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UDK 821.111(73).09 DeLillo, D.-31

Izvorni znanstveni članak
Primljeno: 4. studenoga 2015.
Prihvaćeno: 21. prosinca 2015.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN A CONSUMERIST SOCIETY: DELILLO'S JACK GLADNEY

Summary

This paper deals with the construction of the postmodern identity of Jack Gladney, the main character in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Employing (post)modern, social psychology, and psychoanalytic theories of Zygmunt Bauman, Erich Fromm, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Lipovetsky, it analyzes the construction of Gladney's character through his social roles as professor, husband, and consumer in the narrow sense of the word in order to deduce that his consumerist practices have spread to all aspects of his life. This reading reveals a new interpretation of Gladney's fear of death; it shows that Gladney's thanatophobia represents a consequence of his atheistic worldview. Namely, unable to find a haven in religion, he unsuccessfully seeks the meaning of life and death elsewhere, mainly in consumerism, which is identified as the source of his alienation from himself, people, and God. This paper suggests that numerous problems of postmodern life are caused by the lack of faith in God and proposes a conclusion that religion itself could be the answer to the difficulties faced by postmodern individuals with fragmented identities such as Jack Gladney.

Keywords: identity, consumerism, postmodern society, *White Noise*, Jack Gladney

1. Identity: theoretical background

Identity is today "the burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue" (Bauman 17). It has been progressively studied by the humanities, especially during the last decades marked by globalization, a process whose social and cultural changes are responsible for the growing interest in this question. According to Culler, literature has always been dealing with questions of identity; in fact,

literature provides implicit or explicit answers to these questions by portraying the destinies of individual characters. Identity can be considered to be given or constructed. Both viewpoints are richly illustrated in literature; however, they are often inextricably entangled, as when the protagonists realize who they are, not by discovering things from their past but by behaving in a manner that they *become* what finally proves to have been their “nature.” However, the importance of literature is not only in its production of literary identities but also in the construction of readers’ identities by identifying with literary characters (111–3).

According to Stuart Hall, identities are constructed regarding the differences outside them, i.e. in relation to the Other (4). Jonathan Culler confirms Hall’s statement and reports that not only does the process of identity-formation highlight some differences and ignore others but it also projects internal difference or division as factors that differentiate individuals or groups. He exemplifies this by claiming that to “be a man” involves rejecting any “effeminacy” or weakness and projecting it “as a difference *between* men and women,” thus rejecting a difference *within* and projecting it as a difference *between* (118).

Regarding the construction of identity, Peternai Andrić reports that there are two main approaches – essentialist and anti-essentialist. The essentialist approach considers identity to be an inner essence that is not subject to change (e.g. woman, German, child). On the other hand, the anti-essentialist position, adopted by the majority of contemporary theoreticians, advocates the opinion that identities have to respond to changing circumstances, depending on their social and historical contexts, so they themselves are always changeable and unstable, determined by a certain time and space (47–8). In postmodernism, mostly as a result of cultural and social changes, especially those caused by globalization, identities become ever more destabilized, fractured, and fragmented, which leads to identity crisis. This means that “the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about” (Hall, qtd. in Bennett et al. 174). In other words, postmodern individuals possess fragmented identities, involving gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, profession, consumer choices, etc. In his *Identity*, Zygmunt Bauman goes so far as to describe identity as a question of choice from the abundance of alternative offers, where an individual alone constructs his/her identity in today’s multicultural society marked by globalization, consumerism, and new technologies. Except from him, many theoreticians reflect on

the consumerist society of today. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm criticizes the alienation of people in the capitalistic society, while Baudrillard in *The Consumer Society* offers his views on “the age of affluence” (26). In *Le bonheur paradoxale (The Paradoxical Happiness¹)*, Lipovetsky describes a hyper-consumerist society, in which consumerism, associated with hedonism and recreation, has permeated all aspects of life. All of these works provide valuable insights into the postmodern consumerist society, one of the most studied topics of contemporary literature.

