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**The Modern Package: Examining Reactions to the
Consumer Society in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great
Gatsby* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise***

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Introduction

Modern society is the product of the industrial revolution, which began in earnest during the late 18th century. The revolution brought about major technological and industrial advancements which caused society to evolve and transform into what we today call modern. This new society became increasingly synonymous with technological improvements and new appliances, and it was in this setting that another modern phenomenon grew ever stronger: that of consumerism. As new industry allowed for the mass productions of items, society's desire and need for these items also grew. In turn, the demand for these innovations spurred industry on to progress further. In this sense, consumerism and technology are interlocked in the modern world.

Two novels that illustrate this evolution of modern society are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* written in 1925, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* written in 1985. Both set in the U.S, the novels depict the modern world and how it is perceived by those who live in it: but whereas *The Great Gatsby* represents a technological consumer society that is not yet fully developed, *White Noise* depicts a society where these elements are fully integrated. The 1920s' setting of *The Great Gatsby* reveals an era of newfound materialism and spending power. The narrator, Nick Carraway, observes his friends and his surroundings in West and East Egg, situated just outside New York City. The novel portrays not only the plenitude of rich people in big houses in the countryside but also the glittering lights and the masses of people in the sprawling city. Nick is forever commenting on the only recently widespread phenomenon of electricity, as well as the fine clothes, telephones and luxurious cars that people were now purchasing. In *White Noise*, which takes place 60 years later, the technological and consumer society has now fully merged with the lives of the characters. The narrator, Jack Gladney, lives with his family in the small town of Blacksmith, where he is a professor at the local university. The novel depicts Jack's everyday life, and how electrical appliances and supermarket products play an integral role in this existence. The title of *White Noise* can even be seen as a metaphor for the whole book, for Jack's world is a cacophony of both audio and visual noise, in which no individual sound or meaning can be picked out.

This essay will examine how the characters in both novels react to the product-centric ideals of the modern world. In order to do this, it is important to first establish how the characters perceive their worlds through the modern forces of consumerism and technology. By looking at

the ways in which these phenomena are perceived, the state of modernity can be illustrated, which in each novel, is very different and leads the characters to perceive their surroundings in contrasting ways. However, despite these differences, there are many similarities in the ways in which they react to and deal with their surroundings. Central to the characters' reaction is the concept of packaging. An integral part in any consumer society, packaging affects not just the way that the characters perceive their surroundings, but also the very manner in which they live in it. The term refers not only to products, but also to various kinds of technology, clothes and other commodities. Moreover, the concept also refers to the way that the characters package everything that surrounds them. Their view of the world, their family and friends, death, and even their own identities; all are subject to this peculiar compulsion.

Following this argument, the aim of this essay is to examine the ways in which the characters seek to make sense of, find meaning in and conform to the modern world. This essay argues that despite living in different states of modernity, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *White Noise* both employ packaging in its various forms to fit in and make sense of the world around them. To begin with, the essay will establish the characteristics of these modern worlds by exploring how the narrators perceive their surroundings. The following section will then be devoted to analyzing how the characters make sense of their modern world.

Perceptions of the Modern World

The narrators of the two novels perceive the modern world in several comparable ways. As this chapter will show, the worlds as observed by the narrators reflect different states of modernity. Nick regularly comments on modern technology such as electricity, material possessions and clothes. Viewing these modern products and appliances with a mixture of enjoyment and trepidation, for Nick they represent a world that can be both unreliable and exciting. For Jack, on the other hand, these things are all taken for granted. Jack does not notice or reflect upon these modern conveniences, but is instead dependent on them, for they are integral parts of his life. Modern influences are ever-present and, whilst being utterly mundane, they also interfere with his life. The states of modernity are distinctive in different ways, and thus the narrator's perceptions are also different. The confusing modern world in *The Great Gatsby* is oftentimes left wholly unexplained and presented simply as 'mysterious'. Similarly, in *White Noise*, the

characters resort to this same form of ‘non-explanation’, where their modern commodities are seen as actually having magical properties.

