’s then recently published book *Libra*, about the Kennedy assassination, DeLillo reveals some common themes that recur throughout his work:*
Certainly there are themes that recur. Perhaps a sense of secret patterns in our lives. A sense of ambiguity. Certainly the violence of contemporary life is a motif. I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America… I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go. (DeCurtis 57)

It is safe to say that many of these themes are apparent in *White Noise*.

Updike, like DeLillo, also tries to decipher what is special about the ordinary: “The real America seemed to me ‘out there,’ too homogenous and electrified by now to pose much threat of the provinciality that people used to come to New York to escape. Out there was where I belonged, immersed in the ordinary, which careful explication would reveal to be extraordinary” (Greiner “The Myth of American Exceptionalism” 151-152). It would appear that Updike feels the need, in his writing, to explain what is extraordinary about America. In *Rabbit, Run* Updike gives us a very ordinary man in a very ordinary setting. The “extraordinary” which Updike provides is both his radiant description of the ordinary setting as well as Rabbit’s out of the ordinary attempts at rising above his situation.

What makes Updike’s detailed depiction of ordinary American life so interesting to read? America is the enticing “other” which stimulates the imagination of those leading the same kind of ordinary lives elsewhere. Kielland-Lund notes that many Europeans may see a reflection of themselves and their culture in America, or perhaps just as often, a number of cultural patterns that they would like to avoid. “Thus, from de Tocqueville to Dickens to Alistair Cooke, reflections on the American journey are not just an attempt to paint a realistic picture of the new nation, they are also an exploration of self and a testing of stereotypes and preconceptions, both general and individual” (77).

Kielland-Lund goes on to suggest that Rabbit is simply part of a long American tradition when he strikes out on his own in the face of an oppressive society. However, Rabbit’s immaturity prevents him from being considered as a viable role model for American independence, regardless of whether his quest is worthy or not. On the other hand, this type of flawed character is precisely what
Updike intended. There are several reasons for this choice. The first is due to Updike’s preoccupation with middleness in general, as well as his use of realism in this work in particular. It was not Updike’s intention to create a perfect “hero,” quite the opposite. This brings us to the second reason Rabbit is flawed: Updike’s concern with the dialectic (as mentioned above) in which the reader is forced to consider Rabbit’s actions and weigh them against society’s standards of right and wrong. While other American “heroes” may be flawed (Kjelland-Lund mentions Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield), neither Twain nor Salinger were as pre-occupied with the dialectic as Updike was. Despite all of Rabbit’s insurrections, Updike was able to prevent the reader from judging Rabbit outright as a scoundrel.

New Historicism can be helpful in an analysis of both Rabbit, Run and White Noise. However, just as New Historicism is not completely adequate when analyzing Updike’s novel, nor is it when we use it to approach White Noise. It is clear that DeLillo’s novel is full of commentary and criticism of its time. Yet it is important to remember that New Historicism was originally directed at works from the Renaissance which were taken up many years later and looked at from a fresh perspective. White Noise, on the other hand, is a contemporary work, and was written by DeLillo with an awareness of this type of criticism. I would argue that the satire with which DeLillo writes negates a “historical” look at this novel, because this study of culture is already built into the novel. From the very first page, when the students arrive with their ridiculous load of goods, DeLillo is implicating the culture within which he writes. This sense of self-awareness makes a New Historian approach to this work redundant. There is a self-deprecation about it, perhaps because DeLillo knows that, as a member of his society, he must also share some of the blame. Presumably, DeLillo needs to buy his food at the supermarket as well. The humor and satire, because they represent the absurdity of the times so well, cause White Noise to be implicated in this culture. DeLillo is employing the very elements which are his targets. He cites advertising slogans, for example, as well as snippets from tabloids which are completely ridiculous, yet for all we know could have been taken straight out of an actual tabloid:

[Babette] reported a front-page story. ‘Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons.’...Scientists at Princeton’s famed Institute for Advanced Studies have stunned the
The way in which *White Noise* takes part in the cultural exchange of the eighties reinforces the New Historicist view that literature is not simply a commentary on a certain time, but an active ingredient in the meaning of the time.

A difference between the two novels is that in *Rabbit, Run* it is primarily Harry who struggles to adapt to society’s demands, while in *White Noise* the ambivalence seems to be shared by many of the characters. Heinrich, at various times during the course of the novel, reveals the ambiguity that dominates his life. This uncertainty, in almost everything he is involved in (‘is it raining?’, ‘should I go and visit my mother?’) can be likened to Rabbit’s own incapability of making an informed decision. The difference is that Heinrich’s questioning nature seems to come from his addiction to modern media. He seems to have been, in effect, ruined by the television. On the other hand, his skills in the dialectic would make Updike proud, for instance as evidenced by his argument with his father over whether it is raining. He may have a future as a debater, or, perhaps a TV reporter. When disaster strikes in *White Noise*, he is extremely well prepared because of his experience watching catastrophes on TV.