A well-known postmodern literary work dealing with the construction of fragmented identities is Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), a novel whose protagonist is Jack Gladney, chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. He lives in an American college town with Babette, his fourth wife, and their four children from previous marriages. Gladney is obsessed with the fear of death, which increases after his exposure to a toxic substance. Babette is also excessively afraid of death, so she decides to participate in the testing of Dylar, an experimental drug created to cure the fear of death. In order to get the drug, she has an affair with Willie Mink, the project manager of the company testing Dylar. When Gladney finds out about the affair, he decides to take revenge by killing Mink. He shoots him, but also gets shot by Mink in return, which gets him to a hospital run by atheist nuns. At the end of the novel, Gladney enjoys shopping, his favorite activity throughout the story.

Gladney is a typical postmodern character with a fragmented identity; he is a college professor, the head of a department, a father, a husband, an ex-husband, an American, a colleague, a consumer, etc. Burdened with so many identities and alienated from himself, his fellow men, and God, Gladney does not know who he actually is, which results in an excessive fear of death that completely controls his life. In this paper, the construction of Gladney’s fragmented identity will be based on the analyses of identity and consumerism presented in Bauman’s *Identity*, Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*, Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society*, and Lipovetsky’s *The Paradoxical Happiness*. Namely, Gladney creates his own identity by choosing from the abundance of offers, thus being a consumer in every aspect of his life. Firstly, his professional identity is a product that he places on the market in accordance with the market demand, but he is aware of its fakeness. Secondly, he consumes numerous relationships throughout his life and marries five times. Moreover, consumerism in the strict sense of the word is reflected in Gladney’s fascination with

1 My translation.

supermarkets and shopping. It seems that the unimportance of God and the triumph of science have led to Gladney's irrational fear of death because, as a typical postmodern individual, he is not preoccupied with the eternal, but escapes into the "magic" of consumerist life and, in his excessive fear, seeks the help of science.

2. Gladney's professional identity

"I am the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo 17). This sentence best describes Gladney's identity, confirming Bauman's opinion that people create their own identities by choosing from alternative offers. Namely, in 1968, when Gladney invented Hitler studies, the chancellor advised him to alter his name and appearance in order to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator, so he invented an extra initial and called himself J.A.K. Gladney, "a tag [he] wore like a borrowed suit" (16). Because of Gladney's "tendency to make a feeble presentation of self," the chancellor suggests that he gain weight, to "grow out" into Hitler (16-7). It seems to Gladney that the chancellor is suggesting that it would help his career tremendously if he could become uglier. Thus, he decides to wear glasses with thick black frames and dark lenses to accentuate his image even more. Apart from that, as the most prominent figure in Hitler studies in North America, Gladney conceals the fact that he does not speak German. Bennett et al. argue that it is not problematical that identity is for some a disillusioning process considered to be a performance (175). However, it is clear that, by creating a false identity, Gladney loses track of who he is. Throughout the novel, his identity is dependent on his formidable academic costume and Hitler, two shields that serve to protect his "indistinct"² identity from himself and his environment. As DeLillo explains in an interview, Hitler represents for Gladney "a perverse form of protection," since Gladney feels that he and his dread can disappear in the enormous damage created by Hitler, who is for him not bigger than life, but "bigger than death" (DeCurtis 63).

Yet, what spurred Gladney's decision to create this false character in the first place? The answer lies in the capitalistic society. In capitalism, useful skills and knowledge become transformed into commodities, but they have no market value if there is no demand for them. Therefore, Gladney creates an identity that responds to the market demand, so he himself becomes a com-

