

Suspense in Don DeLillo's *Libra*



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Introduction

Countless books have been written about President Kennedy's assassination. *Libra*, by Don DeLillo, is one of the most well-read novels on the assassination. The book was published in 1988, twenty-five years after Kennedy's death. DeLillo's novel earned him the first International Fiction Prize, which is an awards for "work that exemplifies literary excellence, written in the English or Irish language ("Don DeLillo wins")." *Libra* has inspired many other books and movies, such as James Ellroy's *American Tabloid*, which also focuses on the assassination of Kennedy.

Libra is therefore well acclaimed and many papers have been written about DeLillo's novel however none focus solely on suspense in the novel. Many critics analyzed *Libra* as a postmodern novel. The historical facts and narrative are also aspects that have often been discussed. Many papers argue that the narrative contributes to the suspense, but they do not contribute the level of suspense to other aspects of the novel. The present paper will focus solely on the level of suspense in the novel *Libra*. The suspense in the novel will be analyzed with the use of theory. DeLillo uses several methods to increase the level of suspense. To analyze this level of suspense, four aspects will be examined: the multiple narratives, the knowledge and continuing threat of the assassination, the role of Branch and the role of Oswald. These four element contribute to the suspense throughout the novel.

The Multiple Narratives

Libra contains a structure that has multiple narratives. One of them is a biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged murderer of President Kennedy. The second narrative is of Everett, Parmenter and Banister who are planning to shoot the President. The third narrative is of a retired secret service agent, Nicholas Branch, who is writing a secret history of the assassination for the CIA.

The narrative of Lee Harvey Oswald shows his life, from his childhood till his death. Oswald's life is described in detail, which allows the readers to build up compassion for him. The relationship with his mother is dreadful and Oswald has grown up with her negativity. His mother blames the men in her life for the hardships she has suffered; she has been abandoned, widowed and divorced. The second chapter introduces the other two narratives, namely those of Nicholas Branch and Win Everett, Lawrence Parmenter and Guy Banister. Nicholas Branch is the retired secret service agents who is asked to write a secret history of the assassination for the CIA. Branch learns more about the assassination, as the readers do. Everett, Parmenter and Banister are the conspirators of the assassination of President Kennedy. It is, however, made clear that they did not want to kill President Kennedy, but just injure him.

The novel is split into two parts. It consists of twenty-four chapters that are divided equally. All three narratives are present in both parts of the novel. The first twelve chapters give an overview of Oswald's life and present a short biography; Oswald's childhood, his service in the Marine and his defection to the USSR. Many of the aspects of Oswald's life are based on historical facts. The other narratives are, in the first part of the novel, not the main focus. The narratives in the second part of the novel can be described as *conspirational*. The final twelve chapters focus more on the actual assassination.

DeLillo keeps shifting between these three narratives, which is an important aspect of the novel. Joseph Kronick states that: "Indeed, time and space, or the incompatibility between the chronological narrative and the nearly paratactic sequence of coincidences, generate the plot of *Libra* (113)." The presence of multiple narratives generate the plot of *Libra* because the different narratives activate a level of suspense. Robert Yanal, a professor in psychology, says the following on suspense: "Narratives, fictional and factual, commonly raise in their audience suspense. A narrative lays out over time (not all at once) a sequence of events; and because the events of the narrative are not completely told all at once, questions arise for the audience which will be answered only later in the narrative's telling (146)." Yanal argues that suspense increases whenever the events of a narrative are not completely told at once.

The suspense in the novel mirrors the perception of the world after the 22th of November, which is the date of the assassination of President Kennedy. The world was distressed, angry and most of all confused. People did not know who killed the President and what was the motif for the assassination. The world did not know the truth and was left in the dark. The readers are kept in the dark as well because DeLillo does not provide them with subsequent information. DeLillo creates suspense using Yanal's method. The questions of the readers are not answered immediately because of the shifting between narratives. This shifting causes for gaps in the story. For example, when the narrative of Nicholas Branch reveals some new information, the narrative shifts towards Oswald or those of the three conspirators (38). The new information is not elaborated on and the readers have to wait until the narrative of Branch continues. This lingering can go on for multiple chapters. It is the cause for the extreme level of suspense in the novel. Readers do not receive enough information to fully understand the truth behind the assassination and have to unravel the truth themselves.