Rabbit attempts to be different from the crowd, just as Jack does. Apart from his gifts on the basketball court, there is nothing extraordinary about Rabbit. Updike makes clear that those coming from the “middle” are equally capable of having an existential crisis as those who are considered to be from the upper echelons of society. Rabbit needs to accept his lot in life, yet not give in to external pressures to conform. This is Rabbit’s existential dilemma. In response to Rabbit’s adolescent questioning about why she likes him, Ruth responds: “’Cause you haven’t given up. In your stupid way you’re still fighting” (92). He feels that he has been misled by others and that he needs to take matters into his own hands; there is a mistrust, a suspicion of society, of the things which make up his everyday life. When Rabbit flees in his car, he is hobbled by paranoia, yet this is most likely provoked by his own guilty conscience: “He doesn’t drive five miles before this
road begins to feel like a part of the same trap” (26). “Senseless fear cakes over Rabbit’s body” (27). He feels that he has broken the rules, which deep down still have a hold on him, making his attempted escape uncomfortable.

The absence of clear, commonly accepted moral principles and value systems is a significant similarity between the two works. What typically inspires us to try to be on the right side of the moral divide? In America, the term “family values” is often used. The term gives a clue that the family is considered central to one’s value system. In these two works, however, the family is not a source of unity or comfort. Rabbit’s family life is among his excuses for leaving. In White Noise, the Gladneys are a family patched together from disparate parts.

In Updike’s view, there is no simple definition for right versus wrong. Bernard Schopen explains, including quotes from Updike:

> Updike has suggested that the human conscience constantly suffers guilt for transgressing the laws of two different moralities. One is external, abstract, made up of biblical injunction, social and cultural mores, and all the precepts our civilization has established to enable men to live together in harmony. But 'Another kind of morality is a sort of response to an inner imperative'; this subjective morality is less a system than a 'feeling' or 'sense' of the propriety of a given act. And while Updike believes that 'Morality tries to keep us from pain,' he admits that 'I don’t see either solution being perfect.' (198)

This has clear implications for Rabbit’s dilemma in the novel. In Rabbit, Run the two sides are succinctly represented in Eccles’ attempts to round Harry up and return him to his wife for the sake of order, and Rabbit’s impulsive actions which do not seem to follow any pattern. Instead of adhering to “social and cultural mores,” he makes his decisions according to what he feels is right at any given time.

Another common guideline or source of morality for many people is the church. Organized religion is certainly addressed in Rabbit, Run, and Rabbit at various times attempts to prove his faith, even by praying at one point. However, this act says more about his own remorse than his devotion to God, and in general he turns his back on organized religion. Although he is an “(o)rder-loving man” (8), there seem to be few other guidelines in Rabbit’s life when we meet him. True to the model of the independent American protagonist that Kielland-Lund refers
to, the order he has in his life is self-imposed. Harry has faith (in something which eludes him), though he is not faithful to anything in his life, neither in the worldly sense (with his wife), nor in the spiritual sense. He simply does not have the persistence to stay the course of devotion. His belief is primarily self-centered.

It has been suggested that such worldly things as sex and sports, for Rabbit, replace religion. As if to prove that Rabbit does have something ‘calling’ him, as opposed to being completely directionless, we are treated to a discussion Harry has with Eccles over a game of golf. Eccles demands to know why Harry left his wife. “There was this thing that wasn’t there,” Harry answers. “Are you sure it exists?” Eccles counters. Although inarticulate as the discussion may be, a vague allusion to religion becomes clear, as Harry intimates that it is up to Eccles to prove that ‘it’ does, in fact, exist. When Eccles presses Rabbit to clarify, he can’t, despite the fact that Rabbit has claimed he knows what ‘it’ is. The discussion seems to be getting nowhere, and Eccles attacks Rabbit’s decision-making, calling him a coward. Harry tees up the golf ball, and for the first time in the game hits the ball cleanly. He proclaims: “That’s it!” (134) For Harry, a golf ball hit cleanly is tantamount to a connection with God. On the surface it would appear that Rabbit simply wants life to go his way, the way the ball did. Pinsker summarizes Rabbit’s epiphany in this way:

‘That’s it!’ is simultaneously discovery and confirmation, a moment when confusion gives way to wordless certainty. Moreover, this all-important it conflates God, the motions of grace, the pure camaraderie of sport, and perhaps most important of all, the bracing possibility of a new, pristine chance at the next tee into a single image. (71)