2 An adjective Gladney's colleague uses to describe him when he sees him for the first time out of the campus.

modity that has to be sold under the existing market conditions if he wants to financially support himself and his family (cf. Fromm). In his analysis of the novel, Eid points out that it is desirable to teach about Hitler's personal life, without ideological references to Nazism, as part of mass culture to keep pace with market demands. It is expected from (post)modern intellectuals to "legitimate and institutionalize 'mass culture,'" (4) equalizing it with high culture, in order to justify their choice to teach it by using the market logic: "whatever the market decides goes" (4). This is why the chancellor immediately realizes the potential of the Hitler Studies Department, i.e. the profit it will bring (4). According to Bauman, contemporary companies have become stages for competition between employees, who are searching recognition and approval of their bosses, rather than showing proletarian solidarity in the effort to create a better society, like they did in the past. Each of them knows that they are replaceable. Accordingly, they try to show that they are better than their colleagues, namely, that they bring more profit, so when the time comes for the next "rationalization," they will be worthy to be kept (34). Burdened with the instability and uncertainty of employment, employees are expected to constantly improve their knowledge and skills, to show initiative, flexibility, and creativity in order to keep up and not lose their jobs (Baudrillard 128, Lipovetsky 164–5). Being aware of these facts, Gladney takes initiative and expresses his creativity in inventing Hitler studies and the corresponding personal appearance.³ Similarly, his German language learning represents an attempt to improve his skills with a view to remain successful on the market. It follows that one should adjust by creating and recreating one's identity according to market demands in order to survive in the labor market. What Jack Gladney does is exactly that: he invents Hitler studies because of the market demand for legitimizing mass culture, and he changes his appearance to create an image that will be taken seriously in his field. This enables him to hide behind his professional image, compromising his identity in the process.

3. Gladney as a husband

Postmodern individuals are faced with many problems arising from their interpersonal relationships, marked by a lack of definition, extreme fragility, and unstable and transitory nature. These issues are particularly emphasized in family life, a place that once offered security and a sense of belonging, but

³ Featherstone reports that "[i]mpression management, style, panache, and careful bodily presentation . . . become important" for interactions (165).

is nowadays becoming increasingly unreliable. If we bear in mind that people are identified by their relationships, the unreliability of family bonds leads to an inability to define one's identity, thus making it incomplete and pointless. Apart from that, as Lipovetsky notices, individuals are left to their own when it comes to dealing with difficulties since they have no support from the community (126), i.e. family. According to Bauman, people have learned from the consumer society that they should always expect "anti-risk devices," (64) such as quick solutions, lasting and complete satisfaction, and money-back guarantee if complete satisfaction is not immediate and untroubled. All these mechanisms are expected in love too, but here they are absent. Love brings risks, and yet postmodern people have lost the skills needed to tackle them. It is deduced that, dealing with love relationships, people go into the "consumerist mode" (64), the only one they feel safe and comfortable with (64). What Bauman here misses is the fact that the "consumerist mode" is the only possible one because, as Baudrillard notices, relationships are nowadays products and objects of consumption (173). Bauman observes that the "consumerist mode" requests satisfaction to be immediate, while the only value (use) of objects is their ability to provide satisfaction. If a relationship (or anything else) does not satisfy or stops satisfying, it has no purpose, and, therefore, there is no reason to keep it (64). In the context of love relationships, Bauman reports:

Anthony Giddens famously suggested that the old romantic idea of love as an exclusive partnership "till death us do part" has been replaced, in the course of individual liberation, by "confluent love" – a relationship that lasts only as long as, and not a moment longer than, the satisfaction it brings to both partners. In the case of relationships, you want the "permit to go in" to come together with a "permit to go out" the moment you see no more reason to stay. (65)

This phenomenon is recognized by various scholars. Lipovetsky describes marriage as an unstable and terminable concept (85) since there are more and more people who believe that they are unable to love the same person for a lifetime (185). Similarly, Štulhofer and Miladinov, influenced by Giddens, use the term "pure relationship," whose characteristics are finiteness, reflexivity (a continuous assessment of the harmony between the partner and our self-project), and the substitutability of partners (5). According to Bauman, Giddens considers this idea to be liberating, but he does not mention that it causes anxiety in all relationships because, while the consent of two is

needed to start a relationship, it takes only one partner to end it, so there is always a fear that the other person will get bored before you do. Apart from that, an easy way out is a major obstacle to the realization of love because partners are more likely to abandon the long-term effort since there are other possibilities on the market (65–6). Long-term relationships become unreasonable and meaningless, dangerous, and foolish for two main reasons. First, even relationship experts advise to avoid committing yourself because you should constantly be open to other, more satisfying and fulfilling possibilities (Bauman 29), and second, even though commitment is a prerequisite for long-lasting relationships, commitment without reservations is avoided for fear of getting hurt (Giddens 137). If we cannot have the quality, perhaps there is salvation in the quantity, so break-ups are as “natural” as death (Bauman 65, 69). In other words, postmodern love relationships last for a short time in order to be replaced with new ones, leading to a high divorce rate and multiple subsequent marriages.

