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“Manly Men”: Representations of Masculinity in Don DeLillo's Fiction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Representations of manhood in contemporary American culture have recently become a subject of study for many scholars. The literature on the subjects deals mostly with the historical development and the dominant figures of American national types of manhood, as represented in different cultural forms, whether through national myths, cinematic representations or literature. While most authors single out a certain normative type of manhood for each historical and cultural period, the one often called hegemonic masculinity, these types differ in characteristics from author to author. A certain stereotype does indeed exist, but its defining characteristics are differently interpreted by each scholar that touches upon the subject. However, most agree that the concept is difficult to define due to its instability, historical contingency and performativity (Adams and Savran 7-8).

The cultural changes that the hegemonic masculinity experiences through history (e.g. some of the typically representative figures are the breadwinner, soldier, warrior, frontiersman etc.) are explored by many authors (e.g. Baker, Adams and Savran, Benyon, Mosse etc.). Most of these figures re-appear in the analyses of historical and cultural representations of masculinity and what they have in common is that they are “successful ways of 'being a man' in particular places at a specific time” (Benyon 16). Benyon claims that what defines hegemonic masculinity is power, as opposed to other, subordinate masculinities. This power is manifested in different ways in different contexts, but it mostly refers to economic, political and social power over others. To put it simply, this manifestation most often takes form of domination over women, objectivization of women as trophies of sexual conquer, physical prowess, wealth and possession of luxurious objects, physical aggression towards other, weaker men etc. These are some of the most frequent examples of hegemonically manly behavior, but, as already stressed, they are highly dependent on the

historical period and cultural constructions and susceptible to change according to the appropriate context.

In this paper, I will be observing the most recent changes that the hegemonic type of masculinity is going through in its representations. Accordingly to the cultural shift towards postmodernism, the representations of the American national manhood have been experiencing a modification towards a more postmodern form: one with looser boundaries, and determined by almost an awareness of its own constructive and artificial nature. This type of manhood is well represented in the works of Don DeLillo. As much as he represents the shift towards postmodern literature in contemporary America, he does the same for the notion of American masculinity. This paper studies his novels in the light of performative masculinity, an aspect of his novels often pushed aside for the sake of exploring “bigger” themes, but when studied more closely it becomes one of the prevailing subjects of his social and cultural critique. Hidden between the lines of his novels is an elaborate and detailed view of the most recent developments in the cultural construction of masculinity, which provides a new perspective on the complexity of its performative nature.

Although thoroughly studied by scholars and critics, DeLillo's fiction is a critical representation of contemporary gender norms which often goes under the radar in the study of his novels. Only a few scholar have taken upon themselves the task to study DeLillo's representations of masculinity, an aspect of his novel which should by no means be overlooked, as it represents all that the author stands for: toying with the norms and rules of a particular aspect of American culture in a way that he at the same time uses them to construct his narrative and subtly subverts them to express his critical views. This is precisely what happens to the notion of masculinity in his fiction: DeLillo never goes exploring the 'subordinate' models of masculinity, but rather tends to use as his characters the representatives of the traditionally dominant masculinity which is hegemonic in the American

culture and society. As Benyon explains, “in terms of enactment masculinity is a diverse, mobile, even unstable, construction” (2). DeLillo's male characters are not all the same, but they do all represent the normative figures of masculinity—Jack (*White Noise*) is an esteemed academic and a head of family, Eric (*Cosmopolis*) is a financial mogul whom women adore and men are jealous of his success, and Keith (*Falling Man*) is a corporate lawyer and an emotionally stunted, independent and impossible-to-tie-down man. All of them belong to the same arena of masculinity, but represent its various actualizations. Interestingly, these models do not serve DeLillo as a way of avoiding the issues of contemporary masculinity, but instead provide an arena in which he can expose those very issues by demonstrating the fabrication and the consequent instability of such models. Ruth Helyer, one of the scholars to dedicate most attention to masculinity in DeLillo's fiction, puts it best: “Don DeLillo’s fiction suggests that masculinity, rather than being inherent, is an insecure construction based on dominant societal norms and presented via mediated images” (“DeLillo and Masculinity” 125). In my analysis of masculinity in DeLillo's novels, the focus is largely on its demonstration through relationship to others. As DeLillo tends to represent the normative type of manhood in American society, it is not a surprise that he bases the normativity on the status of men as established through power relations, i.e. his protagonists' superior attitude and behavior towards other characters.

In this study, I will analyze three of DeLillo's novels: *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*. I have chosen these novels for they all put such characters in a context of a personal crisis, which is at the same time a crisis of masculinity. All three of the protagonists of these novels—Jack Gladney, Eric Packer and Keith Neudecker—are victims of a crisis which occurs “when society demands that men try to live up to an impossible standard at the hard or gynephobic ends of the scales . . . In this argument, masculinity is fundamentally the social pressure that, internalized, prevents personal growth” (Carrigan et al. 106). As their

masculinity is challenged by different circumstances—whether it is fear of death and a wife's affair, failure in the business arena or a crisis brought on to American masculinity by the 9/11 terrorist attacks—these characters feel inadequate as men, and therefore resort to the construction of a 'hypermasculine' self. Ivry explains 'hypermasculinity' as a response to the threat to American masculinity in the context of 9/11, but I would argue that this could be applied to each of these characters, as they all return to, what he would call, a “hegemonic, heteronormative form” of masculinity (13).

In these novels, hypermasculine characters are presented “torn between upsetting the status quo and conforming to it. [They] display the inadequacy of stereotypes whilst also admitting that the concept of individuality is flawed and not sustainable” (Helyer, *Hyper-masculinity* 1). In other words, the men in the novels are constantly trying to live up to certain stereotypes imposed by the society, which creates anxiety and feelings of inadequacy which destroy them on the inside. Individual men could never live up to such stereotypes and they cannot escape crumbling under the pressure. Such situations point to the fact that the same stereotypical mediated imagery that prevents these men from personal development is the ideal they cling to in order to resolve their inner unrest. By showing that the ideal of manhood cannot be achieved—men cannot be simultaneously “spontaneously handsome, brilliant, athletic, kind, rich, sexy, devoted, skilled, tough, sensitive, rebellious, obedient, muscular, adventurous, brave, bold, *and* successful” (Helyer, *Hyper-masculinity* 5, emphasis in the original)—DeLillo points to the feelings of confusion in individual men, which are usually resolved through gender performativity. Whenever the characters feel insufficiently manly, or as if their manhood was being brought into question, whether in the domestic, social, economic or any other sphere, they turn to performing the stereotype. In Tetreault's words, DeLillo “exaggerates gender norms in order to show that gender is ultimately a performance” (n.p.). In this way, DeLillo deconstructs gender, by serving the “culture's

readily available caricatures of manhood” (Ducat qtd. in Parish 187) to his characters for them to look up to, deconstructing them into the elements that make them “manly men.” For Jack, this is the image of Hitler, for Eric, those are the other power figures that surround him and provoke extreme jealousy whenever someone is better than him in any particular field of life and business, and for Keith, this might very well be the old Keith—the independent archetypal man that his mother-in-law keeps talking about, instead of a vulnerable family man he turns into.

Ducat further comments on these caricatures by saying that it is precisely them that make the nature of masculinity “essentially unstable,” in a way that it “is punctured by the most innocuous of threats” (qtd. in Parish 187). This fragility is DeLillo's main means of subverting the established dominant patterns of masculine behavior. He uses the insecurities in times of personal crises to show how easily one's masculinity may be threatened in a culture where the role models are such exaggerated figures. This happens to all of these characters as they fail to fulfill all expectations in the spheres of business, economy, family, relationships, sex etc. As Carrigan et al. put it, “[n]ot all men are 'responsible' fathers, nor 'successful' in their occupations, and so on. Most men's lives reveal some departure from what the 'male sex role' is supposed to prescribe” (106). Therefore, an inner conflict arises when the “everyday lives of most men” contrast the “versions of culturally praised hegemonic masculinities” which are “part of general consciousness” (Benyon 17), as well as internalized and accepted by these same men. The only escape in a time of self-consciousness and insecurities seems to be the “nostalgic, or originary, claim resurrecting a ‘lost’ masculinity” (Ivry 6). These developments are portrayed in DeLillo's novels through masculine characters, and they represent the American masculinity in a millennial crisis—a crisis “in the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity” (Ivry 5). While there is, and has always been, a presumed ideal, an abstract model of the traditionally dominant masculinity, in the

previous few decades, it, too, has been experiencing a crisis. It still holds a certain image in the minds of many men, but this image is no longer clearly defined: “the contours of the male stereotype [are] getting blurred, even if the ideal itself might still be present” (Mosse 192). Precisely this blurriness of the stereotype is what makes DeLillo's characters resort to a violent, aggressive, even barbaric behavior in the lack of a better, clearly defined paradigm.

The characters represented in these novels are portrayed in various contexts. These contexts and the challenges they pose before the protagonists concern the themes that DeLillo is most famous for. They are faced with the issues related to capitalism and consumer culture, media and technology, and even terrorism. These are some of the most prominent and studied aspects of DeLillo's novels and at the same time the standpoints from which Jack, Eric and Keith are represented and interpreted. In these spheres of life in the contemporary American culture and society, one of the main problems approached through issues of masculinity is the development and fragility of supercapitalist markets. This aspect is mostly explored in *Cosmopolis*, through Packer's incessant fight with the digital numbers and a constant pressure to live in the future. Furthermore, capitalism is linked to consumer culture and what Marx would call “commodity fetishism,” another concept that has recently put men alongside women at the “center of consumerism and consumption” (Felski 61-63). This topic relates mostly to Jack and Eric, who rely on the merchandise they buy to build their status and manhood. The motif of the mediated images of manhood has already been mentioned: it concerns above all “[t]he masculine stereotype [which] confronts us once more from all sides, in advertisements, film, and literature: clean-cut and fit” (Mosse 181). Men are bombarded with images of hypermen—“highly crafted, alluring and accessible role models” which are “constructed and represented in various guises throughout the mass media, whether on television, in film, advertising, literature, magazines, the tabloid and broadsheet press, pop music, even on the internet;” it is what Benyon calls “mediated masculinity” (64), and it

represents the manifestation of the social pressures creating insecurities in individual men. Finally, the topic most relevant for *Falling Man* is the emasculation of the American man by the trauma of 9/11. DeLillo is one of the authors who represent the “post-9/11 cultural preoccupation with the demasculinization of America” (Ivry 5), resolved through a return to a traditional model of hypermasculinity (13).