The epigraph of the novel, a quotation from the French philosopher Pascal, fits Updike’s theory of two moralities well and summarizes Rabbit’s inner dilemma of whether to accept society’s standards (for example the Church) or to trust his own instincts: “The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances.” Pascal was not only a philosopher but a mathematician, and this statement could be viewed as an equation which is impossible to solve. The statement itself, like Rabbit’s character, is ambiguous. Which element is most important? The “motions of Grace” in the novel are certainly not a reference to Eccles’ attempts, more social than religious, to reunite Rabbit and Janice. Nor can
Rabbit claim to have the Grace of God on his side. He did, however, possess a type of worldly “grace” on the basketball court. Just because Rabbit was a star basketball player, he thinks that he has some kind of privilege in the other areas of his life. In a way, he was spoiled by his own talents.

The belief that he is special has hardened Rabbit’s heart towards Janice: “Just yesterday, it seems to him, she stopped being pretty” (7). He, the star, is suddenly living a very average life alongside a very average wife, and he feels he deserves better. By the time we meet him, his heart has already hardened towards Janice. He seems to give little thought to Nelson either when he decides to escape in the car. We can only hope that he thought the boy was in good hands with his parents. Even if he is without a solid plan as he drives down the highway, he has a certain determination about him. It is the hardness of his heart that prompts his decision to leave his family behind and begin his search. In the end, however, it is external circumstances which keep him running. In the beginning, Rabbit is running towards something, his idea of a better life, however vague and inconclusive this was for him. By the end of the story, I would argue that Rabbit is running away. His bad decisions, together with his indecision, have raised the stakes until he simply has nothing to do but run from everyone. As Rabbit finds out, external circumstances, like the kids he refers to in the novel, have a way of “crowding you up” (3). It would appear that this last element of the epigraph, despite all of Harry’s efforts to the contrary, have beaten him.

In comparison, White Noise has very little religious content, at least of the established variety. There are, however, a number of references to sacredness and spirituality. The spirituality is found in everyday life, so there seems to be no need for God. In this way DeLillo’s “radiance in the everyday” is not just the bright lights in the supermarket, but a spiritual radiance. The commercial triads which pop up mystically throughout the novel are likened to religious chants and are examples of the insidious way advertising invades our consciousness. Frank Lentricchia explains this phenomenon in the book:

A deep refrain- like a line of poetic chant, with strong metrical structure- is placed by itself in privileged typographical space, part of no paragraph or dialogue, without quotes and
related to nothing that comes before or after: a break in the text never reflected upon because Jack never hears it….Jack in these moments is possessed, a mere medium who speaks:

Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex
Mastercard, Visa, American Express
Leaded, Unleaded, Superunleaded. (102)

Murray likens a trip to the supermarket to a Tibetan “transitional state”, in which one waits for rebirth. He goes on to say that the supermarket recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data….Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore. (37-38)

Murray’s monologue on the supermarket is damning for the state of affairs in America. His eloquent description of Tibetans’ beliefs is juxtaposed with stocking up on “onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints”(3). Murray’s comparison of the two contexts is over-the-top, though we must admit that the ritual of going to the supermarket is part of the daily life of an American. Murray refers to a kind of secret wealth behind “all the colors of the spectrum.” The bright lights and packaging of the supermarket beckon the consumer. There is, in fact, a purpose to them, though it is perhaps unpleasant to think of the fact that, as opposed to an ancient religion, they are created by focus groups and advertising executives. Murray asks Babette to consider what is behind the façade. However, just when he is in the thick of his argument, he does an about-face, and admits that it is pointless. To be sure, there is an impressive amount of dogma to the religion of consumerism, yet there is no “useful purpose” in examining the meaning behind it.

What DeLillo is doing is trying to draw connections between modern life in America and elsewhere in the world. There is most often a huge gap, in which non-industrial countries, when measured economically, pale in comparison to a superpower like America. However, Americans are not necessarily so much
further advanced than Tibetans. If Americans rely on the supermarket to spiritually recharge themselves, perhaps they are many steps behind the Tibetans? We are ultimately reminded that this is still America, as the white noise encroaches: “...the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension.” (36)

When Murray talks of “deciphering” and “rearranging” the codes, we can see a reference to DeLillo’s “secret patterns”. However, are the patterns really so secret here? The Gladneys watch disasters on TV, they shop at the mall and the supermarket, and they read tabloids. They are typical American consumers. When we look at the connections DeLillo makes between these activities and death, it is only natural that Jack and Babette are bothered by a constant fear. “Here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think” (38). As we have seen, the supermarket also has death-like qualities. Murray refers to exiting through the sliding doors as a walk towards death. The “last purchase point” is also where one is able to purchase a tabloid, famously full of tales of death-whether celebrity or alien. Mark Osteen argues that these tabloids are a unique convergence of television, consumerism, and spirituality: “All three channels—television channels, consumer desires, and spiritual channels—converge in the tabloids, those garish magazines loaded with lurid tales of celebrity indiscretions, UFOs, and miracles that shout at us from supermarket checkout stands” (166).