According to Fromm,

Love is possible only if two persons communicate with each other from the center of their existence, hence if each one of them experiences himself from the center of his existence. Only in this “central experience” is human reality, only here is aliveness, only here is the basis for love. Love, experienced thus, is a constant challenge; it is not a resting place, but a moving, growing, working together; even whether there is harmony or conflict, joy or sadness, is secondary to the fundamental fact that two people experience themselves from the essence of their existence, that they are one with each other by being one with themselves, rather than by fleeing from themselves. There is only one proof for the presence of love: the depth of the relationship, and the aliveness and strength in each person concerned; this is the fruit by which love is recognized. (86–7)

In this passage, Fromm describes how to recognize love, a desirable but unreachable feeling in the postmodern society of *White Noise*. As a typical postmodern husband, Jack Gladney lives with his fourth wife, Babette, and is married for the fifth time. He describes his marital history in a nonchalant, matter-of-fact, slightly sarcastic way, disclosing that no true emotions are involved in the beginnings and the ends of his marriages, as if they were purchased products that are thrown away when they stop providing satisfaction:

My first and fourth marriages were to Dana Breedlove, who is Steffie's mother. The first marriage worked well enough to encourage us to try again as soon as it became mutually convenient. When we did, after the melancholy epochs of Janet Savory and Tweedy Browner, things proceeded to fall apart. But not before Stephanie Rose was conceived, a star-hung night in Barbados. Dana was there to bribe an official. (213)

Gladney's expression "it became mutually convenient" as a reason to get married gives away that he does not marry for love, but because it is suitable for him and his wife. Moreover, he does not give reasons for his divorces either because he does not think that they are important or because there were no good reasons for a divorce. The only information the readers have is that in one of his marriages "things proceeded to fall apart," implying that, confronted with problems, he and his wife stopped trying because there were other opportunities waiting for them on the market. As easily as he gets married, he divorces his wives, experimenting with his love life because he does not know what he wants due to his postmodern identity. He believes that he has finally found the love of his life in Babette, whom he describes as a loving and open person. Their marriage corresponds to the description of a pure relationship, in which, according to Štulhofer and Miladinov, partners are enchanted by the uniqueness of their spouse, whom they hold the only person qualified to be their partner, at least at that moment (5). Gladney believes that he and Babette tell each other everything, but it turns out that Babette does not tell him about Dylar, the drug she acquired by having sex with Willie Mink, while Gladney hides from her the fact that he has been exposed to the toxic cloud, which causes increased anxiety in him. Intimacy, defined by Štulhofer and Miladinov as "a risky and painful disclosure" (7), is, therefore, not wholly present in the marriage of the Gladneys. Štulhofer and Miladinov define a lack of intimacy as a self-fulfilling prophecy: there is little intimacy because of the fear of relationship dissolution, which in turn results in relationship dissolution *owing to* the lack of intimacy (15). Following this logic, the lack of intimacy between Gladney and his wife condemns their marriage to failure. Gladney declares that he cannot forgive Babette for not being the woman he believed she was (197). However, neither of them actually knows what her identity is because, like Gladney, Babette is also a postmodern individual with a fractured identity.

Fromm warns that the two "normal" forms of love that decay in modern society are "[l]ove as mutual sexual satisfaction," and "love as 'teamwork'" and a

refuge from loneliness, both being “the socially patterned pathology of love” (79). This ascertainment is wholly applicable to the relationship between Jack Gladney and Babette. Firstly, the kitchen and the bedroom are for them the major chambers, “the power haunts, the sources” (DeLillo 6). In these rooms their appetites for food and sexual intercourse are satisfied. Secondly, both of them are afraid of loneliness after being widowed in the future, that is, their marriage serves as a shelter from aloneness. In other words, their relationship represents a form of the pathology of love.