According to critic, Glen Thomas: "*Libra* implies that in the end there are only narratives and their attendant structures; in the representations of Everett's and Branch's respective attempt at constructing narrative, each in their different ways a failure, the text suggests that control over and knowledge of events is never absolute (123)." The readers are aware of the assassination of Kennedy and his alleged murderer Oswald. The plot of DeLillo might differ from the famous theory of the assassination. In this theory, Oswald is a lone gunman. The knowledge of the reader is therefore never absolute. Knowledge and the truth are important aspects in the novel *Libra*. Only knowledge can lead to truth however this knowledge is given out infrequently and, in many cases, held back. *Libra* begins, for example, with the narrative of Oswald however this is not obvious from the beginning of the chapter. Oswald keeps being referred to as Lee. The alleged murderer of Kennedy has, however become famous under his last name, Oswald. As he is only referred to as Lee, in the beginning of the novel, many readers may not immediately identify him with the Oswald that allegedly killed the President. It's not until the end of the first chapter that it becomes clear that Lee is actually Lee Harvey Oswald. The name of Oswald's mother is fully mentioned: Marguirite Claverie Oswald. This information allows the readers to resolve Lee is the alleged murderer of Kennedy. DeLillo has purposely chosen not to reveal Lee's surname to raise the suspense. The readers are given enough information to connect the dots however this information is only given after a period of time. This shows how DeLillo uses information to raise the suspense in the novel. He would leave out bits of information and only elaborate on those parts after a period of time.

Barbie Zelitzer argues that the assassination narrative is characterized by an absence of closure (105). Oswald may have fired the shot that killed President Kennedy, or he may not have. The readers are therefore kept in suspense. Zelitzer aptly states that there is an "absence" of truth. Thomas also mentions the uncertainty the assassination brings:

History as a narrative form becomes unstable at the moment of the assassination, as there is no discernible plot structure within which it can be constrained and thereby be accorded some form of meaning. The assassination becomes the site of contest and uncertainty as the narratives about this one event proliferate and continue to dispute each other and attempt to gain acceptance in popular consciousness (120).

The assassination generates a great deal of uncertainty, because there is still no solid proof, in the novel and in real life, who killed the President. DeLillo withholds essential information and gives this information periodically to his readers to increase their level of suspense.

The Threat of the Assassination

The threat of the assassination of President Kennedy is an important aspect of the novel. This threat is a recurring theme, which contributes in great deal towards the level of suspense. The assassination of Kennedy took place at 12:30 p.m. (Central Standard Time) on Friday November 22, 1963. Kennedy was shot while he was in a presidential motorcade in Dallas, Texas. During this assassination multiple eyewitnesses filmed the event and therefore caught the assassination on tape. Abraham Zapruder shot the most famous footage, nowadays called the Zapruder film. The film was first shown on television in 1975, twelve years after the assassination. Branch calls this footage "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American Century (181)."

As Branch noted, the assassination of Kennedy shocked the nation. People gathered in public places to watch the reports on the television. Forty minutes after the first report of the assassination, the television audience had doubled. In the evening, seventy percent of the televisions in the United States were on channels that covered the assassination of Kennedy ("Many Nations Share"). CBS correspondent Roger Mudd said the following: "It was a death that touched everyone instantly and directly; rare was the person who did not cry that long weekend." However, not just America mourned the President. Television networks overseas broke their schedule to report on the assassination and some networks went off the air and solely played funeral music ("Many Nations Share"). The assassination of Kennedy had a major impact on the world.

DeLillo wrote *Libra* in 1988, twenty-five years after the assassination. Books and movies about the assassination are still immensely popular. Dozens of books have been written about the assassination, both fiction and nonfiction. The movie JFK was so popular it earned 200 million dollars worldwide and was nominated for eight Academy Awards

(Weinraub). It is important to understand that the assassination is still very well-known and talked about. Nowadays people are still conducting new conspiracies.