In these contexts, I will be analyzing DeLillo's male protagonists through the elements that construct their image, or rather, their performance. The normative manhood that DeLillo is trying to depict and subvert is reflected through “pattern[s] of behavior that [inform] all aspects of life from attitudes towards the human body and sexuality, clothes, appearance, and the conduct of personal relations” (Mosse 192). These elements are the most prominent manifestations of masculinity in DeLillo's fiction. To begin with, the importance of body and appearance is stressed in all three novels: for Jack, it is a carefully constructed [persona](#) based on 'props' which create his image of a strict intellectual, and for Keith and Eric, it is mostly the concern with keeping their bodies in extremely good shapes. As Mosse stresses, “the love for the body beautiful . . . inform[s] modern manliness” (5). The body, and the overall appearance, are the easiest ways of following the mediated ideals of manhood and the simplest means of achieving an outward appearance of confident virility, which often serves to hide inner insecurities, and at the same time help sustain the exaggerated stereotypes.

A crucial aspect of representing masculinity is also through relationships to other people. Mostly, this concerns women, as “women are always present in men's self-image” (Mosse 53). All of the men portrayed in these novels have a different way of approaching women, but they all seem to fit a certain pattern of manly behavior—whether as heads of family and loving husbands, or as playboys to whom women only serve as sexual objects. Other relationships matter in the definition of manliness, as well. These are mostly

relationships with male friends, but also those to enemies. Eric in particular proves Mosse's claim that one of the "building blocks of modern manliness" is also the "presence of enemies apparently bent upon masculinity's destruction" (55).

Finally, the topic of violence seems unavoidable as part of DeLillo's construction of characters. As Helyer puts it, "[his] fiction abounds with violent acts" ("DeLillo and Masculinity" 134), which are mostly a consequence of a masculinity in crisis and the search for a primal, more aggressive sense of self as a man. However, as Helyer continues: "DeLillo's men gravitate toward the force and violence traditionally expected of them, but it is an unpleasant surprise to find that this violence does not solve anything or give the real world any more clarity. Violence against the self has to escalate into death and self-annihilation before anything new and unmediated is revealed" ("DeLillo and Masculinity" 134-35). There is no resolution in these attempts to find a satisfying sense of self by trying to live up to the stereotype of aggressive normative masculinity. The violent conflicts they resort to never end well nor do they offer any resolution or comfort for these characters. In this way, DeLillo shows that gender is, first and foremost, a performance—merely an act, for which they cannot find any real reason besides the social pressure and the images it imposes on them. Groombridge explains gender performativity as a "disadvantage": "we tend to go on and on doing things without realizing that the original reason for the action has disappeared, and even after we have entirely forgotten why we ever acted like this in the first place" (2). Ultimately, this only proves that masculinity and femininity are "abstract concepts"—"ideas that people have at the back of their minds about what a real man or a real woman is or does" (7), which can never correspond to reality.

Therefore, even when trying to find a stereotype to live up to, and changing their behavior patterns to what they believe is expected from a man, DeLillo's protagonists never manage to achieve greatness and become the ideal men they look up to. DeLillo portrays "the

emergent male self-consciousness, which is crucially and increasingly knowing about the performative nature of men's roles" (Helyer, "DeLillo and Masculinity" 125). The performativity is evident in each character's pondering on their supposed behavior and the consequence of it, but these characters never manage to find a suitable solution for the insecurities imposed by the culturally mediated images. Gender, therefore, proves to be nothing more than an illusion—as Butler puts it, "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (900).

2. WHITE NOISE

White Noise is perhaps DeLillo's most famous novel and the one most studied by scholars and critics. While the main theme of the novel focuses on the search for identity in the increasingly technological world of mediated images, I will be observing the type of a masculine figure that DeLillo represents through the protagonist Jack Gladney and the crisis Jack goes through as his self-image no longer corresponds to the desired image of a man he wants to be, an aspect of the novel often overlooked by scholars and critics (Hamming 27). Jack is a college professor, a father and a husband. These are his three defining roles and I believe to have put them in the order of their importance to his self-perception. As a man, Jack defines himself through his work and his family, assuming different preconstructed roles that he believes to be suitable. Halldorson defines Jack as “the perfect American citizen: adept and comfortable; his career and his very life are fully repressed as he lives a naturalized form of playacting” (128). He openly embraces his role as an American family man and an intellectual, that is until his feelings of inadequacy kick in and he can no longer “orient himself in his world” (Harack 304). As the plot develops, his goals and actions move in a direction that neither he nor the reader would expect from a man like Jack.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo explores the reaction of individual men to the models of hegemonic masculinity imposed on them through media images. While DeLillo almost never deviates from the hegemonic models in his choice of characters, he still subverts these models and explores their consequences for the lives of actual men. Jack starts off as a perfect construction of middle-class masculinity, but the mediated images of masculinity make him question his worth as a man, and he turns to a hypermasculine style of life, which corresponds more to a working-class model. In this way, DeLillo criticizes the idea of a predetermined model of what a man is supposed to act and look like, which is merely a

cultural construction. For Jack, these models are a source of insecurities, as he is overwhelmed by the unrealistic expectations from himself and from others based on such images. Lost in his insecurities and in search of a compensatory strategy, Jack embraces as a role model one of the worst figures of terror in the human history. However, whichever model he decides to follow, his attempts at becoming them are doomed to fail, as they are only unrealistic cultural constructions with little connection to reality.

2.1 Work and Social Status

Jack's professional position is the thing he takes most seriously in his life. This is the role that he feels belongs to him and that he needs to continually perform in order to feel good about himself and his manhood. He is good example of a representation of what Benyon describes as a middle-class masculinity, which often “heavily based on . . . career and profession” (21). He is the “chairman of the Department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill” (*WN* 4). The world of academia is his safe place—not in terms of him feeling comfortable or relaxed there, but the place where he feels in control and important. As Helyer puts it, Jack builds a “strong masculine identity [that] he has deliberately connected to ideas of academic self-aggrandizement” (“DeLillo and Masculinity” 126). In order to better affirm his position as an authoritative masculine figure, he uses props and gestures. His “costume” serves as a way of insulating himself and creating a comforting and secure surrounding built on fantasies (Halldorson 118). Many examples of such behavior are referenced at more than one point in the novel: he likes his academic robes, due to their ability to “add romance to life” (*WN* 10), he wears dark heavy-framed glasses even during the day, he makes long pauses before the beginning of his lectures and even renames himself by adding an extra initial to his name as a way of asserting a more strong and authoritative impression, thus

compensating for “his ethnic and professional inadequacy” (Giaino 81). While to others these features communicate “dignity, significance and prestige” (*WN* 20), to Jack, they are a reminder of his insecurities. He feels like “the false character that follows the name around” (*WN* 20). Such stunts, which serve to build an appearance of a strong man, are used by Jack as a means of creating for himself the social status that he aspires to—that of an intelligent professional and a strong man. Halldorson even goes so far as to call this self-constructed appearance a “heroic individuality” (126). However, the fact the he is aware of the deliberate construction of this status is a source of insecurities. Outside the academic world, he is a vulnerable and harmless man. This is not a change that only he notices. His friend Murray says to him at one point, “I’ve never seen you off campus, Jack. You look different without you glasses and gown . . . You look so harmless, Jack. A big harmless, indistinct sort of guy” (*WN* 98). The fear of dying without being remembered as a great man is the very force that drives the plot forward, as Jack eventually embarks on a journey to explore his fears and insecurities once removed from the familiar and secure surroundings of his everyday life and work, in fear of dying “indistinct.” Deep inside and hidden from the view of others, Jack “lives in fear: fear of his society, its people and its systems” (Halldorson 126).

Once a chemical catastrophe hits their town, the Gladney family experiences many turmoils and changes. In the disastrous situation Jack holds onto his academic status as a protective barrier, believing himself to be a citizen of too high a status to be affected by such events: “[t]hese things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas . . . 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?” (*WN* 133); “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of the department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (*WN* 136-37). His confidence in his status could almost be interpreted as smugness or egotism, and yet

he gradually comes to realize that he is just as vulnerable as anybody else in his private life, and has no means of defending himself from the life that is coming at him.