According to Fromm, there are numerous forms of the pathology of love, which lead to conscious suffering and are reckoned neurotic (79). He describes some of the forms, such as the Oedipus and Electra complex, but also a very frequent form of pseudo-love that can be recognized in Gladney’s and Babette’s relationships – the idolatrous love, which Štulhofer and Miladinov connect to many cases of pure relationships (15). In addition, Fromm states that “If a person has not reached the level where he has a sense of identity, of I-ness, rooted in the productive unfolding of his own powers, he tends to ‘idolize’ the loved person” (83). In the context of *White Noise*, due to Gladney’s crisis of identity, he idolizes Babette and puts her looks and soul on a pedestal: “The point is that Babette, whatever she is doing, makes me feel sweetly rewarded, bound up with a full-souled woman, a lover of daylight and dense life, the miscellaneous swarming air of families” (5–6). Thus, he projects his powers, which he is alienated from, into his beloved one, “who is worshipped as . . . the bearer of all love, all light, all bliss” (Fromm 83). Instead of finding a sense of identity, strength, and aliveness in a relationship, Gladney is weakened by his marriages; he flees from himself because there is no depth in his relationships. Considering that no one can meet the idolized expectations, after some time the worshipper is disappointed, so he/she seeks for a new idol as a remedy, which sometimes occurs “in an unending cycle” (Fromm 83–4). Gladney’s “unending cycle” is epitomized by his four failed marriages and the one with Babette, whose infidelity and insincerity stand for Gladney’s disappointment, so it is only a matter of time when he will, for the sixth time, seek for a new “love of his life.” Lipovetsky argues that postmodern love life is “structured as turbo-consumerism because of the disruption of the myth of eternal love, the disappearance of the ideal of sacrifice, the increasing number of temporary relationships, the instability and *zapping* of heart.”⁴ In this phenomenon he finds the source of negative feelings such as

4 My translation.

emptiness and disappointment (185) deeply felt by postmodern individuals such as Jack Gladney.

All in all, Gladney's identity as a husband is as fragile as is his professional identity. His former marriages, as well as his marriage to Babette, are certainly not based on eternal love. He approaches his love life in a consumerist way, changing wives when his relationships stop providing satisfaction, which corresponds to Fromm's definition of a form of pseudo-love called the idolatrous love. Gladney's relationships are neither characterized with depth and strength nor do they bolster the identities of both involved parties, thus making them full of life. Instead, both Gladney and Babette are excessively afraid of death.

4. Gladney as a consumer

Being a consumer represents an important part of postmodern identities. Bauman asserts that our ancestors were formed and trained to be producers above all, with traits such as loyalty to customs, toleration of routine, willingness to delay pleasure, and permanence of needs, which are considered to be serious flaws in (post)modern people, trained to be primarily consumers. The education of consumers has become a lifelong campaign with a myriad of omnipresent institutions such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines, bombarding us with commercials, lifestyles of celebrities, and experts that will provide us with recipes for solving all life's problems (66-7). According to Lipovetsky, proportionally with one's loneliness and frustration grows the search for comfort in happiness of purchased goods (37). Similarly, Fromm suggests that amusement and the contentment of buying things only to exchange them for others is today offered as a remedy for alienation. He states that happiness is sought in "having fun," which includes "the satisfaction of consuming" (73). There is plenty of evidence for this in Baudrillard's and Lipovetsky's works. The former, namely, observes that consumers expect happiness if they surround themselves with "miraculous" objects (32), considering enjoyment to be their obligation (81), whereas Lipovetsky concludes that hedonism and recreation are the main goals of shopping. However, a multitude of material pleasures does not infuse life with the joy of living it, which is also the case with Gladney in *The White Noise*.

Like many contemporary people, Gladney spends much time in a supermarket, observing it admiringly and trying to find the meaning of life in it, forgetting that supermarkets are nothing more than buildings in which one can buy goods. Gladney sees the experience of buying as transcendental, describing it as a practice that brings "the sense of replenishment," "well-being," as well as

“security and contentment” (20). He goes so far as to say that Babette and he seemed to have “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, italics mine), whereby he mistakes consumerism for a religious practice that brings fulfillment. On the contrary, consumerism drives people away from “a fullness of being” and affects their identities in a distinctly negative way, diverting them from themselves and others.

