



Becker's TMT and the Reflection on Mortality in Don DeLillo's Point Omega

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Becker's Terror Management Theory (TMT) provides a frame for discerning how man encounters the fear of death and its anxiety. As indicated in this theory, man controls his fear of death by devoting himself to cultural ideologies that supply meaning and purpose, and preserve self-esteem. Don DeLillo's novel Point Omega (2010) delves into these ideas through Richard Elster the main character of the story, a former defense veteran who grapples with the fear of death and anxiety. His engagement in war strategies management forms his ideology, which is investigated in the novel; he secludes himself in a remote desert to meditate on time and place. Mainly through Elster's character, DeLillo exhibits how cultural and social ideologies, existential dilemmas, and the fear of death intertwine with each other by presenting a convincing exploration of TMT's crucial notions. The novel's contemplation of existential matters and the man's condition accords with the opinions presented in Becker's book *The Denial of Death*. (1973) The desert and the use of film as a medium play a significant role in highlighting the themes of transience and man's yearning for meaning and immortality. The novel's subject matter and characters perform as a meditation on the man's condition, underlying how people conduct the fear of death and look for meaning and importance in the face of mortality. It reflects the parallel of DeLillo's way of writing and the key concepts of TMT.

Keywords: Anxiety management, Cultural worldviews, Death, Fear of death, Mortality salience

Introduction

Fear of the unknown has accompanied us since birth, and due to limitations of the mind and lack of perception of some issues may remain in us until death, leaving us with anxiety mingled with fear. Death is one of those unknowns that is the most obvious reality of human life and exists in our conscious and unconscious to the last moment of life. No one knows what death exactly is, nor its feeling or nature; the existence of such indescribable indefinite intensifies feelings of fear and anxiety. Death originates from life, and its fear may not be related to the awareness of this fact. TMT is a communal and developmental psychology theory that was first proposed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski. It is found in the thought that man has a basic fear of death, in Freud's words "Thanatophobia" which creates dread. If this anxiety affects daily life it will be called a disorder then that stops people from having a normal routine in their lives. The most powerful form of such fear [thanatophobia] is its existential one that is rooted in man's awareness of his mortality. To control this feeling, man immerses himself in cultural ideologies or the systems that grant meaning and importance to his life, and saturate him with a sense of self-esteem. Cultural and social values, such as the view of an everlasting afterlife or being part of something else that is more significant and will last more than man, offer true or symbolic immortality and help to control death anxiety. (Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, 1991)

By TMT Becker explicates how man deals with the fear of death. In contrast to Freud who relates death anxiety to fearful occasions of childhood, Becker, in his existential psychology, views it as a primary anxiety that all humans suffer from. His hypothesis states that man has a natural inclination towards self-protection, but is peculiar in his talent for symbolic reflection, which cultivates self-recognition and the capacity to meditate on the past and contemplate the future. (DD 16) This view brings the awareness that death is unavoidable and can occur at any time for unexpected reasons that cannot be handled. Death awareness provokes potential fear that is controlled by the progress and preservation of humanly established convictions about truth, shared by people that relieve existential fear by granting meaning and significance to life.

Life's meaningfulness is a belief that cultures provide by presenting an account of the origin of the universe, patterns for proper behavior, and a guarantee of immortality for those who act correctly according to cultural orders. (DD 55) Immortality is promised by some religions through the afterlife, heaven, and so forth; symbolic immortality on the other hand is gained by man through his effort to create something significant or be part of a greater system that provides him the ways of heroism; the immortality project or as Becker calls it *causa-sui*; Man would be a part of something immortal by it, which against his physical body never dies and assures him of his meaningful life. (DD 46)

DeLillo borrowed the idea from the writings of [Pierre] Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit thinker and paleontologist to write *Point Omega*; the consciousness reaching to the point of exhaustion and boredom, and the possibility of something challenging and unimaginable is the idea that is more probable by the Point Omega of the heading (*Alter, Alexandra, 2010*). Because of mirroring time and loss the novel could be considered as a philosophical one. It also could be considered as contemplation on man's circumstances, investigating the ways that people conduct the fear of death, look for meaning and impetus in life, and control existential anxieties. It is in accordance with the crucial notions of TMT, suggesting a provocative consideration of the man's soul and how we confront with final existential question: the unpreventable death.