Confusion and Interference

For *The Great Gatsby*'s Nick, the modern world is fast paced and confusing. He lives in a time of technological transformation, where many inventions of the previous years, such as electricity, cars, telephones, photography and motion pictures have become accessible to the majority of the population (Reynolds VII). This technology gives Nick the impression of an accelerating society. As Nick watches the world through a train or a car window, he even sees the world as a “constant flicker” (*GG* 37). In this way, his impressions of his surroundings mirror a fast paced modern world. There is a kind of “compression of sociological or cultural insights into ... brief, flashing images” in Nick’s narrative (Reynolds IX). As a result, there is little time for contemplation in Nick’s observations, which reveals a sense of confusion in his impressions of the modern world. In his study of the technological sublime, David E. Nye states that people during this time were disoriented by the way that the night light of the city distorted their perception of space, size and scale. Nye notes that, at the time, New York “seemed a jumble of layers, angles and impossible proportions; it had become a vibrating, indeterminate text that tantalized the eyes and yielded no definite reading” (196). This idea is captured in Nick’s description of the modern world of New York City as a “constant flicker of men and women and machines” (*GG* 37). Such complex impressions also lead to Nick portraying the world in conflicting images.

These contradictory ideas about the modern world are illustrated in Nick’s descriptions of electric light. Nick shows signs of both fascination and fondness, as well as a clear dislike of this new and modern landscape. His mixed emotions are clear in his descriptions of electric light, with the light from houses being described in both positive and negative terms. At different times, a house may be “glow[ing] full of light”, “blaz[ing] gaudily on”; indeed, on one occasion, the windows in a house are described as “bloom[ing] with light” (*GG* 61, 52, 91). Nick’s depictions reflect his attitude towards modernity. At times, it is beautiful and fascinating, whilst at others, it is garish and disturbing. Nick also seems to assign the electric light new properties. The image of “the new red gas-pumps [which] sat out in pools of light” (*GG* 15), changes not just the impression of light but the very texture of it. The electric light can even be active as it

“sen[ds] ten square feet of light, volley-ing out into the soft black morning” (*GG* 69). By ascribing these features to electric light, Nick gives new powers to it. Being a symbol for the modern world, these ideas indicate a sentiment of a world that offers many different futures. For Nick, the forces of modernity are not only unpredictable, but are also the providers of endless possibilities.

For *White Noise*'s Jack, this is no longer the case; these items of modernity do not provide opportunities but are instead a source of constant interference in his life. Jack lives his life passively, as the inventions of previous years are now more than just accessible, they have become commonplace and are integral parts of his and his family's life. Consumer products have exploded in numbers and are not only objects of desire but of necessity and dependence. Despite the silent ubiquity of these technological inventions, they are forever interrupting Jack's life and consciousness. One such item is the television, which, with its increasingly inane and banal statements, often breaks up dialogue or Jack's train of thought. Jack and his wife Babette are even interrupted in the privacy of their own bed. Whilst talking about sex, the television makes its own surreal interjection: “Until Florida Surgeons attached an artificial flipper” (*WN* 34). Since the messages from the television have no apparent meaning, Jack merely acknowledges the interruptions but makes no attempt to understand them. Randy Laist agrees, observing that Jack cannot make sense of these messages from the television since they have no similarity to ordinary human language (73). Moreover, these meaningless but frequent interruptions actually numb Jack's impressions of the world since, as Laist confirms, the television has no intrinsic meaning. Being “a dull murmur, invisible and everywhere”, it is a primary example of how technology is integrated into Jack's existence (Laist 73). Jack does not reflect upon this “white noise” of the modern world, it is simply there and it interferes with his understanding, rendering even large events in life meaningless and inconsequential.

One such major occurrence is the Airborne Toxic Event, a catastrophe that should, by any normal standard, register as highly important but, in Jack's world, is quite the opposite. When an accident on a nearby motorway causes a truck to release a cloud of the poisonous chemical Nyodene D, the inhabitants of Blacksmith are forced to evacuate their town. Even though Jack and his family have to flee their homes from the Airborne Toxic Event, it is, in a sense, a mere blip in the narrative. It merely “flashes in and out of the middle of the book like a light that someone has turned on by accident and then quickly turns off” (Laist 90). The focus is not on

this frightening occurrence that ruthlessly breaks up the characters' life routine. Instead, "their routine ... seems uninterrupted by the surreal Dante-esque nightmare that consumed their town" (Laist 90). In this modern world, even the Airborne Toxic Event is reduced to little more than a short burst of interference in the white noise that surrounds the characters.

