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"Ambiguously Death-Sentenced": Freudian Theories on Death and Life at Work in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract for “‘Ambiguously Death-Sentenced’: Freudian Theories on Death and Life at Work in
Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*”

This essay analyzes how Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel *White Noise* utilizes psychoanalytic theories set forth by Sigmund Freud in order to explain a fascination with death and disaster which the characters within the novel exhibit. Particular Freudian theories that play into the characters’ actions are the theories on Eros and the death drive, two opposing yet often coordinate instincts within the human mind which strive for the preservation of life and the destruction of it, respectively. A portion of the death drive is an inherent aggression which, when directed outwardly, dispels a tendency towards self-destruction. The characters’ fascination with death serves as a means to fulfil this aggression via proxy, allowing the violence viewed on television screens or studied academically to take the place of violent actions that they may have themselves perpetrated. The incentive for such actions is a fear of personal death. There is a false belief among these characters that their actions will prevent their own deaths, a belief that is examined through the lens of another of Freud’s theories, that the unconscious mind does not truly believe in its own death. The essay also briefly examines how the actions of the characters reflect the attitudes of people in the real world.