When Gladney is faced with discomfiture, shopping provides great comfort, which corresponds to Lipovetsky’s conclusions discussed above. As an illustration, he goes to the supermarket immediately after the airborne toxic event, concluding that “[e]verything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (170). Similarly, when his colleague encounters him in a mall, he comments that Gladney is a completely different person without his dark glasses and gown. Inviting him not to take offense, he says that Gladney looks like “[a] big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (DeLillo 83). His colleague’s comment nevertheless hurts him because he is aware that his costume creates a false image of him, which puts him “in the mood to shop” (DeLillo 83), so he finds his family, and their shopping mania in numerous eight-floor stores begins. He spends irrationally; for example, when he cannot decide between two shirts, he buys both, and he tells his children to choose their Christmas presents, describing the act of shopping as a fulfilling experience:

My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. . . . I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. . . . I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. . . . The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. (83–4)

In the moments of haphazard shopping, Gladney experiences “a fullness of being,” which is realized in him feeling alive due to the superfluous consumption, a common case in all societies (Baudrillard 44). First, believing that he has finally found his “authentic identity” (in consumerism), he feels satisfied with himself, his greatness, and his importance. In Lipovetsky’s terms, Gladney discovers who he is through purchased objects (27). Second, he believes that “he becomes ‘one’ with his family” (Ferraro 22) through their shared consumer spree. However, both are only illusions that last for a moment,

since consumerism “the satisfaction of consuming” (Fromm 73) can neither complete individuals nor spiritually recharge them. This becomes obvious when Gladney and his family drive home in silence after the shopping frenzy, and when they arrive, everybody retreats to their rooms because they want to be alone. Thereupon, the family unity disappears once the shopping activity is over, leading to alienation of the family members. Ferraro rightfully wonders, “What kind of kinship do we attain if the price of our connectedness is *only* money?” (24). And yet, it is extremely difficult not to be pulled into the glittering world of consumerism with attractive, but empty promises of the media, constantly humming in the background of the Gladneys’ lives.

On several occasions, Gladney throws things away. The things accumulated through time represent a burden for him, they “dragged [him] down, made escape impossible” (DeLillo 294). In America, as Bauman observes, consumers constantly and obsessively experiment with products that can be used to construct their identities, so it takes only money to buy the desired gear for the transformation of one’s identity (81, 84). It happens repeatedly: people buy things to create identities, which are again replaced with new things and corresponding identities, over and over again. However, Lipovetsky warns that replacing things is mistakenly believed to bring about a change in one’s life (43) because a person’s essence does not change in the same way as his/her appearance or hobbies. Following Baudrillard’s logic, “Tell me what you throw away and I’ll tell you who you are” (43) or, better said, were, it follows that Gladney tries to get rid of the burden of the accumulated old identities. However, “[t]he more things [he] threw away, the [more] [he] found” (DeLillo 262). Since he sees mortality in things, he tries to get control of his life by throwing things away in order to feel at ease. It seems that he finally realizes the absurdity of consumerism, which cannot bring a fullness of being. However, in the last chapter, observing the supermarket in fascination, Gladney returns to consumerism, embracing it again as a substitute for religion, unaware that it cannot help him define his identity and overcome alienation.

5. The unimportance of God and the triumph of science

In the atheistic world of *White Noise*, Gladney, who suffers from thanatophobia, is trying to embrace death as an integral part of life. He rejects the belief in God and the afterlife, so he is forced to reconcile with his mortality, which only amplifies his fear of death. Fromm explains that the consequences of contemporary “disintegration of the love of God” include anxiousness, no faith principles, and aimlessness (87), all intensely felt by Gladney. Since