Television in White Noise has unmistakable links with death as well. This is the medium which brings disasters from all around the world into the Gladneys home. As we find out, the television is not able to convey the hard reality of death to the Gladneys—they only experience this feeling when they are directly affected by the airborne toxic event. Another example of the TV transmitting death is when the family sees Babette on screen:

The face on the screen was Babette’s. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she
dead, missing, disembodied?...A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation. It was her all right, the face, the hair, the way she blinks in rapid twos and threes. I’d seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen made me think of some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I? (104)

_White Noise_ is built on a foundation of paradox: the television, the shopping mall, and the supermarket, not the church, are where we find spirituality. However, instead of this spirituality having positive and life-affirming qualities, it is invariably associated with death. This leaves little hope for Jack and Babette, and since these are such fundamental aspects of American culture, there is no escape.

DeLillo could have voiced his concerns for society with a dark portrayal of the dangers of television and consumerism. However, there is a possibility that no one would have found this interesting to read. Instead, he borrows from the playbook of the very commercialism he chides by using a “radiance” in the form of satire. This satire is much more effective than a realistic account would be.
Conclusion

It may at first glance seem odd to compare *Rabbit, Run* to *White Noise*. While both writers are white American males, the similarities seem to end there. One deals with a desperate attempt for self-realization by a young, immature, middle-class man in the fifties, while the other has to do with a college-professor, his wife, and their assorted children hemmed-in by the at times overwhelming eighties. However, I have attempted to demonstrate that these two novels in fact share a number of common themes. The most fundamental aspect that they share is an ambivalence towards commonly accepted American moral norms. This overarching idea is further represented in such diverse themes as the individual’s struggle with the standards of society, commercialism, skepticism, religion, the meaning of family, immaturity, and a fear of irrelevance, death, and entrapment. These are just a sampling of themes which are present to a greater or lesser degree in the two novels. The two works are solidly rooted in their time periods, something which adds a further irony to their similarities. Because of this, a New Historicist view of the two seems obvious, yet I attempt to show that this perspective alone is insufficient.

I believe the word “ambivalent” is more correct than “critical” when looking at how these two authors have approached America. This is, I would argue, due to
the fact that their criticisms are mediated by a certain grudging respect for their country. This can be summarized in DeLillo’s idea of “radiance in dailiness”. Updike is adept at adding feeling to setting, as evidenced in the rich portrayals of Rabbit’s surroundings in the novel. Updike has labeled this use of setting as a kind of “subjective geography.” As D. Quentin Miller observes: “Setting is never merely background in John Updike’s fiction. His characters are so intertwined with their settings that their very identities adhere to certain places” (“Subjective Geography” 15). This “subjective geography” can have several different forms. One of these is a form of nostalgia for a particular setting. Updike reminisces in his memoir *The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood*: “…the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges recede to a calm point that in my subjective geography is still the center of the world” (15). I believe that this proves that Updike has a soft spot in his heart for his native country. When he is critical of it in *Rabbit, Run*, it is because he is worried about the direction the country is headed. To be sure, much of the conflict in the novel comes only from one man, but this man is supposed to be a solid representative of middle America. *Rabbit, Run* can be looked at as an attack on the status quo of the fifties in the form of the protagonist’s clumsy attempts at rebellion. However, if you turn this around, it may also be seen as a defense of an idealistic America, one in which the individual is the focal point. Rabbit’s search for individual purpose, when looked at from today’s perspective, is just as much a search for an America that he can be comfortable with. As people we are not all identical, so the rigid, conformist roles (particularly in the fifties) are confining and unrealistic. When boiled down to its essentials, this is what Rabbit’s sudden exit from his usual code of behavior is all about.

DeLillo’s novel also deals with the theme of an individual attempting to find his place in an oppressive society. *White Noise* is full of doubt and ambivalence about where America is headed in the eighties. Behind the brightness of the everyday rituals of watching TV and going shopping is some “secret pattern” that has darker connotations. As Murray points out so frequently during the novel, these activities which may seem harmless (and don’t require much brain activity) are full of “psychic data”. Behind DeLillo’s humor and satire in the novel is a real
concern that inane commercials, shopping lust, disaster channels on TV, and an automation of society (including the industrialization represented by the toxic event) are all contributing to making us less human.