Theoretical framework:

The main premise of the *Denial of Death* is that man's awareness of his death could be considered as the source of his advancement. (DD 11) Man is terrified by death of meaning more than the physical one, so he has always been seeking ways to get it. He can overcome his mortality issue by relying on the elements of his symbolic world such as self-esteem. Denial of death by society is done by creating the grounds of heroism for man. Man tries to create something or be a part of something else that lasts more than him; the immortality project. Man would be a part of something immortal, which against his physical body never dies and assures him of his meaningful life. (DD 4-5)

Cultures fulfill their roles by creating some projects and plans that are aimed at immortality; by creating heroic systems that are social roles given to man by society they persuade him to perform well to guarantee his immortality. (DD 7) Becker also mentions the failure of these systems as the cause of many mental illnesses that always remind man of his mortality. (DD 209-210) He considers the conflicts of different hero systems as the source of calamities in this world and thinks science's effort to solve them is abortive. By revealing the conflicts of different immortality projects they deny each other and consider the other ones as wrong. All the tragedies of this world are the outcome of such conflicts that show itself in the forms of war, genocide, racism, nationalism, and so on.

TMT debates that anxiety of death propels individuals to embrace ideologies that preserve their self-esteem, merit, and durability and grant them the belief that they play a significant part in a meaningful world. Some of these views result in some actions from the governments that bring about troubles for the world and they justify them. Based on this theory, individuals ought to keep themselves away from their extreme feelings of fear about living a meaningless life certain to vanish by death so it offers to ensure them that they are part of a significant group or system.

At the core of TMT are some concepts that almost all of them encompass the mortality issue and its fear and anxiety. These notions draw attention to the mechanisms through which individuals can alleviate their fear about their final destination by looking for certainty, importance, and immortality or in other words an indefinite sequence of existence even after death. (*Philosophy Encyclopedia*) Mortality salience, cultural worldviews, self-esteem, anxiety management, and symbolic immortality could be considered the focal concepts of TMT.

By anxiety management people learn how to relieve their fear and anxiety of death. Some ways are proposed by TMT such as ideologies and self-esteem. Different ideologies try to persuade people the believe in purpose and a meaningful life. Anxiety management keeps a close relationship with mortality salience or being conscious about death and the fear and anxiety it creates. (*Hayes, Joseph. 2017*)

Cultural worldviews imply the convictions that people accept to make meaning, goals, and a sense of immortality in their lives. These ideologies perform as a psychological defense process in opposition to the fear of death, supplying people with a system through which they can explore existential tensions and vulnerabilities. By adopting cultural ideologies, people can feel a sense of continuousness, importance, and safety, even in confrontation with mortality.

(*Eleanor Myers, Aug. 8, 2023*)

Death is the most obvious reality of human life; biologically it is defined as the ceasing of cell function of a live organism. It accompanies birth, as it is inherent in the process of birth. Every single component should be born

to experience death. There is a wide range of causes that result in death: trauma, brain death, heart attack, and so on; other forms could show themselves through war, suicide, genocide, and so forth. There is also another type of death that is caused by losing the meaning; something that man is afraid of and suffers from; a death that brings him nothingness and destruction. Biological death is inevitable and will ultimately occur to every organism.

Mortality salience is a crucial notion in TMT, which suggests that man has a primary existential fear of death that impacts his behavior and forms his beliefs. It applies to one's awareness of his/her mortal being and the consequent anxiety of it. Confronting the fear of death and its denial is done by man through his endeavor to make meaning and purpose in life. (Whitley, Bernard; Kite, Mary 2010)

Point Omega by Don DeLillo, reflects the main ideas of TMT through Richard Elster as the main character of the novel. He is a former veteran who is now in absolute isolation in a remote desert to contemplate time, the meaning of life, and death. The passage of time and his profound thinking on his mortality issue are obvious throughout the story as he struggles with his previous actions, especially his presence and strategies in the Iraq-U.S. war. Existential issues such as anxiety and man's uncertainty are discernible in the novel.

To fully comprehend "TMT" some of its crucial notions were briefly argued which are subtly explained in Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death*. To investigate these concepts Don DeLillo's novel *Point Omega* is introduced as a sample to clarify the correspondence between Becker's ideas and DeLillo's story. In the end, it will be revealed how TMT's crucial concepts which are in a close relationship with existentialism, manifest themselves.

Anxiety Management

Man's awareness of his death could be considered as the source of his advancement. Man is terrified by death of meaning more than the physical one, so he has always been seeking ways to get it. Becker, in his existential psychology, views it as a primary anxiety that all humans suffer from. Denial of death by society is done by creating the grounds of heroism for man. Man tries to create something or be a part of something else that lasts more than him; the immortality project. Man would be a part of something immortal, which against his physical body never dies and assures him of his meaningful life.