he is painfully aware that he has no sense of his identity and his spirituality, he makes often parodic attempts to endow a grander meaning to his “mundane and superficial life” (Barrett 101). Unable to find a haven in religion, Gladney tries to find the purpose of life and death elsewhere, so consumerism becomes his religion, money his god, and going shopping his religious practice. As Fromm explains it, given the fact that people do not seek God’s help and are no longer striving to achieve salvation by living according to God’s principles, their religious values are replaced with a devotion to the acquisition of material comforts, and development of successful personalities (87). Proportionally with the triumph of the consumerist society, claims Lipovetsky, mental disorders and psychological problems are on the rise (125), which results in the increased spending of psychotropic medications, whose usage reflects an individual’s need for control over his/her mind and body, as well as giving-up of one’s own efforts (34). In order to make his fear of death disappear (although death itself would not and cannot disappear), Gladney seeks help in the advances in science or, more precisely, medicine: he wants to take Dylar, “the ultimate form of consumer product” (Vungthong 35). Dylar is an ineffective drug, but Gladney believes that it can help him because he is “eager . . . to be fooled” (DeLillo 251), which proves his unhealthy belief in the advantages of consumerism and consumer products. As shown in the previous chapter, consumerism does not bring fulfillment and spiritual recharging. These notions can be achieved only through a genuine belief in God. Accordingly, Gladney’s disbelief in eternal life results in his inability to discover the meaning of life and death, leading to his excessive fear of death and identity crisis. In fact, it seems that he wants to believe in God and the afterlife because he asks a nun to confirm the truthfulness of Christian religious beliefs. Asking him “Do you think we are stupid?” (DeLillo 317, 319), the nun explains unkindly to Gladney that nuns do not believe in heaven, hell, the devil, angels, or saints but only pretend to believe, so that other people can believe that nuns still believe. With the realization that even nuns are atheists, the last ray of Gladney’s hope vanishes. He feels that his death is shallow and unfulfilling because he is convinced that there is nothing after death. Due to the lack of belief in the afterlife, Gladney’s fear of death is understandable. Who would not be afraid if there were no life after death? Moreover, since he does not believe in God, it does not matter how he lives his life, whether he is a sinner or a saint, which makes his life absurd and aimless.

The unimportance of religion, or even an atheistic worldview, seems to have had significant consequences on contemporary Western society and identity construction. Bauman observes that the notion of God’s irrelevance in human

lives has led to a shift of the focus from God to humans' abilities, resulting in the triumph of science and thereby in a disregard for "eternity and eternal values" in the time when the sacred has no authority (73). There is no time and space for the concern about eternity because people are preoccupied with the "now;" in the world where delivery, use, and pleasure must be immediate, eternity does not make sense since it cannot be consumed instantaneously (73, 75). All known cultures tried "to bridge the gap between the brevity of mortal life and the eternity of the universe," but contemporary society is the first without such a bridge (75). Reflecting on religious changes in the contemporary society, Lipovetsky argues that mortal sin and (self-)sacrifice are not emphasized by the Church anymore. He claims that Christianity was once a religion focused on eternal salvation, but is nowadays oriented toward worldly happiness, including love, inner peace, personal fulfillment, etc., which he considers to be a new interpretation of Christianity adjusted to the ideals of hedonism and flourishing individuals, propagated by capitalism (83). In the same vein, Campbell associates hedonism with Christianity, but only with its Protestant branch, claiming that Puritanism played the leading role in the advancement of hedonism (51).⁵ Protestantism is often related to capitalism because of the belief that one's success in acquiring material wealth reveals one's predestination to salvation. Owing to this, many Protestants strive for wealth and success. Lipovetsky seems not to make any difference between the three Christian branches (as Campbell does), but he also mistakes New Age for Christianity. Namely, it is New Age that promotes worldly happiness and finding salvation within oneself, thus putting humans in the center instead of God. Apart from that, mortal sin and (self-)sacrifice are still strongly emphasized by the Roman Catholic Church as the first and original Christian Church. The irrefutable evidence for this is the Mass, which represents for Catholics (but not for Protestants) a sacrifice offered to God, through which, subsequent to confession, sins are forgiven. Catholics are invited to sacrifice, following the example of Jesus Christ, in this world to achieve salvation after death. However, this way of life is not attractive to postmodern individuals such as Jack Gladney, who strive for the hedonism of consumerism.