Central to his academic career, and so his workplace masculinity, is the [figure](#) of Hitler. While DeLillo often uses Hitler as a reference and a leitmotif in many of his novels, in *White Noise*, Hitler is an unavoidable topic. He serves as an icon isolated from its historical context and “impressed into the academic service in exchange for high tuition payments” (Olster 80), and thus freed of his historical burden he serves as a kind of a masculine role model for Jack. Hitler becomes the “hero and academic inspiration” to Jack, with both of them “masquerading behind a show of power” (Helyer, *Hyper-masculinity* 105). The fact that Hitler in a way belongs to Jack Gladney is an additional compliment to him. He feels important simply because he “filled an opening no one knew existed” (*WN* 216). He takes Hitler to be his life-time achievement, even his property (“He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you” (*WN* 13)). The reason Hitler represents such a powerful model for Jack is the fact that he stands for Jack's “obsession with power” (Donovan 138); he gives Jack a sense of comfort in being incorporated into the “self reliant 'I am'”, based on the “ability to role-play an arch-individualist who stands above the crowd” (Halldorson 127). Hitler's power and actions inspire Jack's behavior as a man, as he looks at Hitler as a manly and authoritative leader and role model, rather than the historical figure he really was. Again, this is a mediated image rather than a realistic person, which Jack takes as a comfort, when he is really simply a construct as any other masculinity [style](#) (Hamming 34). The obsession with Hitler is [Jack's compensatory fantasy and thus](#) a sign of Jack's “masculine anxiety” (Hamming 30). [As a strongly masculine figure, which serves as his role model, the image of Hitler is at the same time Jack's fantasy, in a way that it makes him feel more authoritative, and a source of his anxieties, as it is the mediated images of hypermasculine figures that are impossible to achieve that his insecurities stem from.](#)

2.2 Family Life

The roles of a father and a husband are no less important to Jack than his career. In the realm of the family, he finds quite a different outlet for his performance of masculinity. The family he lives with is a composite of a few different families. Both he and his wife have had multiple previous marriages and brought into the family a number of children. The readers learn little about Jack's previous three wives except for the fact that they all worked in intelligence. Babette, his current wife, is a well-developed character and their relationship is one of the main themes of the novel. In the context of performativity, Babette is a suitable choice for Jack. She is attractive, motherly, serious and intelligent. All of these qualities appeal to Jack's needs as a man, a husband, a father and a professor. He thrills in the idea that they as a couple construct the image of an "Important Scholar" and a "Dirty Blonde," and continually recreates this image of himself as part of that couple by fondling Babette wherever they go, as a way of "act[ing] out the sexual facets of his masculinity" (Helyer, "DeLillo and Masculinity" 131). But she, too, is a source of insecurities for Jack's virility. To begin with, he often feels inferior to her in many aspects of everyday life:

She runs, she shovels snow, she caulks the tub and sink. She plays word games with Wilder and reads erotic classics aloud in bed at night. What do I do? I twirl the garbage bags and twist-tie them, swim laps in the college pool. When I go walking, joggers come up soundlessly behind me, appearing at my side, making me jump in idiotic fright. Babette talks to dogs and cats. I see colored spots out of the corner of my right eye. She plans ski trips that we never take, her face bright with excitement. I walk up the hill to school, noting the whitewashed stones that line the driveways of newer homes. (*WN* 17)

He believes her to be more equipped for life, while he himself has only the one constructed tag of an important academic figure that he wears “like a borrowed suit” (*WN* 19). She represents motherly comfort and security, “posited as a maternal figure” even to Jack (Hamming 37). In a world filled with insecurities, Babette fulfills Jack's fantasy of “regression toward a primitive state” (37), a protective womb where he can safely be his authentic self.

However, not very helpful to his insecurities is the fact that she betrays his trust by cheating on him. Jack believes Babette to be, above all, the love of his life. To him, this entails an honest and trusting relationship, a factor that he continually stresses as the tenet of their marriage. Being a partner “with whom [Jack] can feel safe,” Babette is the opposite of his former three wives, who have all worked in intelligence (LeClair 216). Because of their jobs, they could never be completely honest with Jack and he was unable to trust them. He believes love to be the only place where he is allowed to be an honest human who can let his insecurities and fears show—the only place where he does not have to perform, but simply be: “[l]ove helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection” (*WN* 34). This identity is shattered once he finds out about her affair with a man who provides her with a medicine that inhibits the fear of death. It hurts him deeply, but also brings to focus his vulnerability to both pain and death. Overwhelmed with fear, he leaves his role of an established intellectual and turns to a more primal manly behavior in search of a way to overcome his insecurities. Her affair emasculates him and he finds himself in an identity crisis, which ultimately pushes him to turn to a more primal state of masculinity, characterized by violence and aggression. This topic will be further explored in the chapter “Death and Violence”.

Jack and Babette's sexual life is another aspect of his performance as a man and a husband, and it appears as a subject of many parts of the text. Perhaps the most relevant to

observing Jack as a husband and a man is the conversation between him and his wife concerning sexual pleasure. They argue over whose task it is to please the other one:

“What do you want to do?” she said.

”Whatever you want to do.”

“I want to do whatever's best for you.”

“What's best for me is to please you,” I said.

“I want to make you happy, Jack.”

“I'm happy when I'm pleasing you.”

“I just want to do what you want to do.”

“I want to do whatever's best for you.”

“But you please me by letting me please you,” she said.

“As the male partner I think it's my responsibility to please.”

“I'm not sure whether that's a sensitive caring statement or a sexist remark.” (*WN* 32)

Much like in any other area of life, Jack perceives sex as a role he has to perform in order to satisfy his own expectations of what a man should act like in the bedroom. The sexual pleasure is in this case less based on the actual sexual encounter, and more so on the socially prescribed role and expectations from a man or a woman, for Jack can only find sex pleasurable if he feels like a dominant man. His sexuality completely lacks spontaneity (Helyer, *Hyper-masculinity* 74), as it is, too, only a [script](#) he wants to follow. Helyer claims that he simply fulfills stereotypes by creating himself “through his desire for the created other” and thus “act[s] out the sexual facets of his masculinity” (“DeLillo and Masculinity”131).

In the context of family life, the role of a father is equally important to Jack as that of a husband. Helyer believes his gathering of his offspring to be yet another expression of his masculine role: through it, “he hopes that [he] will demonstrate his ability to be a socially

commendable father” (“DeLillo and Masculinity” 135). While Jack has four children of his own, and lives with two of his children and two of Babette's, I would dare to point out Heinrich as his favorite child, his only son. Heinrich, as a child version of Jack himself, is most relevant for the analysis of Jack's masculinity. His name is the first thing that comes into focus in this context. Jack explains the choice of name: “[w]hy did you name Heinrich Heinrich? . . . I thought it was a forceful name, a strong name. It has a kind of authority . . . 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” (*WN* 74). He does to his son what he does to himself—he names him in a way that would insure for him an image of a strong and authoritative self. In other words, he wants to construct a desired image for his son from the very beginning of his life—that of a “Nazi-like masculinity” (Hamming 31). While Heinrich has a strongly peculiar personality, much like many of DeLillo's children characters, there are a few of his traits and behavior patterns that should be focused on that are relevant to Jack's own personality.

Jack transfers some of his insecurities to his son. Some of them he openly states, while others remain his personal thoughts, but they are all based on the same fear of losing authority and virility, and finding appropriate coping mechanisms. One of Jack's biggest worries is that his son's hairline is receding. He refuses to accept this as a natural occurrence and instead transfer the responsibility to himself: “Heinrich's hairline is beginning to recede. I wonder about his. Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance when she was pregnant? Am I at fault somehow? Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site . . . ?” (*WN* 25). Much like his tendency to search for things that make him less of a man, he exhibits the same problem with parenting—by projecting his fear of destroying his manly appearance to his son, and blaming his own parenting for a natural body change. In this way, he doubts his performance as a father.

Similarly, Heinrich is picking up on the same thing, and much like his father, feels his masculinity threatened by the hair loss:

“Why do you want to chin? What does chinning accomplish?”

“What does anything accomplish? Maybe I just want to build up my body to compensate for other things.”

“What other things?”

“My hairline's getting worse, to name just one.” (*WN* 208-09)

By being insecure as a father, he transfers the same anxieties to his son, who also turns to a normative way of proving his masculinity—by building up his body. Helyer interprets the building of an “admirable physique” as part of the celebration of “male physical prowess” aimed at “conform[ing] to the socially approved appearance of a man” (“DeLillo and Masculinity” 129).

An important moment to mention is the event when an insane asylum burns down in their town. Jack takes Heinrich to watch the fire together:

This was the night the insane asylum burned down. Heinrich and I got in the car and went to watch. There were other men at the scene with their adolescent boys. Evidently fathers and sons seek fellowship at such events. Fire helps draw them closer, provide a conversational wedge. There is equipment to appraise, the technique of firemen to discuss and criticize. The manliness of firefighting—the virility of fires, one might say—suits the kind of laconic dialogue that fathers and sons can undertake without awkwardness and embarrassment. (*WN* 274)

This scene depicts the perfect example of the transfer of masculine values and images across generations. It is an educational moment that Jack wants to share with Heinrich, as do other fathers with their sons, which helps perpetuate the myth of American masculinity. It teaches that it is the virility, the risk-taking, the bravery and the physical prowess of the firemen that

American fathers want their sons to learn, so as not to feel inadequate as their fathers sometimes do. However, these again are culturally constructed images of masculinity, which are in fact the reason of men's insecurities.

With his other children, there is no such bond of intimacy and identification. He enacts his fatherly role much like he does any other role in his life. He again imagines a projection of a desired self and performs it in front of others and himself. Many critics comment on Jack's identity in the context of consumer culture. Participating in the “business of exchange” seems to be one of the ways in which Jack helps himself feel “rewarded” (Helyer, *Hyper-masculinity* 85). While shopping with his children, Jack feels a “wave of generosity” and lets the children pick out gifts for themselves out of the blue, while thinking the following about himself: “I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*. The children knew it was the nature of such things that I could not be expected to engage in technical discussions about the gifts themselves” (*WN* 100). This event represents the “moment of consumerism” through which “Jack attempts to regain a sense of patriarchal authority and entitlement defined by rituals of benefaction” (Hamming 31). This gesture is not a wave of generosity directed at the children, but rather at himself. He is the one who enjoys the situation the most. He loves being the generous father, the breadwinner who rewards his proteges. The figure of the father is in his eyes based on two premises: the protector and the benefactor—and he fulfills both of these roles for his children.