Mystery and Magic

The modern world holds a great deal of mystery for the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. In its 1920s' setting, a great number of technological advancements are often present and having mystifying effects upon the characters (Reynolds VII). One example of such an effect is Nick's description of a light coming from an open door: "the bright door sent ten square feet of light volleying out into the soft black morning" (*GG* 69). Reynolds reasons that such an image, makes for a "strangeness in the text" and that it, and others like it, are "resonant metaphors for the glamour, allure and ultimate artificiality of the jazz age" (Reynolds VII). Such artificiality is hard for both Nick and Gatsby to make sense of. The city, a "wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world", for example, seems mysterious and unreal when described as "rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps" (*GG* 44). When Nick visits Myrtle's apartment, he feels that the "line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets" (*GG* 24). To the uninitiated, these isolated sources of light are furtive and mysterious. Furthermore, wealth can also instil similar ideas. Gatsby finds Daisy's house full of "ripe mystery", as its bedrooms seem to be "more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms" (*GG* 94). To Gatsby, the rooms are "redolent of this year's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered" (*GG* 94). Here, the ultra modern and expensive is mysterious. In addition, Gatsby finds Daisy alluring because of her young age and luxurious lifestyle. In Gatsby's eyes, "wealth imprisons and preserves" the desirable traits of "youth and mystery". Daisy's money, then, seems mysteriously to keep her ever young.

In *White Noise*, the modern world is instead thought of as magical. Mark Osteen proposes that, even in this modern world, the characters' "yearning for mystery and meaning hasn't gone away; ... it has merely changed form" (191). In their search for understanding, supermarket products are seen to have magical properties, such as being able to combat "physical decay" (Osteen 170). Such commodities, notes Osteen, can be conjured for "protection or supplication" (167). Even the ubiquitous television contains magical hidden meanings. The television is a

medium, where its commercials communicate the products' magical powers (Osteen 167). Jack's friend Murray has a "[c]lose to mystical" experience after having watched television intensely for two months (WN 60):

TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world 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. ... 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.** (WN 61)

The television, according to Murray, contains magical information. He feels that the television "is like a myth being born" and is something that can only be known in "a dreamlike and preconscious way" (WN 60). If Jack is to remember how to interpret the information streaming from the television he must go back to his childhood, says Murray: "The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently (WN 61). For Jack's children, locating such innocence is not a problem. When his daughter Steffi watches television, she is deeply involved with the program and even tries to "match the words as they were spoken" (WN 100). Thus, she is connected to the television and even "cultivates some magical sympathy with the force of television itself" (Laist 77). Her sense of the television's magical properties is exemplified when she is asleep during the Airborne Toxic Event. Here, she murmurs the words "*Toyota Celica*", which to Jack seem "to have a ritual meaning, [be] part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant" (WN 180). Steffi's words are spoken like a spell during a time of danger. She remembers the words of the television commercial and murmurs them like a mantra.

Packaging: Creating Sense in the Modern World

The modern consumer worlds in both *The Great Gatsby* and *White Noise* are to a large extent made up of packaging. This is a natural by-product of an environment where "consumerism has become a crucial aspect of ... social and cultural life" (Jervis 93). Not only does the term 'packaging' apply in a very literal sense; with the plethora of readily available commodities, but also in a metaphorical sense; with the characters 'packaging' their identities, by doing their best to express a desired "self-image" (Jervis 93).

Packaging comes in different forms and is viewed and used by the characters in both similar and dissimilar ways, so that they may fit in and make sense of the world in which they live. The concept is expressed in a very literal sense in Jack's world. When Jack has been to the supermarket and filled his car with the shopping bags, he takes in "the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers" (*WN* 24). Furthermore, clothes and accessories form another type of packaging, and are of great importance to Jack and his family. These items, which will be examined later on in this chapter, help them to better understand the world and project a desired image of themselves. This phenomenon is similarly true in *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick, often particular in his observations of what people are wearing, notes "Gatsby, in a white flannel suit, silver shirt and gold-coloured tie" (*GG* 54). Clothes, then, are vital for the image that Gatsby wants to project and they are seen to be demonstrating one's "personal identity" (Jervis 121). Moreover, Nick is also greatly impressed with Gatsby's car and status symbol: "It was a rich cream colour, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns" (*GG* 41). Nick's clear admiration of such a material possession is an example of the importance of packaging in *The Great Gatsby*.