The struggle of the individual is a well-worn theme in American writing. As I have argued, Rabbit is not alone in his fight in the mid-20th century. Both Holden Caulfield's fierce fight against the "phonies", and Ginsberg's "Where are we going, Walt Whitman?" are depictions of American individuals trying to make their way in the face of resistance. However, behind this ideal American struggle is a very immature man. Rabbit says to Eccles: "If you're telling me I'm not mature, that's one thing I don't cry over since as far as I can make out it's the same thing as being dead" (107). Kielland-Lund notes that Rabbit's immaturity, while being very American, somewhat undercuts his place as a representative of the ideal in America: "This refusal of a grown-up commitment to one person, one place, or one way of life is in Rabbit's mind a necessary refusal to give up his options" (81).

When we meet him in Updike's novel, Rabbit Angstrom is undoubtedly an immature man who struggles with the weight of his family burdens. Not only was Rabbit burdened with guilt from his parents (his mother did not approve of Janice), but his own nuclear family was coming apart at the seams. Rabbit needs to take his fair share of the blame for his dysfunctional family life. However, one must take into account the backdrop of the stifling American '50's as a cause of Rabbit's disillusionment.

*Rabbit, Run* is a novel which challenges the status quo of the fifties. Updike's depiction of the irreverent Rabbit is evidence of this. However, whereas Rabbit's insubordination can be seen as a response to the time, it is easy to attack his own actions as selfish and immature. This leaves us with the question of Rabbit's character. What are we supposed to believe, that Rabbit is simply childish or that he is on a personal, existential quest in the face of an oppressive society? Updike does not give us any indication of his judgment in this matter, leaving the question to us. Updike attempts to show both sides of these big questions. In the face of Rabbit's generally poor behavior it is difficult to portray him as a hero. Updike manages, however, to provide a glimmer of hope within the reader that Rabbit, for
once, will rise above his circumstances and find what he is looking for, whether
this be the happiness with his wife and family that he has evidently lost, or a
greater purpose in life beyond his unsatisfactory job. I believe that the way we
look at Rabbit says something about us as individuals. I would also argue that the
popularity of the book suggests that many readers have found something to like in
its protagonist. Updike triggers a fundamental sympathetic instinct within us
which wants this confused individual to find his way. Yet, in the end, he
disappoints us again by letting everyone down.

_Rabbit, Run_ shocked many, particularly regarding its depictions of sex. _Time
Magazine_ described Harry as a “weak, sensual, selfish and confused moral
bankrupt” (Trachtenberg 4). One of the primary differences between America in
the eighties and in the fifties is that, as a society, America had grown a thicker skin
in relation to what is ‘proper’ to discuss in a novel. In comparison, DeLillo needed
to go to greater lengths in order to provoke his readers than Updike did because as
time goes by, we have become more and more immune to attempts at provocation.
Due to the conservative nature of the fifties, there was a lower threshold for the
public to be shocked by a book. For example, if we were to take the action in
_Rabbit, Run_ and place it in the eighties, it would lose much of its effect. However,
when we read the novel, we read it from the point of view of the fifties. It is
Updike’s detailed description of the scene in the work that allows the reader to re-
enter the past.

_White Noise_, on the other hand, did not seem to “shock” anyone on its
publication. DeLillo is an author who, in general, has appealed more to academics
than to the general public. However, this novel struck a chord with many people
and was awarded the National Book Award in 1985. On the surface, _White Noise_ is
a more light-hearted portrayal of American life. This is due to DeLillo’s use of
satire as his method of criticizing America. Because of this, _White Noise_ may not
seem at first to make such a bold statement as _Rabbit, Run_ did. However, this
novel, despite its humor, contains a great deal of social criticism.
Lastly, the way that *Rabbit, Run* and *White Noise* relate to their time periods provides an opportunity to use New Historicism as a method of criticism. There is little doubt that both novels rely heavily on, respectively, life in the fifties and the eighties in America. However, I have argued that this perspective proves to be too narrow for both works. First of all, I believe that more credit needs to be given to individual authors who manage to not only represent their period, but also to put it into a greater perspective. Updike created an unorthodox portrayal of the fifties with his rebellious Rabbit, while DeLillo’s *White Noise* has a self-awareness in the way it participates in the cultural dialogue.
Bibliography


Harris, Robert R. “A Talk with Don DeLillo.”


Victoria and Albert Museum website, accessed on 9/19: http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/postmodernism/postmodernism-about-the-exhibition/