Man has always been looking for a way to guarantee his immortality and all his actions have aimed to achieve this goal. All human efforts are made in the symbolic dimension because assuming the physical body and realizing it as a mortal phenomenon in the evolution process would make all of them absurd and the body will be the final winner. Getting the meaning of life is only possible through continuous attempts. Based on this; he found an attempt in man that was aimed to enhance meaning and to get it to its highest level. All human behavior, which results from his perception of his mortality and is evident in his evolution, combines social realities in a way that unites and enhances them. At any point in history, people have always strived to escape from their ultimate physical fate and have made indefinite time with no expiry date to guarantee their immortality

By anxiety management people learn how to relieve their fear and anxiety of death. Some ways are proposed by TMT such as ideologies and self-esteem. Different ideologies try to persuade people to believe in purpose and meaningful life. Anxiety management keeps a close relationship with mortality salience or being conscious about death and the fear and anxiety it creates. All the efforts of ideologies and cultures, and their proposed methods, show human beings' limitations that want to get more life by ignoring it as they are more concerned about preserving their immortality than they are concerned about saving their physical life. Becker mentions man's involvement in heroic systems and proper fulfillment of societal roles that are assigned by society to him as a way of anxiety management that alleviates his death fear.

In *Point Omega* anxiety management following TMT mainly reveals itself through the main character Richard Elster the former defense veteran and Jim Finley the filmmaker who joins him in the desert to film his life. Through their behaviors and speeches, they manifest something that leads them to cope with death fear and existential anxieties:

Elster retreats to the desert and does nothing, just sitting and awaiting his end to come. He contemplates the space and time there. "[...] *He was here to eat, sleep and sweat, here to do nothing [...]* (P O 18)" The Desert which seems limitless suggests that man alleviates his fear and anxiety by being connected to something greater and more enduring. "[...] *The desert was outside my range, it was an alien being, it was science fiction [...]* (P O 18)" It also represents the time's unrestricted nature and the transient nature of man. "[...] *The desert was clairvoyant, this is what he'd always believed [...]* (P O 60)"

He also talks philosophically about extinction, time, and Omega Point which is thought to be the final point of the world showing that man has a deep-rooted desire to surpass his mortality issue and to develop meaning when confronting his existential anxiety. "[...] *Time falling away. That's what I feel here,*" he said. *Time becoming slowly older [...]* (P O 52)"

Jim Finley, an amateur filmmaker, joins Elster later. He wants to screen the life of a militant who is in absolute isolation. "[...] *I wanted to make about his time in government, [...]* (P O 20)" His endeavor to persuade Elster to accept his idea and his filmmaking shows man's striving to find meaning and purpose in life. "[...] *You'll have every opportunity to talk about these things [...]* (P O 40)"

Elster's presence in the war and his strategies to manage the military actions of his country are his cultural ideologies, which grant him fame and significance that are evidence of man's effort to attain importance, purpose, and meaning in life. "[...] *his time in government, in the blat and stammer of Iraq. (P O 20)*"

As examined in the novel all the components of it: the characters, the desert as the prevailing setting, and the subject matter of the story function as a medium to show man's everlasting desire to guarantee his immortality; he also alleviates his primary existential fear and anxiety of death by inventing some ways that could be considered as the motivation of all of his activities.

Cultural Worldviews/ Heroic System

Unlike any other animals, man's awareness of his death is known as the source of all his activities. He always seeks different ways to escape from the death that brings him destruction; he denies his anxiety and often suppresses it. To strive for being a hero and to join something beyond the physical self, leads man to believe in his immortality, and be alive even after the death that is brought to him by nature. The influence of thinkers and geniuses even after their death is normal, but for typical people of society who cannot achieve it on their own, the society innovates something that these groups of people show their longing to become a hero by.

Heroic systems are the roles that society assigns to people, and they always try to fulfill these roles because they are favorable for society and help them deny their mortality; society in Becker's point of view, is a kind of codified system that pays more attention to spiritual immortality than physical one. (*DD 7*) The unchanged matter of all human beings through centuries and the cultures that transcend physical dimension grants a kind of ideology to the man that helps him on his path to immortality and reminds him of the importance of his life. He sought to find the meaning of life in different realms; a quest that led to the formation of relationships and power structures that follow immortality.