Cataloguing

Before the characters can use different forms of packaging to make sense of this new world of things, they must first create order in it. They do this by cataloguing everything that they see, in the form of largely superficial lists. Nick makes one such list, when he wants to make a record of all the people attending one of Jay Gatsby's famous parties:

From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches, and a man named Bunsen, whom I knew at Yale, and Doctor Webster Civet, who was drowned last summer up in Maine. And the Hornbeams and the Willie Voltaires, and a whole clan named Blackbuck, who always gathered in a corner and flipped up their noses like goats at whosoever came near. And the Ismays and the Chrysties (or rather Hubert Auerbach and Mr Chrystie's wife), and Edgar Beaver, whose hair, they say, turned cotton-white one winter afternoon for no good reason at all. (*GG* 39-40)

Stretching over two pages, this list removes depth, and prevents the mind from lingering on anyone in particular, allowing Nick to “create the illusion of comprehensiveness and completeness” (Miller 28). Being an illusion, the information given in the section means nothing. By providing an overload of meaningless information, Nick may plant an idea of wholeness, as Miller suggests, but in fact the section implies just the opposite.

Similarly, Jack catalogues items that he sees. The first example of such a list appears on the very first page of the novel. Here, Jack makes a lengthy list of all the random consumer objects that the arriving students bring to the college:

As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags - onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn, the Dum Dum Pops, the Mystic Mints. (WN 3)

As Jack is caught up in these lists, his attention span is automatically kept short. He cannot linger on any single product and even if he would try, these are but meaningless, dead things, and so there is nothing about them that is worth thinking about. In these lists, then, there is no room for deep reflection and instead they focus a person’s attention on whatever is new. The lists help the narrators to make sense of the things that surround them. For the narrators to catalogue what they see in this way mirrors an environment which feels increasingly devoid of meaning.

Religion in Packaging

In their search for meaning, the characters find religious significance and icons in packaging. Traditional ideas of spiritual comfort are found in new places in the modern consumer world, including the supermarket and the products on its shelves. Other objects of consumerism and modernity are seen to have omnipresent and thus almost god-like qualities. These objects may represent a passive or active divine being; one that is either simply watching and knowing the characters actions, or one that promises a life in radiance where their physical and mental needs are tended to. True for all these examples is that they reveal ways in which the characters make sense and find meaning in the things that surround them.

The characters in *White Noise* see religious meaning in the supermarket and the packaged products displayed on its shelves. When Jack visits the supermarket with his family, he meets a colleague, Murray, who considers the workings of the shop similar to that of Tibetan religion (WN 44). For Murray, the supermarket is actually “a metaphor for the transcendence of life and death” (Laist 70). Laist equates the supermarket with the act of rising above life and death, and thus the inherent nature of packaging is given a religious quality. Murray acts like a Tibetan priest guiding Jack through this consumer temple, saying that “it’s a gateway or a pathway” (WN 44). Since an everyday shopper is faced with tens of thousands of products, “packages must appeal instantly to the consumer’s emotions, rather than to his or her intellect” (Osteen 170). The products are thus designed to have a religious aura, and can even be compared to “arks... and chalices” (Osteen 171). People, argues Osteen, “desire containers that fulfil their spiritual yearnings, and consumer packaging fills the void created by the disappearance of traditional religious icons” (171). To be a consumer, then, means that a person is somehow united with products that represent immortality because they can be forever reproduced (Osteen 171). They are indeed brimming with “Chants, numerology, horoscopes, recitations” (WN 45). Murray identifies these modern commodities with religious experience, exclaiming that “[a]ll the letters and numbers are here, all the colours of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases” (WN 44). Packaging here, then, is understood in a religious context and thought to be of religious significance.

Technological objects, representing a different form of packaging, have important religious significance in *White Noise*. One such object is the ATM machine. When Jack withdraws money from the ATM, he feels “its support and approval” as the figure on the screen corresponds to his own estimation (WN 55). However, this technological package does even more; Jack actually feels that “the system had blessed [his] life” (WN 55). The ATM actually confirms his existence in a spiritual sense. Another such object with religious significance is the ever-present television, a neat package that streams a world of information. In this mass market world, the television communicates consumer needs and wants via the medium of commercials, promising a life of brilliance if the viewers buy the products advertised. As the characters seek such “luminous moments through consumption” they believe that the television holds religious power (Osteen 166). The television’s commercials express the idea that products hold not just physical remedies, but can bring about spiritual healing too, Osteen calls this “the gospel of

consumerism". As the television functions in this way, the "religion of television is thus a real religion" (Laist 76). For Jack and his children, the television is a regular presence in their lives, and often captures their attention completely. It is "their counsellor and priest" and guides the way they perceive the world to help to shape them into consumer believers (Osteen 174).