2.3 Death And Violence

Fear of death is, according to many critics, the main topic of this novel. It could be argued that it is also one of the main factors that construct Jack's masculinity and self-image. Jack is terrified of death, and the whole novel revolves around him finding ways of coping

with his fears and conquering death. While the search for a way to be rid of his fear serves as a driving force that pushes the plot forward, the possible ways of conquering death are mostly expressed through dialogues. Much like Eric in *Cosmopolis*, Jack also partially believes in achieving immortality through great and epic deaths. He talks about great historical figures, such as Genghis Khan and Suleiman the Magnificent:

It's hard to imagine these men feeling sad about death. Attila the Hun died young. He was still in his forties. Did he feel sorry for himself, succumb to self-pity and depression? He was the King of the Huns, the Invader of Europe, the Scourge of God. I want to believe he lay in his tent, wrapped in animal skins, as in some internationally financed movie epic, and said brave cruel things to his aides and retainers. No weakening of the spirit. . . I want to believe he was not afraid. (*WN* 118)

Hear again, fear of death is treated as non-masculine, a characteristic that Jack is desperate to be rid of. As a result, Jack searches for a masculine identity that would rid him of his “feelings of inadequacy” and “fear of death” (Helyer, “DeLillo and Masculinity” 126). Hamming believes Jack's principal solution to be a primal, more authentic masculinity that returns to nature. In the postmodern world of technologically mediated images of masculinity, Jack is bothered by a certain “cultural malaise,” which evokes in him a feeling of “nostalgia for an imaginary moment when masculine subjectivity was constituted by and through an intimate relationship to pre-technological nature.” In this state, figures like Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan are idolized as a way of “draw[ing] on a host of conceptual affiliations between nature and masculinity—immediacy, authenticity, corporeality, essence,” as the “only defense against the artifice and uncertainty of postmodernity” (27). In this context, Hamming also interprets Babette as a refuge. She represents a “maternal 'earth-mother' figure,” to whose bosom Jack retreats as a way of returning to the authentic arena of “American masculinity marked by violence, domination, and nature-escapism” (34).

Another way to avoid death is through the death of others, which is a premise that appears again in *Cosmopolis*. Jack's friend Murray is the one to bring out the theory that Jack heartily embraces: “[b]ut think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions” (*WN* 334). And this is precisely what Jack does—he goes on a search for Mink, the dealer and producer of Dylar, at first to get the pills and get rid of his fear this way, but when this does not work, he uses Murray's strategy. He shoots Mink, and finally sees himself to be “[l]ooming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit” (*WN* 359). By doing so, “he can establish himself . . . as a sexually powerful killer rather than an impotent dier” (Boxall 127). Besides only gaining life points, by doing this Jack is at the same time “avenging his wife's infidelity” (Helyer, “DeLillo and Masculinity” 134), thus re-masculinizing himself and embracing a more aboriginal model of masculine behavior. He establishes himself as a man through “assert[ing] his sexual power by revenging his cuckoldry” (Boxall 127).

Violence is an element of masculinity introduced gradually as the novel progresses. Babette sees it as a general feature of virility present in every man: “[y]ou're a man, Jack. We all know about men and their insane rage. This is something men are very good at. Insane and violent jealousy. Homicidal rage” (*WN* 259). While at this point Jack disagrees with her, he gradually embraces this kind of behavior, and transforms into a man who follows the normative strain of masculinity symbolized by violence, aggression and physical strength. The type of a model of a man that he becomes by the end of the novel is far from his initial self-image of a high-class intellectual. Yet, it inevitably results from Jack's “short-comings as a rugged 'manly-man,’” as a way of “defend[ing] his masculine ego” (Hamming 29).

The symbol of the kind of masculinity that Jack embraces later in the book is Babette's father Vernon. Vernon is a “manly man”—a man with a gun, a man who repairs things around the house, who flirts with waitresses etc. He is “a transient and rugged guy who would feel perfectly at home in a country line dance or a mechanic's shop,” and at the same time “makes an already troubled Jack feel even less adequate with his work” (Giaino 84). If Jack represents the middle-class masculinity, Vernon is the symbol of the working-class masculinity. As far as manual work goes, Jack thinks about it in the context of masculinity: “[n]ot to care about [it] was a betrayal of fundamental principles, a betrayal of gender, of species. What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet—fundamentally useless, dead to history, to the messages in his genes?” (*WN* 282). At this point, Jack has already started doubting how masculine his former role of an intellectual really was, and he starts to embrace the model that Vernon pushes on him, revealing “his own feelings of inadequacy” (Helyer, “DeLillo and Masculinity” 125) or, in Hamming's words, “an indictment to his own failed manhood” (29). When Vernon gives him a gun to be able to protect his family, he says to Jack:

“In your whole life as a man in today's world, have you ever owned a firearm?”

“No,” I said.

“I figured. I said to myself here's the last man in America who doesn't own the means to defend himself.” (*WN* 290)

Violence and weapons are, besides physical work, the most defining characteristic of the American man, at least according to Vernon. And Jack eventually accepts this to be true. The weapon gives him power and self-confidence. He even starts carrying it to school with him. It replaces the glasses and the gown as a prop, and becomes the main token of his virile power (“How stupid these people were, coming into my office unarmed” (*WN* 341)).

2.4 Conclusion

Jack Gladney is a representation of a middle-class masculinity as constructed through mediated images. As he strives to maintain the desired image of a man he wants to be, he reveals his insecurities and turns to a different kind of a masculine stereotype to regain a sense of control over his life and identity. Both his obsession with Hitler and his return to a primal, aggressive masculinity represent the “anti-modern response to man's alienation from nature” (Hamming 35). However, even “violence as a testament to his masculine authority” (38) is inadequate to the hypermasculine image mediated through culture and technology. His constant need to “[obey] social pressures [by] conform[ing] to stereotypical identities” still fails to achieve satisfaction (Helyer, “DeLillo and Masculinity” 134). Jack can never be the man that is idolized in the cultural constructs. His insecurities cannot be escaped as long as he strives to become the stereotypical model, as the lives of real, individual men never correspond to the mediated image.

3. COSMOPOLIS

DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* follows Eric Packer's trip across New York to get a haircut, a trip that turns into a brilliantly developed story of a dominant masculine billionaire in the interaction with his surroundings constructed of screens, women, men, cars, celebrities, murderers, protesters etc., poised to lead him to his death. The novel is above all an exploration of the technological and economic reality of today's business world, but DeLillo does not miss the opportunity to use the context of the corporate world to explore the status of masculinity in contemporary America, by presenting the readers with a hypermasculine protagonist, an alpha male of our generation. Hidden inside all these wider contexts reflecting the novel's main themes is an incredibly carefully constructed caricature of hegemonic masculinity. The author explores the shift of world's power towards the technological and economic sector, where new figures of power emerge: "the investment banker, the land developer, the venture capitalist, . . . the software entrepreneur, the global overlord of satellite and cable, the discount broker, the beaked media chief, . . . the exiled head of state of some smashed landscape of famine and war" (*Cosmopolis* 10). Among these new figures of masculinity we find the corporate businessman brought to extremes in Eric Packer as the new model of greedy, aggressive, dominant masculinity. He is "the supercapitalist, superpatriarch, supercolonialist who wants to buy, fuck, and run the whole world entirely on his own" (Heyne 44). Through Eric, DeLillo criticizes this model. By bringing everything about Eric to extremes, and making him the *superman*, only to completely destroy him, he shows that these models are merely fragile masks—constructions of outwardly apparent sovereignty over one's masculinity, which only hide personal disquiet. In fact, under his appearance of the perfect man, Eric is a troubled individual, prone to destruction and self-destruction as a result of his constant chase for perfection. On his path to be the best man at everything, he loses all

humanity, becoming an emotionless machine. As he fails to achieve his impossible goals, his self-doubt and self-hatred surface in multiple forms, only to finally destroy him. DeLillo thus satirizes the chase for masculine perfection that is imposed by the culture and society on men, but impossible to achieve or be sustained, by bringing the best and the worst of it in Eric Packer.

3.1 Wealth and Power

The first and most important characteristic that the reader learns about Eric Packer is that he is rich. The money he has so much of is his most precious possession—through it, he claims his power and dominance. David Cowart describes Packer as a “sardanapalian . . . twenty-eight-year-old tycoon” (213). Wealth and a luxurious way of life are common ways of demonstrating manhood, especially so in the capitalist society. Thorstein Veblen recognized the consumption of luxurious goods as a sign of male prowess already at the beginning of the 20th century. He connects conspicuous consumption to the status of a master in society (70), which corresponds to what Eric would represent in today's world. His idea of conspicuous consumption is connected also to the fact that anyone with a lower social position than the consumer does not have access to these goods (71), which is the basic motivation for Eric's excessive purchasing habits, further elaborated later in the text.

Benyon describes the worlds of “technology, finance and advertising” as “sexy” and “dangerous” in the context of masculinity. The arena excludes women and is inextricably linked to possessions: “the business suit, the mobile phone, the flashy car, beautiful and compliant women and the large house or penthouse suite”—all of which represent the “entrepreneurial masculine values” (21-22). To Eric, too, it is the base of what he is and, therefore, also the base of his manhood. Brooke Allen identifies him as “the personification

of global capitalism” (21). But his arrogance with money is also what creates his enemies—which he enjoys, being a man with a constant need to stress his superiority over 'the common people.' To Allen, Eric Packer “is the natural culmination of the 'master of the universe’” (21).

To begin with, the novel opens with him exiting his 48-room apartment in the highest residential tower in the world. DeLillo writes about the tower that its “only statement was its size” (*Cosmopolis* 8). As his chief of theory later puts it, he “live[s] in a tower that soars to heaven and goes unpunished by God” (*Cosmopolis* 103). His apartment and his car, both brought to extremes in regard to their size, may be interpreted as “enormous phallic projections,” a way of stating one's masculinity through possession of objects (Heyne 440). Davidson comments on Eric's choice of a car as a proof of his knowing “the cultural and social implications of [it] and its place in the discourse of power” (474). In other words, Eric knows that the car, as does the apartment, serves as a symbol of power that will grant him the desired status. Statements like this go to prove that, for Eric, it is not at all about the things (and people) he possesses, but rather about the idea of possessing them. His arrogance in this regard stems from the price he pays for these things, much more than it does from the things themselves: “[t]he only thing that matters is the price you pay . . . You paid the money for the number itself” (*Cosmopolis* 78). The arguably best example of his ostentation is his wish to buy the Rothko Chapel, an art gallery that contains the paintings of Mark Rothko. While his art dealer Didi Fancher is proud to present him with an opportunity to buy one of Rothko's paintings, Eric declines, wanting to buy the whole chapel and transfer it to his apartment. Here arises the difference between Didi, as a true art aficionado, and Eric, as a person to whom art only serves as a way of demonstrating his power and superiority:

“If they sell me the chapel, I'll keep it intact. Tell them.”