Cultural worldviews imply the convictions that people accept to make meaning, goals, and a sense of immortality in their lives. These ideologies perform as a psychological defense process in opposition to the fear of death, supplying people with a system through which they can explore existential tensions and vulnerabilities. By adopting cultural ideologies, people can feel a sense of continuousness, importance, and safety, even in confrontation with mortality.

Elster and his daughter Jessie struggle with some existential dilemmas such as trauma. "[...] *He wanted her near him all the time [...] (P O 20)*" "[...] *seeming to remember in his grogginess that there was [...] (P O 33)*" They contemplate and meditate on their lives, their mortality issues, and how their ideologies affect them. "[...] *The whole point of nothing happening [...] (P O 36)*" Their self-observation reveals the interaction that exists between their mortality issue and the cultural and social background that they are a member of. "[...] *But he'd lost interest in the conversation [...] (PO 23)*"

The novel explores the complications of man's discernment and awareness, probes reality in essence, and the development of meaning. These investigations mention cultural ideologies that construct people's evaluation of the world and impact their reactions to existential questions. "[...] *Isn't this the burden of consciousness? [...] (P O 38)*"

Elster's philosophical conversation with Jim Finley which revolves around subjects like war, time, and awareness is evidence of his cultural ideology that considers great subjects and opinions, highlighting the significance of conceptual implications and intellectual pursuit in forming people's perception of truth. "[...] *I keep seeing the words. Heat, space, stillness [...] (P O 19-20)*"

Elster was a commander and veteran in the Iraq-U.S. war and his strategies helped soldiers to act under his decrees. He was a great war expert who worked for the defense ministry. His experiences form his viewpoint, contemplating the special ideology of institutions with their peculiar beliefs and convictions. "[...] *I used this word. That's what I was there for, to give them words and meanings [...] (P O 26)*"

Cultural worldviews are shown through the characters mainly Elster and Jim. Their viewpoints and their contexts' convictions and beliefs are gradually revealed as the novel progresses. The story indicates the complex connection between how people perceive something and their awareness of their creation of truth and reality. The story also underscores how different ideologies affect individuals in forming their experiences.

Death

The most obvious fact of human life, which accompanies him since birth, is possible to happen at any time and place and happens to almost all organisms, and fear of it is universal. On the opposite side of immortality that occurs beyond place and time, death or physical destruction remains in the level of the body and the physical life will end by it. The failure of the immortality project results in terror of death which is the source of many mental illnesses. There are two types of death: physical death and the death of meaning. Some people are afraid of death while others are not afraid of the exact action of dying but the death that ends in destruction. The anxiety of death could be seen as the motivation of all human actions that are done for its denial by him and he has been looking for a way to get meaning from death.

Scientifically death is the cessation of living cells functioning but in some cultures and religions, it is a stage that heralds the afterlife living in a better world than the first one. By studying the primitives it would be revealed that they had celebrated death because they believed they would get to the ultimate high; something beyond the life that led them to the joy of eternity. Becker expresses his desire to face a better world by understanding man's motivations, especially death, and mentions religion as one of the most important ways to deny death. According to his opinion, if there were no factors alike, man would get mad.

Death is the most recurred subject in *Point Omega*. Like DeLillo's recent novels that depict death in some other forms except its traditional form, *Point Omega* highlights it in the form of war which could be considered as the major presentation of death. Jessie's disappearance without any clear reason boosts the hypothesis of her suicide which could be another form of the notion of death. Characters' contemplation especially on the time triggers the idea of transition and mortality.

The Iraq-U.S. war is one which nothing is said or explained about its incidents in the story. Blood and massacre are unavoidable in the war; Elster was in this war as a consultant. So many people were killed and bloodshed was everywhere.

Jessie's disappearance is one of the considerable events of the story and shatters the story's evenness proposes her death as the first idea to Elster, Jim, and the police. By this Elster loses his consciousness and can suppose the pain and anguish he inflicted on people now. "[...] *People come to the desert to commit suicide [...] (P O 62)*"

Elster thought the film in the museum was the destruction of time in seven billion years because the movie was very slow and ten minutes passed too slowly for him. "[...] *the universe die over a period of about seven billion years [...] (P O 36)*" In an agreed scientific idea, the universe is slowly going to die and Elster's time at the museum was like it as he thought. He proposes a universal plan by *Omega Point* by which man's consciousness collapses and time becomes a knife that penetrates the body. "[...] *The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife [...] (PO 67)*"

As mentioned before, death is seen in all sections of *Point Omega*. War and murder are the most prominent forms of it which are seen in the initial chapters; the war that Elster attended and the murder scene of the movie screened at the museum. Although Jessie's disappearance is not related to death her death is the first and the strongest hypothesis that other characters would think of that makes Elster fear and feel the same pain and anguish that war imposes on people.