Much like these television commercials, a piece of advertisement is accorded religious symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*. The advertisement in question is a discarded billboard in the shape of "a pair of enormous yellow spectacles" (GG 16). The sign, eventually abandoned by the oculist who raised it, is left "to brood on over the solemn dumping ground" also called the valley of ashes (GG 16). It is Myrtle's husband, Wilson who first identifies the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg with a higher power. In an argument with his wife, he shows her the eyes, saying: "God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!" (GG 102). Wilson is unable to "tell the difference between God and an advertisement" (Berman 7). Wilson's mix up of the two "impl[ies] that God has been replaced by mass marketing" (Barrett 541). Here, then, the characters in this consumer society look at packaging as something that is watching over them and knows their actions. Compared to Jack and his family in *White Noise*, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* also see a celestial power in an advertisement.

Packaging as a Means of Identity Transformation

Beyond their search for meaning in the modern world, the characters have a way of adapting to the world in common. As the characters try to fit into a world full of packaging, they adapt their identities accordingly. Like products fighting for attention on the supermarket shelves, the characters are trying to "package" their identity into something colourful, exciting and desirable. As Jervis points out, as commodities reflect "style and status", the ownership of such things does not just show "who one is, but ... who one wants to be" (108). The busy city scene inspires the characters in *The Great Gatsby* to transform themselves; to, in a sense, package their identities. This phenomenon is a product of the new marketplace landscape, which is, in many ways, synonymous with the city. Mass production, made possible by new industrial achievements, prompted everyone to find a personal style by conforming to consumer ideals (Stuart Ewen 79). Ewen discusses the effects of style on identity:

[S]tyle was ... understood as a tool for constructing personhood. Style was a way of saying who one was, or who one wished to be. The emerging market in stylized goods provided consumers with a vast palette of symbolic meanings, to be selected and juxtaposed in the assembling of a public self. (79)

A prerequisite for a person to have an identity was to be a consumer. Only through consuming could a person find a style that would express their chosen persona. This phenomenon is identified in the behaviour of several characters in Nick's narrative. Similarly, Jack and members of his family also identify themselves with the things that they buy. Indeed, for Jack, the act of shopping actually works to enhance such an identity construction.

The modern city encourages personal transformation as it presents a multitude of impressions and opportunities. In the rush of people streaming down Fifth Avenue in New York, Nick imagines himself following the beautiful women that he sees home (*GG* 37). The city seems to tempt him to be someone he is not. New York is a place where "anything can happen" according to Nick (*GG* 44). Nye's idea that the new modern city landscape can change the self correlates with Nick's sentiment. Nye suggests that the individual bases his/her self on the glancing impressions that this new kind of city provides:

The night city was a wonder that urged the viewer to merge the scintillating landscape into the self. This response was engendered not by nature but by a potentially chaotic urban scene, which ... [was] orchestrated into a glittering scene of images. But the exaltation of self occasioned by the electrical landscape had no metaphysical reference point. It was not only ephemeral; it was based on a game of substitution in which the physical city was etherealized and replaced by a consciously imposed mirage of lights and shadows. (Nye 198)

In this modern setting, Nye stresses the idea that the self is not established on anything solid. The landscape of the city is merely founded on the competition between capitalists who constantly increase the number of lights, billboards and products. With the city as a fantastical creation and the self attempting to follow suit, the result is both a world and an individual founded on material wants. This kind of marketplace environment is tempting to the individual with its "alluring promise of personal transformation" (Nye 198). Under the banners of "individualism, competition, advertising and commodification" the individual seemed able to change identity (Nye 198). A character who clearly changes her identity as she enters the city is Tom's lover, Myrtle Wilson.

The city, along with the products for sale there, helps Myrtle to change her persona. Myrtle has a firm idea about creating her identity by buying things in this consumer environment (Berman 62). Berman reasons that after having been influenced by advertisements for the ideal home, Myrtle is determined to fix this image onto the apartment Tom has arranged for her (62). Ewen discusses the phenomenon, stating that as advertisements sell an idea of style, they hold a “*dream of identity*” (106). Such advertising instils a need within the customer, as it suggests a compelling way of presenting oneself in a favourable light (Ewen 106). Myrtle, then, chooses to express herself through the things that she buys, her possessions become her “badges of identity” (Jervis 108). During a trip to Myrtle’s apartment, Nick sees Myrtle buy “a copy of *Town Tattle* and a moving picture magazine and ... some cold cream and a small flask of perfume” (GG 18). On a whim, she also buys a dog, not because she wants one but as Berman remarks, “for the apartment” (63). Myrtle’s behaviour, then, reflects her desire to mirror the adverts she has seen of what a woman in a home should look like (Berman 64). Despite her flat being full to bursting, she still cannot stop planning to get more material for her reinvention:

‘My dear,’ she cried, I’m going to give you this dress as soon as I’m through with it. I’ve got to get another one tomorrow. I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ashtrays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer. I got to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I got to do. (GG 25)

Myrtle fits in perfectly with the marketplace scene, conforming to consumerist standards with her constant need for going shopping. The products that she buys help her to transform her identity, something which is clearly spelled out when she changes her dress: “With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change” (GG 21). Nick observes that her previously “intense vitality” had with the makeover turned into an “impressive hauteur” (GG 21). Consequently, some characters are made up of an accumulation of items and these items can be “more than material” (Berman 63). Indeed, such commodities have the ability, not just to uphold the image of a personality but, if packaged correctly, change or create one. This is true, not just for Myrtle, but also for Gatsby and Daisy’s romance and even Gatsby himself.

Romantic feelings are defined by consumer products, which is made clear in Daisy’s and Gatsby’s attraction to each other. The romance between the two is “a passion founded on

appearances and the consumerist self” (Reynolds 13). As Daisy is invited to see Gatsby’s house for the first time, she is clearly deeply affected when Gatsby shows her his shirts: “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such- such beautiful shirts before” (*GG* 59). Reynolds notes that “The lover’s sobbed confession of her feelings becomes a confession about love of *things*- the plethora of beautiful shirts ordered from England” (13). Daisy’s amorous feelings for Gatsby are based on material wants; they are, in Reynold’s words, “conditioned by fascination with his wealth” (13). Daisy underscores the importance of a man’s attire when she expresses her feelings for Gatsby, by actually talking about his appearance: “You look so cool” (*GG* 75). Her definition of cool is something she has seen in a product promotion: “You resemble the advertisement of the man” (*GG* 76). Her seeing his likeness in an advertisement shows that it is the “packaging” she likes, not Gatsby himself. Gatsby values much the same ideals in his love for Daisy. Gatsby seems to look upon Daisy as a commodity, something that can actually increase in value. For Gatsby, she has a “value”, just like a commodity, that is increased when she is admired by other men. In Gatsby’s own words, Daisy has a “voice full of money”, which surely makes her a prize possession in a material world (*GG* 76).

Jay Gatsby’s identity is likewise defined by his possessions. In order to win Daisy, Gatsby must simultaneously fit in and stand out in the modern world, which requires him to be more modern, and more new, than anyone else. Because of his ambition, Gatsby creates a whole new identity for himself, “trad[ing] in his old self for a new one”, just as you would an old car (Reynolds IX). To this end, Gatsby owns an extravagant house, a luxurious car, fancy clothes and even a hydroplane. Reynolds talks about this phenomenon as a “consumerisation of the self” (IX), where the new self is purely superficial (Reynolds IX). It is Gatsby’s clothes in particular that seem to define him. Coming from a poor background and having been forced to only wear his military uniform after the war, he now wears “caramel-coloured”, “pink” or “white flannel” suits. (*GG* 41,91,54). Along with all his other possessions, his clothes are meant to characterize his new persona. As identity was increasingly expressed through clothes in the emerging times of consumerism during the 19th and 20th century, personality “bec[ame] a matter of appearance” (Jervis 121). Kirk Curnutt underscores this point, stating that this new availability of mass market items allowed people to actually “package their personality” (34). Gatsby constructs his persona in much the same way, using expensive suits to dress up his personality.

Material items are also important to the character's self-transformation in *White Noise*. For example, Jack's daughter Denise uses a green visor as her "interface with the world", an accessory that she wears during all the waking hours of the day (WN 44). Jack surmises that it seems to provide her with "wholeness and identity" (WN 44). The visor is a mere product, but Denise feels that it helps her not only to make sense of the world around her but it actually aids her in shaping her persona. Jack maintains his adopted identity at the university in a similar fashion. He uses some outward visible attributes, including dark-toned glasses and a professor's robe. In this get-up "he enjoys imagining himself in the third person as some kind of timeless image in the eyes of onlookers" (Laist 75). Together with the Hitler Studies department, of which he is the founder, these attributes help him to "package himself as an attractive item on the curricular shelf" (Osteen 167). When somebody tells Jack that he looks "harmless, aging, indistinct" without his professor's attire, he finds that his identity is called into question. Without the costume, Laist suggests that Jack gives off an impression similar to what Hitler would give "in a Gap tee-shirt" queuing up at the local video shop (75). For both Jack and Denise, these material items are important not only for how they see themselves but also for upholding their very identity.