“Keep it intact where?”

“In my apartment. There's sufficient space. I can make more space.”

“But people need to see it.”

“Let them buy it. Let them outbid me.”

“Forgive the pissy way I say this. But the Rothko Chapel belongs to the world.”

“It's mine if I buy it.” (*Cosmopolis* 27-28)

While she believes the purpose of art to be its ability to show its beauty to the world, he sees it as a means of demonstrating that he can take it away from the world, positioning himself as a God-like figure. The only purpose of art in Eric's life is to become one of the “means of displaying his own wealth and sophistication and of acquiring power over others by exercising his intellectual superiority over them” (Giaino 105). As is exemplified in the novel, “he liked the paintings that his guests did not know how to look at” (*Cosmopolis* 8).

3.2 Social Relationships and Status

Eric's image corresponds to many of the masculine ideals constructed in popular literature: he is the possible star of a romance novel—the kind of a man all women want and all men want to be. He is attractive, intelligent, obscenely rich, educated, passionate about arts and high culture. Despite all these qualities, the reader can never grow to like him. His huge ambition makes him contemptuous and condescending, thrilling in his superiority over other people. Heyne describes him as highly self-centered and unable “to see other people as equals” (442). Eric expresses the type of behavior towards other people that Veblen refers to as “crude dominance;” in other words—it is an expression of higher status through a patronizing relationship to “menials” (47). Thus, the superficial image of a gentleman in love with poetry and painting is soon left in the shadow of his dark side—Cowart even goes so far as to call him a “son of a bitch” (222). This is most likely the result of his love for

degradation of other people. He belongs to the group of men that Benyon would refer to as “men-as-managers,” which he believes to exert “their masculinity through absolute control over the men and women beneath them” (22). And in *Cosmopolis*, everyone is beneath Eric. He treats most women as mere sexual object, or rather, toys that he plays with. And for Eric, playing usually implies downgrading and hurting them. The men, on the other hand, are all considered competition and he thrives in their downfall.

His relationship to people in general is one based on a patronizing stand and proving his superiority through the destruction of others. His killer, a disgruntled former employee who calls himself Benno Levin, perhaps best describes his tactless personality: “[t]he huge ambition. The contempt. I can list the things. I can name the appetites, the people. Mistreat some, ignore some, persecute others. The self-totality. The lack of remorse. These are your gifts” (*Cosmopolis* 191). No matter his intelligence and charm, he is a ruthless capitalist who feeds his ego on the misery of others, which prevents us from ever growing to like him. Based on his “intellectual gifts,” a “vast ego” and his relationship to other characters, Heyne describes Eric as the modern “supervillain” (439). This is what ultimately gets him killed, as Benno seeks revenge not so much for his financial ruin, but rather for Eric's making him feel worthless. In the moments shortly before the murder, Benno reveals his identity to Eric, who openly states that Benno's name means nothing to him, and finds pleasure in seeing that this disturbs Benno profoundly: “[h]e felt a trace of the old stale pleasure, dropping an offhand remark that makes a person feel worthless. So small and forgettable a thing that spins such a disturbance” (*Cosmopolis* 192). He thrives in making people feel “small and forgettable” only for the purpose of feeding his own ego and proving his superiority, which is what ultimately gets him killed.

While this may not be surprising in the relationship between two mortal enemies, which Eric and Benno are, the same patronizing attitude is extended to all the people in Eric's

life: his colleagues, friends (if anyone could be possibly be called so), even his wife. None of them have any defense against Eric's attacks on their intelligence and emotions. These attacks are mostly carried out through what Heyne calls “dialogic competitions” (442). Eric lures his interlocutors into conversations which shame them and make them feel inferior. Most of them, however, are smart enough not to even engage in such discussions, e.g. his currency analyst responds to his teasing by refusing to answer his questions: “I know I'll say something that's halfway clever but mostly shallow and probably inaccurate on some level. Then you'll pity me for having been born” (*Cosmopolis* 15).

While Eric's dismissal of the people he does not find important is a sign of his exaggerated self-opinion, there are men in his life that threaten his very perception of self, as they have a hierarchical status similar to or above him. The first of such figures to appear in the novel is the President of the United States, a person Eric hates the most: “he was the president. Eric hated him for that . . . [h]e hated Midwood for being omnipresent, as he himself used to be. He hated him for being the object of a credible threat to his safety. And he hated and mocked him for his gynecoid upper body with its swag of dangling mammaries under the sheer white shirt” (76-77); “[h]e knew a little Finnish. Eric hated him for that” (*Cosmopolis* 140). The hatred, not surprisingly, stems from a strong feeling of jealousy. The qualities that Eric scorns are those that make Midwood more important, interesting or accomplished than himself. The fact that he mocks his appearance as gynecoid point to his insecurities as a man, and a need to single out the one thing that makes Eric more masculine than Midwood.

Two other important figures emerge in the same context: Arthur Rapp, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, and Nikolai Kaganovich, “the owner of Russia's largest media conglomerate” (*Cosmopolis* 81). Both of these men are murdered on the same day and their deaths are streamed widely on television. Eric finds great satisfaction in these

scenes. The image of Rapp being stabbed to death even sexually arouses him, as he imagines himself masturbating to the tape (while he recognizes as the moment of arousal the scene of the journalist's skirt rising as the victim falls over her, it is the bloodiness and the cries that make the scene sexual for Eric). Kaganovich, on the other hand, is not Eric's immediate enemy. In fact, the two were friends who respected each other and even shared a bond of brotherhood. They had experienced a strange encounter while hunting together: “[t]he sight of the tiger aflame in high snow made them feel bound to an unspoken code, a brotherhood of beauty and loss” (*Cosmopolis* 81). But while he is described as a brother to Eric in one sentence, in the next, Eric's ruthless homicidal instinct kicks back: “Eric felt good about it, seeing him there, unnumbered bullet wounds to the body and head. It was quite a contentment, an easing of some unspecifiable pressure in the shoulders and chest. It relaxed him . . . he was glad to see the man dead in the mud” (*Cosmopolis* 81-82). There are no brothers nor friends in a world where men fight for money, power and dominance. Vija Kinski, Eric's chief of theory, uses this moment as an opportunity to once again make a comment about Eric's personality in the context of his enjoyment in others' distress: “[y]our mind thrives on ill will toward others. So does your body, I think. Bad blood makes for long life. He was a rival in some sense, yes? He was physically strong perhaps. He has a large personality. Filthy rich, this chap. Women in his soup. Reasons enough to feel a sneaky sort of euphoria when the man dies horribly” (*Cosmopolis* 82). She is pointing to the fact that Eric would enjoy the downfall of anyone who might endanger his status of the richest, the strongest, the most charming man. Everyone is a competition, and no brotherly feelings are part of this contest. The world of business is presented to the readers as a “blood sport,” a place where there's no place for “philanthropy or social largesse” (Conte 188). And such blood sports are the ideal arena for the contest of virility. The men of today use it to assert themselves as alpha males of the business world. Allen describes it as a space “where

testosterone seem[s] literally to rise from the asphalt,” with every man trying to be the wealthiest and the most powerful one (21).

3.3 Women and Sexuality

Nevertheless, Eric's most unsettling relationships are those he has with the many women in his life. His sexuality is most demonstrative of all of his brutally masculine urges that also find their outlets elsewhere. As a stereotypical dominating male figure, Eric draws his confidence from sexual relations with an unusually large number of women through his day: “[h]e enjoys, or at least tolerates, several sexual encounters” (Allen 22). Sexual transactions with as many women as possible are one of the most common ways of demonstrating manhood and gaining status and honor (Lancaster 51), and Eric is no exception in this regard. Even though the whole plot of the novel takes place in one day, and most of it, as a matter of fact, in Eric's car, he still manages to sleep with several different women. However, his sexual ventures are not limited to mere physical relations. He flirts with and seduces, in one way or another, every woman that he comes into contact with.

The central woman to the novel, however, is Elise Shifrin, a poet and an heiress that Eric marries a few days prior to the day in April on which the novel takes place. The marriage is a business move, not something that would bring Eric a significant fortune, but something he sees as a marriage market trade: “[s]he was rich, he was rich; she was heir-apparent, he was self-made; she was cultured, he was ruthless; she was brittle, he was strong; she was gifted, he was brilliant; she was beautiful” (*Cosmopolis* 72). The marriage is his way of buying and controlling his social status—as the symbol of masculine power he has to have a woman by his side who would have all of the qualities listed above in order to complete the desired image of himself. Elise serves to Eric as a part of his decorum: she is the perfect

addition to his “expressions of status,” as Veblen would call them (47). She possesses the “gentle blood” and almost aristocratic manners, which make her a preferred choice for marriage (51). Yet, his emotional relationship to her is almost non-existent: “Packer doesn't know his wife's eye color, repeatedly cheats on her, and dismisses her poetry as 'shit’” (Donovan 157). As if this was not hurtful enough, he takes pleasure from deliberately hurting her. To begin with, he pretends not to cheat on her, even though she is clearly aware of the fact, just as a way of humiliating her: “[i]t put her at a disadvantage, playing petty interrogator, and made him feel boyishly inventive and rebellious” (*Cosmopolis* 118). The fact that she can see through his lies only makes it more enjoyable for him, for he succumbs to his sadistic trait of drawing pleasure from seeing other people hurting. Elise is aware of it, too: “I don't know how to be indifferent. I can't master this. And it makes me susceptible to pain. In other words it hurts” (*Cosmopolis* 119).