Fear of Death/ Mortality Salience

Mortality salience, according to Terror Management Theory (TMT), signifies the recognition of one's impending death. This awareness of mortality is a crucial element of TMT, which posits that mortality salience and the accompanying anxiety about death shape various aspects of human behavior and are at the foundation of societal systems and beliefs. Mortality salience is commonly investigated in research through the use of death-related questions, which have been shown to impact attitudes and behaviors.

Finding the answer to the question of what motivates heroism and creates its human nature is the first step that should be taken in the case of heroism. Among all the motivations that exist, fear of death has the greatest contribution to human movements. After Darwin's death was mentioned as an evolutionary issue but later it was concluded that it was a psychological problem for human beings. (DD 11) According to Shaler heroism is the first and foremost reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death. (DD 11) All the brave actions have always been done for the sake of immunity from death and its terror. Many actions have been done in different religions even in science and philosophy to perceive how to endure death and how to get meaning from it.

In *Point Omega* mortality salience is portrayed through the characters' meditation on deep-rooted subjects like time, annihilation, and the *Omega Point*, a state of awareness-release. The narrative also investigates the subject of disappearance, as Jessie's unexpected vanishing brings about an intriguing facet, invoking anxiety and anguish that tie into broader political backgrounds. The novel's exploration of mortality salience propels readers to contemplate on notions of lateness, late life, late empire, retrospection, anxiety, and vanishing, cooperating with the conventions of late-stage literature that prompt reader involvement and introspection.

Uncertainty is the prevailing mood of the story that enhances the characters' awareness about their mortality issue. The fragmented narrative of the story, the characters' conversations with each other left incomplete, make readers attempt to fill the gaps, and Jessie's vanishing with no clear clue about the event highlights uncertainty, dread, and the unpredictable nature of mortality. "[...] *she was gone [...], [...] She kept appearing in some inner field of vision, indistinct, like something I'd forgotten to say or do [...] (PO 54)*"

The anguish that was imposed on people by war strategies which were provided by Elster, and the sense of fear, and paranoia that he suffers from now are accounted as mortality salience that describes man's sensitivity and mortality. "[...] *The foolishness, the vanity of the intellectual [...] (PO 41)*"

Elster's perpetual contemplation on time, the final point, and life in the desert highlights the impermanent nature of life and his consciousness about mortality and death. His attitudes are revealed through his speeches with Jim. "[...] *Isn't this the burden of consciousness? We're all*

played out. Matter [...] (PO 38)"

Conclusion

Terror Management Theory is a psychological frame that is explained subtly by Ernest Becker in his book *The Denial of Death*. The main premise of this book is that man is the only creature in nature that is aware of his death and mortality. Sigmund Freud calls it thanatophobia and relates it to childhood experiences but Becker knows it as the primary existential fear that is mutual among human beings that they suffer from. To control this feeling, man immerses himself in cultural ideologies or the systems that grant meaning and importance to his life, and saturate him with a sense of self-esteem. Cultural and social values, such as the view of an everlasting afterlife or being part of something else that is more significant and will last more than man, offer true or symbolic immortality and help to control death anxiety.

Because of mirroring time and loss *Point Omega* could be considered as a philosophical novel. It investigates the main concepts of TMT through the character of Richard Elster, a former defense veteran who struggles with the fear of death and the anxiety it creates. Cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and fear and anxiety of death all intertwine through his character. The novel's inspection of existential subjects and man's condition are in parallel with Becker's ideas in his book *The Denial of Death*. The desert as the prevailing setting in the story and the use of film as a mediator also serve to underscore the subjects of transience and man's ceaseless ambition for meaning, purpose, and immortality in the world. In addition, DeLillo explores the complexities of human existence and how people deal with the fear of death.

Ultimately novel's tension and the sense of uncertainty which is evident throughout the story reflect man's consciousness about his condition and vulnerability. Contemplation on time, life, and omega point as the final destination of the world which it ends by, illustrates the characters' fear and anxiety and their deep-rooted awareness of mortality.

A Letter to Menoecus:

"Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience;... Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not." Non fui, fui, non-sum, non-curo ("I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care") Epicurus (341–270 BC)

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