The act of shopping can similarly support such identities and reinforce an identity that has been called into question. After having been called "harmless", Jack seeks confirmation for his persona in the mall (WN 98). In conquering the shops as an attempt to reconfirm himself, he soon feels "bigger than the sums" that he spends. Osteen notes that shoppers are efficiently isolated from the rest of the social world because the structure is designed to deter socialisation, which would hinder productive shopping. Hence, shopping is not about interacting with others, but "a way to enlarge the self through narcissistic satisfactions" (Osteen 171). As Jack's family urges him on during his shopping spree, Jack soon begins to "grow in value and self-regard" (WN 99). He even finds "new aspects of himself, locat[ing] a person [he'd] forgotten existed" (WN 99). Since "products are viewed as a reflection of their owners' worth" his self is transformed by the items he buys (Keeseey 139). Jack does not only recover an old forgotten self but also discovers new sides of himself by shopping. Shopping is thus an act that Jack depends on to maintain his chosen persona (Osteen 171). By going to the mall, Jack is able to uphold and even reinforce his identity.

As Jack goes shopping, his identity appears to transcend its standard form, and is instead placed alongside the products on display in the mall. When Jack goes shopping at the mall he constantly sees himself “unexpectedly in some reflecting surface” (WN 99). Here, consumer goods create a myriad of impressions that Jack sees himself in: “[it] appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome” (WN 99). Such an effect is common in malls, people face a reflection of themselves in commodities and the dream that the commodities represent, looks back at them (Ewen 85). As Jack sees a representation of himself in packaging, his “image is outside of himself, interspersed among the consumer goods” (Laist 75). The identity that Jack projects, and which is upheld by packaging, is thus also what he sees when he looks at potential new purchases. Osteen takes the idea one step further, suggesting that a person once shopping loses their sense of identity and agency, now becoming little more than “an element of the system of capitalism”. In this state, we are ourselves reduced to “packages”, with no purpose beyond taking in and conforming to the messages of the consumer society: thus, we have “become spectacular commodities who consume everything we see, but most of all ourselves” (Osteen 171). As a result, Jack is truly a part of the world of packaging.

In this way, a contrast is revealed between the ways that the two narrators relate to packaging. The connection between Jack’s identity and packaging is different to Nick’s. Where Jack sees himself in, and identifies with, packaging, Nick does not. Through his behaviour, Jack is transformed into the ultimate consumer, whereas Nick remains an observer of other people’s consumer habits. Although Jack, in his role as narrator and observer, is detached from the modern world, he is at the same time entirely wrapped up in it. Contrastingly, Nick is never connected to the world in the same way, being more of an onlooker than an “active agent” (Curnutt 49). Although Nick is of course a part of the events in the book, he is not subject to such an identity transformation. As previously explored, Nick only observes how advertising reflects Gatsby and Myrtle’s identities. He observes how their possessions come to identify them, and reflects upon the influences of packaging. However, unlike Jack, Nick remains detached and unaffected in this respect.

Packaging and Death

Whilst the characters have developed similar ways of adapting their identities, their approaches to death vary. The relationship between packaging and death is strong in both novels, but these

connections are manifested in different ways. For example, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* keep their focus on possessions left behind, as opposed to mourning their dead, and so in a sense they have removed death from the equation. These actions follow the religious idea, previously discussed, that products of mass production hold a kind of immortality. By remembering a person's things, rather than the person himself, death is no longer a factor; one can live on through one's possessions. Thus, it is a way to make sense of death in a world where packaging holds so much perceived meaning. If packaging holds not only religious properties but also the power to transform one's identity, then it is natural that death is subordinated to packaging.

In *White Noise*, products are instead seen to be the *cause* of death. Thus, the products that have made up life, are also thought to mark the end of it, a viewpoint that stands in contrast to previously explored religious ideas about immortality in packaging. Technological products also have the power to separate an individual from their own mortality, not only alienating them from death but also from life. Such a process calls a person's place in the modern world into question, affecting both the individual's understanding of himself and his environment. These conflicting ideas about the meaning and power that packaging holds, underscore the fact that these are indeed different ways in which the characters try to, or are forced to, make sense of their world.