Alongside the emotional pain he brings her, Eric goes one step further, and by the end of the book he completely destroys her financially. He steals her money and bets it all on the same yen that swallowed all of his money earlier that day, knowing it would all be gone by the end of the day. His final act of destruction towards Elise is his own death. Among his last thoughts is also the comforting idea that he ruined her life as well:

[t]here was something else to consider, that he'd married when he'd married in order to have a widow to leave behind. He imagined his wife, his widow, shaving her head, perhaps, in response to his death, and choosing to wear black for a year, and watching the burial in isolated desert terrain, from a distance, with her mother and the media. (*Cosmopolis* 208)

As far as other women are concerned, I will reflect on the two encounters that best show the performative nature of his sexuality. The first is the prostate exam that he has in his car, in front of his chief of finance Jane Melman, which later turns into a sexual act. The

exam opens up a few masculinity related subjects. To begin with, it is an exhibition of his masochism—a painful experience that Eric chooses to go through every day without exception. As masochism is unavoidably linked to sexuality, DeLillo turns the exam into a sexual encounter between Melman and Eric. They look in each other's eyes for the whole duration of the exam, and Eric gets aroused by Jane and brings her to climax by words only, even though, as she claims: “[i]t can't afford to be hard. It won't allow itself psychologically . . . It knows what's going on back there” (*Cosmopolis* 49). While this claim goes to say that the “sexual encounter” happens despite the fact that he has another man's finger in his rectum, it could be argued that this is precisely what turns him on in the situation. Besides the masochistic pleasures, a possible interpretation of his sexual arousal might be based on the fact that he is so arrogant that he wants to prove that he can still be masculine in the most emasculating positing there is.

This interpretation points to an insecurity in his own body and virility. His prostate problem is the only thing that takes away his illusions of superiority. It is the thing that threatens his masculinity and his physical capacity as a man. His prostate is asymmetrical, a condition he knows of, but not of its implications. Its asymmetry is something that he likes as an idea, but not as a condition of his body:

But there was something about the idea of asymmetry. It was intriguing in the world outside the body, a counterforce to balance and calm . . . But when he removed the word from its cosmological register and applied it to the body of a male mammal, his body, he began to feel pale and spooked. He felt certain perverse reverence toward the word. A fear of, a distance from. When he heard the word spoken in a context of urine and semen and when he thought of the word in the shadow of pissed pants, one, and limp-dick desolation, two, he was haunted to the point of superstitious silence. (*Cosmopolis* 52-53)

The possibility of losing control over the organs that make him a man become the only thing that he is scared of. He shares this fear with his killer:

“I have severe anxieties that my sex organ is receding into my body.”

“But it's not.”

“Shrinking into my abdomen.”

“But it's not.”

“Whether it is or not, I know it is.” (*Cosmopolis* 192)

The problems with the prostate might be interpreted as a reason behind his craving for so many sexual conquests and his other ways of proving his superb virility to others.

A similar exhibition of masochism to the exam is his sexual encounter with Kendra Hays, his new bodyguard. At first, she seems to be yet another one of his sexual preys, an objectified woman to provide sexual pleasure to him; but he likes to play with her in a different way—in the way that he is the one to get hurt. He makes her wear “her ZylloFlex body armor while they [have] sex” (*Cosmopolis* 111), which in a way is suggestive of his need to have some sort of a dominatrix in this activity, a figure stronger than him, more authoritative. Furthermore, the activities they engage in further support such a relationship of power: she pours vodka on his genitals, which stings him, and makes her laugh and him beg for more. The ultimate manifestation of this sadomasochist relationship of things is him begging Kendra to shoot him with a stun gun, which she does, and thus satisfies his need for pain and loss of control, as he ends up crumpled on the floor, dealing with convulsions of pain. Despite creating the situation in which it seems that he has given up all control to a woman, and he is the one being toyed with, he nevertheless still stays in charge and is parallelly creating a game of his own, in which she is being manipulated and used, just like any other woman in his life: “[h]e liked her. The more he knew Torval would hate her, the more he liked her” (*Cosmopolis* 113). He draws pleasure from the fact that he is intentionally

putting her in a bad position, as she is new on the job and Torval is her superior, he knows that eventually she would be the one to suffer the consequences of this relationship. And he likes his women to suffer because of him.

Eric's sexuality is significantly performative, and almost always linked to violence or pain. Helyer claims that all of his sexual encounters appear “neither original nor spontaneous,” but rather as if part of a scripted scenario (127). This goes to support the idea that these encounters are part of a performance of masculinity through which he wishes to be presented to the world. Such encounters serve to make him feel like a man, and others to perceive him as such.

3.4 Violence and (Self-)Destruction

Eric, as a man of the new generation, an elegant businessman, lacks a violent and primal history that would have created a real “manly man” out of him. The masculine ideal of the contemporary world is quite different from what used to be the hegemonic model constructed out of violence, aggression and manual labor. It could be argued that one finds in Eric a trace of nostalgia for a past he never experienced, similarly to Jack in *White Noise*. He admires people's injuries and scars—the finger stub of a taxi driver (“a body ruin that carried history and pain” (*Cosmopolis* 17)), his bodyguard Danko's scarred face, his driver Ibrahim's collapsed eye etc. He particularly admires Torval, his head of security, for his acts of violence. Torval is a significant character in this context, as one can systematically track the escalation of Eric's urge for violence through scenes involving Torval. It starts with a few scenes in which Torval has to physically step in to protect Eric's safety: “Eric looked at the man. He wanted Torval to shoot him or put the weapon at least to his head” (45); “[h]e saw Torval confront a man carrying a brick. He dropped him cold with a right cross. Eric decided

to admire this” (*Cosmopolis* 88). As the novel progresses so do his violent instincts, and he starts having his own violent outbursts: the first one, kicking a pastry chef who throws a pie in his face, while Torval holds him (not the bravest sort of a fight): “[h]e and Torval were bonded now by violence and exchanged a look of respect and esteem. Petrescu was in pain . . . He felt great. He held his clenched fist in the other hand. It felt great, it stung, it was quick and hot. His body whispered to him. It hummed with the action” (*Cosmopolis* 143). At the beginning, the cruelty is reduced to simply watching other people in violent acts, but as the plot develops, his need for violence escalates and he begins to engage in violent confrontations first with the help of, then beside, and finally against Torval, murdering him ruthlessly with Torval's own gun.

Violence is not the only indicator of the return to a primal virile instinct. The novel often goes back to some older, aboriginal associations of manhood that Packer aspires towards. Motifs such as red meat, hunting, virile noises are recurrent and he often embraces them as signs of manliness: “[t]here was something about the noise that he did not choose to wish away. It was the tone of some fundamental ache, a lament so old it sounded aboriginal. He thought of men in shaggy bands bellowing ceremonially, social units established to kill and eat. Red meat. That was the call, the grievous need” (*Cosmopolis* 14).

As has already been discussed, as the novel progresses towards its end, Eric's love for violence and destruction grows rapidly. However, it does not stop at violence towards other people; by the end of the novel, he turns on himself. The reason behind Torval's cold-blooded murder was not only murder, but also suicide: the passing of his chief of security “cleared the night for deeper confrontation” (*Cosmopolis* 148). Eric's life is under a threat throughout the novel, and if he wished for the threat to come true, the only solution was to kill his one protector.

The need for self-destruction is a result of his business mistake. His estimate on the movements of the yen is proven incorrect, which “fatally compromises his intellectual esteem” (Conte 189). After such a fatal mistake, he no longer feels adequate enough as a businessman, a man or a person, and he comes to realize that he is “merely a frail, mortal animal” (Allen 22) and embarks on a path to self-destruction. As Conte puts it, “[t]he symptoms of a seemingly automated self-punishment include stunning himself with his bodyguard's teaser, killing Torval, . . . and shooting himself in the hand during his confrontation with his assassin, Levin, when he might have shot Levin instead” (189).

One of the keys to understanding Eric Packer as a man and why the plot unravels into such a disastrous ending of its protagonist comes, once again, from Vija Kinski. She talks about men's immortality: “[m]en think about immortality, Never mind what women think. We're too small and real to matter here . . . Great men historically expected to live forever even as they supervised construction of their monumental tombs on the far bank of the river, the west bank, where the sun goes down” (*Cosmopolis* 105). These sentences comment on Eric gradual slide towards financial ruin and death. Once he comes to realize that he has ruined his business, he searches for a way to ruin himself: he kills his bodyguard in expectation of the realization of the threat; he wants to die. What is more, he wants to be remembered in his great death. In what turn out to be the last moments of Eric's life, his killer reflects on the old-Indian tradition in which the chiefs of the tribes fought for the status of the alpha male in a way that “the chief who destroyed more of his property than the other chiefs was the most powerful” (*Cosmopolis* 194). Benno claims the same to be true for Eric: “[e]ven when you self-destruct, you want to fail more, lose more, die more than others, stink more than others” (*Cosmopolis* 193). Eric wants his ruin to be his legacy—he wishes to be one of those great men that Vija talks about:

He wanted to be solarized. He wanted the plane flown by remote control with his embalmed body aboard, suit, tie and turban, and the bodies of his dead dogs, his tall silky Russian wolfhounds, reaching maximum altitude and leveling at supersonic dash speed and then sent plunging into the sand, fireballed one and all, leaving a work of land art, scorched earth art that would interact with the desert and be held in perpetual trust under the auspices of his dealer and executor, Didi Fancher . . . (*Cosmopolis* 209)

He wants to be remembered, he wants to be mourned, he wants to fall down in the most impressive and interesting way possible. As Taylor explains it, the game of business is not only a contest to see who will win, but also “a contest to see who can become 'the biggest loser'” (n.p.).

3.5 Conclusion

Eric Packer is the ruthless capitalist businessman brought to the extremes through his greed and self-centeredness. By failing to realize his dream of “conquering the currency markets” and thus establishing his “world domination,” he is brought to the state of questioning his abilities, status and manliness, only to turn in another direction and—instead of admitting defeat—bringing the whole “world economy down with him,” as a way of proving himself as the greatest man even in his demise (Heyne 439). In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo presents us with the fulfillment of capitalist fantasies, “the world's richest, most powerful, and perhaps most evil man” (Heyne 440), as a way of demonstrating the hollowness and the performative nature of the game of power that rules the contemporary corporate society. Once the fantasies come to an end, and Eric is proven to be a human being capable of making mistakes, his decline develops rapidly, with himself contributing to it. He lives out his masochism to the very end—Freud would interpret it as a “punishment from [the super-

ego]”—by acting “against his own interests” and “destroy[ing] his own existence” (Silverman 32). In his superficial mask of power and manliness, Eric cannot deal with the possibility of it being threatened, as fear and doubt enter his self-image. As in many of DeLillo's novels, insecurities lead to violence and self-destruction, but while other characters find their ways of dealing with such anxieties, Eric's masculine ego cannot take the hit, and he chooses to die in a great way, rather than live as anything less than the greatest.