The issues that humans cannot resolve are nowadays divided into small, solvable parts; for example, "the hopeless fight against *inevitable* death" is substituted by the treatment of diseases (Bauman 73). With the sacralization of the body, which has taken the role of the soul as an "object of salvation,"

5 "[A]s a movement it [Puritanism] adopted a position of such outright hostility to the 'natural' expression of emotion, and consequently helped to bring about just that split between feeling and action which hedonism requires" (Campbell 51).

fighting illness has become a demand in the affluent society (Baudrillard 41, 130, 140). Featherstone describes a new type of individual in the affluent, consumerist society, whom he calls the narcissistic individual, as “‘excessively self-conscious,’ ‘chronically uneasy about his health, afraid of ageing and death,’ . . . ‘hunted by fantasies of omnipotence and eternal youth’” (163), a description that strikingly resembles Jack Gladney.

6. Conclusion

Jack Gladney, a typical representative of postmodern consumerist society, is burdened with several different identities: those of a professor, a husband, and a consumer. Gladney creates his professional identity in order to be successful in Hitler studies, a field that he invents to meet the market demand for mass culture. Yet, hiding behind his false professional image, he does not know who he really is. Apart from that, he is also unable to define his identity because of the unreliability of family bonds. Approaching love in a consumerist way, he marries five times and divorces when his marriages to at first idealized women stop providing satisfaction, which corresponds to Fromm’s definition of pseudo-love called idolatrous love. His relationships do not strengthen his identity but, on the contrary, make him lose the sense of his identity to such an extent that he becomes excessively afraid of death instead of feeling truly alive. Trying to find the meaning of life and death in the wrong places, he perceives shopping as a religious experience through which he strives to achieve “a fullness of being.” Even though at one point Gladney starts throwing material objects away, trying to get rid of the old identities, he returns to the “magic” of consumerism after all. Consumerism represents his religion but fails to bring a fulfillment and provide answers, like a true religion does. His atheistic disbelief in life after death is one of the main reasons for his excessive fear of death. Gladney’s alienation from himself, people, and God causes his identity crisis as well as thanatophobia, a fear that rules his life.

In contemporary society, it is extremely difficult to construct a stable identity, and as a result this causes identity crisis. Consumerism permeates every aspect of life, dissolving one’s identity through popular practices for attaining short-term satisfaction – the consumption of products, food, relationships, and TV programs. In any case, such satisfaction is supposed to be instant, and if something does not bring satisfaction, it does not have a purpose. Religion, a haven for numerous cultures and generations, is largely absent in contemporary Western society. Since the issues described in this paper coincide

with the emergence of (post)modern atheism, a solution to the consumerist generated precariousness of modern identity and its relationships is perhaps to be looked for in religion itself.

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KONSTRUKCIJA IDENTITETA U KONZUMERISTIČKOM DRUŠTVU: DELILLOV JACK GLADNEY

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Ovaj rad bavi se pitanjem konstrukcije postmodernog identiteta Jacka Gladneya, glavnog lika u Don DeLillovom romanu *Bijela buka* (1985). Koristeći se (post)modernim, socijalno-psihološkim i psihoanalitičkim teorijama Zygmunta Baumana, Ericha Fromma, Jeana Baudrillarda i Gillesa Lipovetskog, rad analizira konstrukciju Gladneyeva lika kroz njegove društvene uloge profesora, supruga i potrošača u užem smislu riječi kako bi došao do zaključka da su se Gladneyevi konzumeristički postupci proširili na sve aspekte njegovog života. Ovo iščitavanje DeLillova djela otkriva novu interpretaciju Gladneyeva straha od smrti; ono pokazuje da Gladneyeva tanafofobija predstavlja posljedicu njegova ateističkog svjetonazora. Naime, s obzirom da ne može pronaći utočište u religiji, on bezuspješno traži značenje života i smrti drugdje, prvenstveno u konzumerizmu, koji je identificiran kao izvor Gladneyeva otuđenja od sebe, ljudi i Boga. Ovaj rad ukazuje na činjenicu da su brojni problemi postmodernog života uzrokovani nedostatkom vjere u Boga te donosi zaključak da bi vjera mogla biti rješenje za sve poteškoće s kojima se susreću postmoderni pojedinci s fragmentiranim identitetom, kao što je Jack Gladney.

Ključne riječi: identitet, konzumerizam, postmoderno društvo, *Bijela buka*, Jack Gladney