When Gatsby dies, his carefully packaged self is left unwrapped and discarded. After having been shot to death by Myrtle's husband, who believes that he is avenging his wife's death, Gatsby is forgotten. All that remains of his life is a shell, made up of the car, the house and all the things in it. When Nick invites people to attend the funeral, he is met with silence. Not even Mr Wolfsheim, the man who "made" Gatsby, wishes to attend as he does not want to get "mixed up in it" (*GG* 109). Out of all the guests that Gatsby invited to his many parties, only Klipspringer "an obviously frightened person" calls Nick. However, his worry is not about the recently deceased but "about a pair of shoes [he] left there" (*GG* 108). Such a fixation with material possessions is one of the traits of the "artificiality of the jazz age" (Reynolds 8). No one cares about Gatsby's death because, without all of his possessions, he is nothing. Nick even finds that Gatsby's father, Mr Gatz, is dazzled by his son's material wealth: "His pride in his son and in his son's possessions was continually increasing" (*GG* 109). Mr Gatz seems happy, even when his son is lying dead in the house, because he cannot stop admiring all of Gatsby's things. Because of the way that Gatsby packaged his identity, his original self is not mourned upon his

death. The products that Gatsby consumed have dissociated his physical body with the image he projected. He himself, is not remembered at all, only his possessions are.

Where products were all that remained after Gatsby's death, in *White Noise*, death seems to lie in wait in the products themselves. Far from helping the characters avoid it, death seems to be lurking in technology everywhere - in televisions, computers, and even the simplest of household appliances. Laist points out that there is a "commonplace paranoia" about these items, they seem to have ominous properties (78). Great toxic spills are so often reported in the news that they lose their seriousness, since it is thought that a serious event cannot be "an everyday occurrence" (WN 201). Instead, the main concern is with "the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day" (WN 202). Jack's son, Heinrich, sees all this kind of technology as dangerous: "Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway ... Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later" (WN 202). It is especially the television and the radio that Heinrich worries about. Heinrich intimates that this is "where all the deformed babies come[s] from" (WN 203). Such everyday technological products, then, are seen as the cause of human misfortune and death.

By predicting his demise, technology causes Jack to feel not only separated from his own death, but also his very existence. After having been exposed to the poisonous gas, Nyodene D, during the Airborne Toxic Event, a computer works out the likelihood of this being fatal to Jack. The "bracketed number with pulsating stars" go on to give Jack his "computer verdict", telling him that the poison will eventually kill him (WN 163, 199). Thus, it has calculated Jack's probability of death and delivered it to him in a neat package. Jack finds the process disconcerting and he is afraid to know what the "imaging block" and its "computerized nuclear pulse" knows about his death (WN 374). Jack loses an important connection to not only his death but also his life through the transfer (Keesey 145). Jack reflects:

Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. (WN 165)

The process that Jack describes dissociates Jack from his own mortality, an inevitable part of life. Keeseey argues that such images detach Jack “from his own flesh, destroying the vital connection between mind and body” (145). The computer makes Jack feel alienated from his own body and even turns him into purely an “object of further analysis” (Keeseey 146). In this example, packaging has the power to distance Jack from his own mortal body.

Conclusion

The characters in *The Great Gatsby* and *White Noise* reveal several ways in which they perceive and use various forms of packaging to understand and adjust to their modern worlds. Despite living at different stages of the Consumer Society timeline, the characters perceive their surroundings in relatable ways, regardless of whether they live in a state of confusion or constant interference. By seeing these new worlds of excess as simply mysterious or magical, the characters reveal an uncertainty about the various aspects of modernity. Indeed, these ideas show that the characters find their environment hard to explain and similarly difficult to understand. Consequently, the characters do their best to create order of the excess: they make lists and so they are, in a sense, performing a stocktake of the world around them. However, as order is not enough to make sense of these consumer environments, the characters also look for meaning. These efforts result in various religious proclamations, where packaging is thought to carry spiritual significance. Moreover, in this bold and colourful new society, where commodities and technology are packaged and sold as something far greater than what they actually are, how could one resist the urge to do the same? In both novels, we have seen how the characters transform their lives and identities via careful and intelligent methods of packaging. By letting themselves be identified by their clothes and other possessions, the characters manage to simultaneously conform to and stand out among their peers.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the artificiality of such an identity is revealed when a person dies. There is a separation between the two; the person’s possessions live on where the individual does not. In such a consumer focussed world, death is no longer taken into account. In *White Noise*, on the other hand, packaging can also come to represent death or even make a person feel removed from both death and life. This phenomenon is in itself analogous with the characters of the novel. Life is mundane and without wonder, only consumer messages fill their existence.

Packaging does indeed represent the end of life for these characters, simply because, to them, packaging *is* life.

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