4. FALLING MAN

Keith Neudecker is the protagonist of DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*. After surviving the 9/11 terrorist attack, he shows up at his estranged wife's doorstep and reunites with his family. However, although he seems to be a changed man in the beginning of his stay with them, he soon falls back into his old habits. *Falling Man* is a novel that depicts masculinity in crisis, particularly in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The attacks are often considered to have been a threat to the masculinity of a nation. The myth of the great national heroic masculinity collapsed, and the national pride was wounded and emasculated (Ramazani qtd. in Bjerre 241).

This novel explores the crisis of hegemonic masculinity in the context of 9/11 on the example of the individual story of the attacks' victim, Keith Neudecker. DeLillo presents us with a representative of the hegemonic masculinity as he enters an identity crisis due to the experienced trauma (Ivry 5-6). He situates the story in the context of domestic life, exploring what Mosse refers to as the tension “between the triumphant masculinity and the ideal of family life” (164-66). While the novel presents the attacks as a strike on the national masculine pride, at the same time he uses the novel to provide an open critique of the very notion of hegemonic masculinity. As Bjerre explains it, the critique is carried out “[b]y refusing to follow the climax-driven path of traditional men's literature, and by critically debunking the notion of a normative oppressive and dominating male point of view” (257), represented by Keith. The plot follows the story of a man who is the archetypal dominant male, as he experiences a trauma and shifts perspective, only to gradually return to his previous patterns of “manly” behavior.

4.1 Trauma

Keith represents the ideal of American businessman who is precisely the target of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bjerre describes him as the “image of the corporate he-man, greedy to seize and control everything around him . . . an aggressive breadwinner, a term that, as Kimmel¹ explains, has remained 'one of the central characteristics of American manhood’” (252). As DeLillo argues in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” as well as in the novel itself, this is precisely the kind of aggressively rapacious behavior that the terrorists attacked. It is the “rich, privileged and strong” that are the target of the attack (“Ruins” n.p.). And literally being in the Towers, Keith is what they were trying to make fall. Harack even goes so far as to argue that Keith might represent a “masculinization and humanization of the tower itself” (322). He *is* the corporate, heartless America that was being attacked.

Needless to say, Keith's masculinity, as does the masculinity of the nation, takes a hit with the attacks. Through his crisis of masculinity, DeLillo explores the individual trauma that followed the events. As he explains in the essay, “this catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years” (“Ruins” n.p.). Many critics reflect on the fact that Keith has “all the symptoms of trauma” (Bjerre 251), caused by “the exodus from the towers, seeing his friend Rumsey die, and witnessing the fall of 'figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space’” (Harack 320). As he escapes the scene, he returns to his wife's home in search of protection and care, finding “shelter in the family nucleus” (Bjerre 253). And this is the same family that he abandoned a year and a half earlier. While before the attacks he represented a strongly independent masculine figure, his behavior changes significantly after experiencing a trauma. Some critics argue that the attack initiated a need to stand up to the “castration” of

¹ Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.

the American man executed through these events, as interpreted by the Bush administration (Ivry 5), by seeking a “recourse to reactionary, retrospectively constructed *hypermasculinity*” (13). Ivry believes that this is precisely what DeLillo does in his novel: he “reclaim[s] this 'lost' masculinity . . . [as] Keith recovers his masculine agency and returns to his place as head of the familial unit” (20). While this may be partially contradictory to Bjerre's interpretation of Keith turning into a vulnerable man seeking protection, it is relatively true. While he never actually assumes the role of the head of the family, he does show signs of return to a more primal and aggressive, even hyper-masculinity, as he turns to violence and sports² as a coping mechanism.

4.2 Marriage and Family

Most of Keith's characterization in the book is based on his relationship to other people, more specifically, to his wife Lianne. Keith is not what one would call marriage material, but rather a man too undependable to be a suitable choice for a husband and a father. Lianne's mother Nina describes Keith as a model of hegemonic masculinity:

There's a certain man, an archetype, he's a model of dependability for his male friends, all the things a friend should be, an ally and confidant, lends money, gives advice, loyal and so on, but sheer hell on women. Living breathing hell. The closer a woman gets, the clearer it becomes to him that she is not one of his male friends. And the more awful it becomes for her. This is Keith. (*FM* 59)

Their marriage was short and doomed to fail, as those around him were aware that he was an unsafe choice for a life partner. Nina is the one most insistent on not trusting Keith in personal relationships, but Lianne was also aware that the man could not 'be tamed.' Yet, she

² Bjerre believes poker to fall under the category of sports in the construction of Keith's masculinity (254).

still entered the relationship with Keith and took him back into her house and family after the attacks.

Lianne reflects back on the early days of their relationship with joy and passion. The two very obviously used to be in love, as is evident from the rarely mentioned moments from the beginning of their relationship, as well as from the romance and passion that reappear after his return. Lianne was the one to initiate the separation, realizing that she could not build a family life with such an unreliable man. While the reasons for their separation are never clearly stated, the most likely reason would have been Keith's inability to provide security and reliability to his family. Lianne reflects on their first partition:

He used to come home late, looing shiny and a little crazy. This was the period, not long before the separation, when he took the simplest question as a form of hostile interrogation. He seemed to walk in the door waiting for her questions, prepared to stare right through her questions, but she had no interest in saying anything at all. She thought she knew by now. She understood by this time that it wasn't the drinking, or not that alone, and probably not some sport with a woman. He'd hide it better, she told herself. It was who he was, his native face, without the leveling element, the claims of social code. (*FM* 103)

While she loved the man deeply, she knew he would not change his habits and behavior for any woman. He would avoid being controlled by a woman at any cost—a “quintessential 'man's man'” (Ivry 19). Despite her knowledge of his character, Lianne takes him back, aware of his ability to only be “half-here” (*FM* 213). She has no grand expectations about rebuilding her family as a traditional intimate social unit: “[a]nd Keith. He's back with you now. This is true?' 'Could leave tomorrow. Nobody knows’” (*FM* 43). And yet, she has her own hopes and dreams about a husband who would play the role in its true meaning: “[s]he'd never felt easy with that term. My husband. He wasn't a husband. The word spouse had

seemed comical, applied to him, and husband simply didn't fit. He was something else somewhere else. But now she uses the term. She believed he is growing into it, a husbandman, even though she knows this is another word completely” (*FM* 70). While she is aware of his personality, she cannot help but hope that the tragedy changed him. Unfortunately, her hopes soon fade away as he gradually drifts away again. Finally, she learns to accept him for who he is: “[b]ut I know what's happening. You're going to drift away. I'm prepared for that. You'll stay away longer, drift off somewhere” (*FM* 214). His son is aware that his father cannot be trusted to stay, as well: “[h]is father was back home now, living here, sleeping here, more or less as before, and he's thinking the man can't be trusted, can he?” (*FM* 101). Keith takes up the role of a good father for the first time after the attacks: the bond between the father and son starts to grow after his return. That play catch together and Keith drops him off to school, and yet the child maintains a distance. As is the case with many of the other DeLillo's children characters, Justin is too mature and wise for his age. He tells only his father about the secret he keeps with his friends—about them watching the skies for Bill Lawton, a reinterpretation of Bin Laden, to crash another plane. The secret serves as a kind of a test of trust for his father, one that Keith fails, proving once again to be an untrustworthy father.

Bjerre believes that the crisis of masculinity that Keith goes through has to do with his inability to find his identity in any of the arenas offered by Helyer as pillars of masculinity: “occupation, family, sexuality, sport and physical exercise, and violence” (qtd. in Bjerre 252). Many of these are lost to Keith after the trauma, and he resorts to fulfilling an image of hypermasculinity that would help him feel like a man again. The return to the family is only a part of this, and one which does not last. With the traumatic state that he is in, he is in no condition to be the head or the protector of the family—this is not the arena where he can

show his dominance, so he continues the search. However, he finds sexuality, violence and sports to be the tenets of primal virility that he turns to as a way of coping with the trauma.

4.3 Affair with Florence

Besides Keith's relationship to his family, the two aspects of the novel that most define him as a man are his affair with Florence and his gambling addiction. He meets Florence when he brings her back the briefcase he picked up on his way out of the World Trade Center. At the beginning, their relationship is not sexual, they share an emotional bond and a mutual understanding that the people who were not in the towers could never be part of. They find comfort and solace in each other: “[h]e knew why he was here but could not have explained it to someone and did not have to explain it to her” (*FM* 89). Keith, being an emotionally distant person, expresses his need for solace and understanding through a sexual relationship with Florence. In his sexual encounters with Florence, it is more about something else than it is about sex:

[t]hey took erotic pleasure from each other but this was not what sent him back there. It was what they knew together, in the timeless drift of the long spiral down, and he went back again even if these meetings contradicted what he'd lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls. (*FM* 137)

For Keith, this is just another way of coping with the trauma; he finds certain comfort in his family, but they could not possibly help him deal with the trauma, as only a person who experienced it would be able to understand. She, too, is simply a “shelter” for Keith, and he leaves her behind as he falls into his pre-9/11 identity. This is not the case of his hypermasculine performance, or as Bjerre puts it, “having a mistress does not grant Keith the

traditional sense of masculine control but becomes another instance of his being neutralized, left alone with his trauma” (253).

Florence, on the other hand, expresses her loneliness and isolation from the rest of the world through an emotional bond with Keith. He believes him to have saved her life by being the only person who could end her loneliness and make her laugh at times like that. Florence forms an attachment to Keith that gradually scares and pushes him away. While she does not start as one of his previous affairs (if they can be called so for a separated man), which were unlike Florence not about the person but about the sex, once Florence starts showing signs of attachment, Keith runs away. She begins to resent him for being married and always having to leave, and he ends the affair. To him, it was like leading a double life: “[h]e was still back there, with Florence, double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down through the smoke, and then here again to safety and family, to the implications of one's conduct” (*FM* 157). The doubleness of self is not only a result of his relationship with Florence, but a more persistent state of being for Keith, as he is torn between his inner crisis and the need to perform a strong, dominant masculine role on the outside.

Despite the fact that Keith has no true romantic feelings for Florence, he still likes to be a man in control in this affair. When he goes mattress shopping with Florence, his masculinity is challenged as two men make “comments about Florence [which] could connote criticism or competition” and Keith resorts to physical violence as if to a script of the masculinity he is expected to perform (Bjerre 256). Violence is interpreted in Keith's behavior as a way of “reassert[ing] control and reclaim[ing] his gendered identity” (Ivry 21). Albeit confused and in need of protection most of the time, his violent outbursts help him reassert his masculinity and feel in control again (after it has been taken from him by the terrorists). Lianne, too, recognized this trait of his: “[y]ou want to kill somebody . . . You've

wanted this for some time . . . I don't know how it works or how it feels. But it's a thing you carry with you" (*FM* 214). Lianne does not state how long "some time" is, but it can be presumed that she refers to the period after the attacks, in which case this aggression can easily be interpreted as a need for revenge, but also as an attempt to regain control and feeling of dominance. The violence that was directed at him when 9/11 happened emasculated him in a way, taking away his ability to fight against it. Therefore, these outbursts of aggression are a way of proving that he is still a man able to fight.

4.4 Poker

The addiction to poker is Keith's trait that ultimately takes him away from his family. Through it, he finds his outlet from family life, both the first and the second time, until it finally drives him away completely. Poker has many attractions for a man like Keith, it is where all of his masculine power comes out. To begin with, it is a men-only game. As Nina described him, this is where he becomes the archetypal man—among five other men and with their manly rules. He enjoys the company above all, as he is much more comfortable around men than he is around women, and these are men just like him, New York businessmen who use the game to escape their lives: "the business writer, the admin, the mortgage broker" (96); "the bond trader, the lawyer, the other lawyer" (*FM* 97). To these men, this was the essence of life, the only place where they felt like themselves: "these games were the funneled essence, the clear and intimate extract of their daytime initiatives" (97); "[h]e was fitting into something that was made to his shape. He was never more himself than in these rooms" (225). As Ivry puts it, the game "facilitates performativity that allows 'gauzy manhood' to authenticate masculinity" (18). It is one of the ideal external features of masculinity, a game (or a sport) that provides the men with "emotional detachment" (Bjerre 255), male-only

company, enriched by symbols of hegemonic masculinity (like cigars and alcohol). They created a set of rules that excluded things like food, certain words, certain drinks etc. —the things they did not find manly enough, and all that was left was the type of archetypal behavior that Nina was describing earlier—a behavior that no woman could ever be part of—and that made them feel “expansive, grand in scale” (*FM* 99). It represents the place where they can feel independent and in control, which is why Keith returns to it soon after his traumatic experience. The control that was taken away from him by the trauma, is regained in the game: “[h]e had memory, judgment, the ability to decide what is true, what is alleged, when to strike, when to fade. He had a measure of calm, of calculated isolation, and there was a certain logic he might draw on” (*FM* 211). Ivry believes the game itself to represent American masculinity that DeLillo is trying to portray—“ritualistic and performative” (19), much like it is in his other novels. It is an image of a gender that is constructed by rules and regulations of expected behavior, but can only be realized through isolated instances, such as Keith' poker games.

4.5 Conclusion

Falling Man is a novel that plays with the insecurity of masculinity in a time of crisis. What Keith experiences is a search for identity in a time of the emasculation of the whole nation. Vulnerable and traumatized, he searches for protection, but soon finds in himself the need to exhibit an aggressive masculine behavior as is expected from the American man in response to terrorism. There is an inner conflict in Keith, as he tries to manifest his “outwardly performative masculinity,” while his emotional and psychological state is one of insecurity and crisis (Ivry 22). Through Keith's crisis of masculinity, DeLillo at the same time questions the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and yet offers Keith comfort precisely through

its performance. *Falling Man* is at the same time a representations and subversion of hegemonic masculinity (Ivry 7). He exposes this kind of gender performance as an artifice, an ornamental millennial masculinity, as Susan Faludi names it (qtd. in Ivry 7), constructed upon elements of outward performance and props that display an image of hypermasculinity as a way of masking inner insecurities.

5. CONCLUSION

Don DeLillo's fiction deals with many of the topics relevant for the contemporary American culture and society. His literature explores some of the most prominent phenomena of today's world through narratives based on individuals' stories. Hidden between the lines of his novels, is a very firm and elaborate critique of the issue of gender. While this is never the primary topic in any of his works, it is profoundly infused into every single one of his texts. The three novels chosen for this study, *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, deal with the context of the postmodern technological and global reality of the American society, but looking at the protagonists in these contexts, one can find a careful and complex critique of the figure of man in American culture.

The first novel studied in this paper, *White Noise*, explicitly plays with the notion of gender as a performance. Jack Gladney, an esteemed college professor, performs his role as a highly important intellectual carefully constructed and supported by props and tricks—such as changing his name and appearance to achieve the desired status. As his authority is questioned, especially in the domestic sphere, his insecurities as a man lead him to turn to a more traditional working-class model, based on manual labor and aggression. Both before and after this shift, Jack's behavior is highly performative and he is a prime example of gender as an artificial, culturally based construction. The novel stresses the detrimental effects of clinging to the mediated images of masculinity which are impossible to apply to every man's life and thus create stress and anxiety for individuals.

Eric, in *Cosmopolis*, takes us out of the world of academia and into the world of finance. Everything about him—his status, his power, and his masculinity—is based on possessions. To him, money equals power, and power equals virility. Eric is characterized through his love of money and control. And once he puts himself in a position where he loses

control and makes a mistake, a fact that he cannot seem to be able to deal with, he embarks on a path to destruction and self-destruction. While he starts off as a playboy billionaire, he ends up a rugged, stinking ruin of a man. Particular for Eric is his inclination for greatness. Once he fails to become the greatest man alive, he decides to become the greatest man in death, thus plotting his own demise, only to prove that he can fail more than anybody else. Much like Jack, he turns his feelings of inadequacy in life to a confrontation with death, believing violence and destructions to be the model he can cling to in order to prove his masculinity and power over self.

Finally, the novel *Falling Man* concerns the notion of masculinity in trauma. The novel deals with the consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. DeLillo explores it on the example of an individual who loses his sense of self due to the experienced trauma. What is more, the 9/11 attacks are often interpreted as an attack on American masculinity, with the only solution being a return to a more primal model of masculinity, based on aggression, control and self-confidence. This interpretation of a national insecurity is transferred to the personal realm in Keith. He loses all control over his life as a consequence of the traumatic event, which makes him vulnerable and insecure. At the same time, Keith feels the pressure to regain control and rebuild his status as a “manly man.” In this context, a conflict between the inner and the outer self arises in Keith, as he at the same time feels exposed and distressed, and tries to live up to the stereotypical hegemonic masculine expectations to regain control.

What DeLillo's depiction of American masculinity aims to show is the process of fabrication of a certain masculine self-image which is based on culturally imposed standards that have little to do with the reality of his characters' lives. DeLillo uses traditional models of masculinity as protagonists of his novels, only to bring them to a crisis of identity, thus demonstrating the instability of the artificial construction that is the postmodern manhood.

Each of the characters presented in this paper goes through a personal crisis triggered by various events—whether it is a marriage affair or a financial break-down, which, among other ways, is also exposed as a crisis of masculinity. Lost in their insecurities and severe anxiety, DeLillo's characters resort to models of behavior that could be interpreted as hyper-masculine model, but are certainly based on violence and aggression. And, as DeLillo points out in more than one of his texts, this shift of perspective tends to lead the plot in a deathward direction.

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7. ABSTRACT

“Manly Men”: Representations of Masculinity in Don DeLillo's Fiction

Key words: Don DeLillo, masculinity, performativity, national manhood

Even though Don DeLillo's novels are rarely a subject of a scholarly analysis concerning the representation of gender, his fiction is crowded with representations of manhood which correspond to the postmodern construction of gender. American national manhood has experienced postmodernism as a shift towards a representational form characterized by looser boundaries, and determined by almost an awareness of its own constructive and artificial nature. This paper studies DeLillo's novels in the light of performative masculinity, an aspect of his novels often pushed aside for the sake of exploring “bigger” themes, but one that, when studied more closely, becomes one of the prevailing subjects of his social and cultural critique.

In this paper, I analyze the representations of American masculinity in three of DeLillo's novels: *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, a college professor, performs his carefully constructed role as an esteemed intellectual, only to hide his insecurities as a man. Eric Packer, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, also engages in stereotypical and highly performative behavior, in his case suited to the normative masculinity of the corporate world. Finally, Keith Neudecker in *Falling Man* represents the American man in the aftermath of 9/11 as a fragile cultural construction brought down by the emasculation of a nation through terrorist attacks. In all three of the novels, the manhood of the protagonists is brought into question when they are no longer able to live up to the impossible standards posed before them as men. In such situations, aggression and

destruction seem to be the easiest means of returning to a primal, hypermasculine state in order to overcome the feelings of inadequacy.

In his novels, DeLillo proves the notion of normative masculinity to be no more than a fragile and insecure cultural construction, constructed upon stereotypes which no man could ever live up to. The image of manhood perpetuated by the media creates insecurities in individual men that lead to destruction and self-destruction. Still, his critique of the mediated stereotype of manhood offers no solution to individual men, as the only resort the protagonists of his novels can find is a return to even more traditional and normative models of masculinity.