Civello mentions that DeLillo provides a new way of thinking without being accountable for historical accuracy. There are however many elements in the novel that are true (9). The chapters on Oswald's childhood and his time in Russia are all historically correct. President Johnson established a commission to investigate the assassination of Kennedy, namely the Warren Commission. On September 27, 1964 the 888-page report was made public. Many of the historical elements that DeLillo uses in his novel can be found in the final report of the Warren Commission. DeLillo has chosen to incorporate a biography of Oswald, as well as fiction. He intertwines these two aspects to develop an interesting plot. DeLillo's readers become even more invested in the story because they know some of the characters. Cornier Michael states that "the novel unravels a proliferation of conspiracies whose plots interweave and acquire lives of their own (146)." Many of DeLillo's readers are familiar with some, of the many, conspiracies. DeLillo mentions that he makes no claim to literal truth, but rather provides a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the ride of speculation that widens over the years (Mott, 243). DeLillo's readers know the attempt to wound the President is going to take place, and they know what the outcome is going to be, namely the death of the President. However, they are unclear about the guilty party and their motifs.

The division and naming of the chapters also contribute to the suspense in the novel. The names of the chapters keep alternating between date and place. DeLillo enables his readers to go back in time and witness the planning to shoot Kennedy. The readers are not interested in the period after the assassination. Oswald is shot two days after he allegedly kills the President, which causes the truth to die with him. DeLillo gives the readers the possibility

to experience the moments before the assassination. However, because DeLillo's novel is based on historical events, his readers already know how it is going to end.

The knowledge of the plot causes the suspense to build up. Leonard Wilcox says the following about the plot:

The plot becomes a self-organized system, its gravitational pull warping the ether of intentionality. The deathward trajectory of the plot coalesces, and, as it does, it becomes a kind of 'great attractor' in the midst of haphazard events, exerting a force on them, making them, in an eerie way, 'textual'. And as historical event and textuality become increasingly indistinguishable, the idea that behind the event lies some prior moment of pure, self-authorized meaning is further confounded (344).

As Wilcox states, the plot becomes most interesting in the midst of haphazard events. Aaron Smuts, a professor of psychology, argues that: "It is widely thought that suspense requires uncertainty, but we often feel suspense in response to narratives when we know their outcomes (the paradox of suspense) (281)." The readers are aware that the assassination of President Kenney is on the twenty-second of November and therefore already know the outcome. The reader's knowledge increases the level of suspense. According to the paradox of suspense, the readers can still experience suspense even though they are already aware of the outcome. In some cases, as in *Libra*, the knowledge even contributes to the suspense. The notoriety of the assassination enables the readers to know the outcome and the naming of the chapters enable them to be aware of the date and location. The readers see the twenty-second of November approaching and are eager to find out the truth about the assassination of the President.

Nicholas Branch

Nicholas Branch is a character that also contributes to the level of suspense in the novel. He is a retired senior analyst of the CIA and is hired to write the secret history about the assassination of President Kennedy. He is described as an old man who has problems with concentrating on the facts at hand and often has to read a text multiple times. Branch also states himself that "he knows he is getting old (14)." He knows that he is writing a history and not a study, which first he accepts, however this changes throughout the novel.

Branch keeps receiving information from the Curator, but this information is being sent to him periodically. This is similar to the manner of DeLillo's distribution of information because he also provides his readers with infrequent information. Branch is in the same situation as the readers and they are conscious of Branch's unawareness. They know he is being given information periodically. There is however a difference between the amount of information Branch and DeLillo's readers are exposed to. Whereas the information shared with the readers is in some cases fairly limited, Branch is buried under information. He is being sent so much work he "wonders if he ought to despair of ever getting to the end (59)." Branch also states:

Everything is there. Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily timesheets, tax returns, property lists, postoperative x-rays, photo of knotted string, thousands of pages of testimony, of voice droning in hearing rooms in old courthouse buildings, an incredible haul of human utterance. It lies so flat on the page, hangs so still in the lazy air, lost to syntax and other arrangement, that is resembles a kind of mind-spatter, a poetry of lives muddied and dripping in language (181).

To find the truth about the assassination, Branch goes through all of the paperwork to obtain more knowledge of the assassination. He gets stuck because the Curator has given him too

much information. A great deal of the paperwork the Curator has sent him is unreliable and can therefore not be used in his secret history. Skip William argues that: "Branch's project threatens to reveal the 'gaps' in the CIA's knowledge; therefore, the CIA tries to protect its identity as "the Other of the Other" by withholding information from Branch. The big secret of the identity of the CIA, then, is that it is an imposter unable to master the secrets (416)."

The CIA is withholding information from Branch, which DeLillo is guilty of as well.

However, the CIA also gives Branch information that is unreliable and in this way tries to divert him of the course of finding out the truth about the assassination. DeLillo imposes the idea that the CIA knows more about the assassination than they lead on. The CIA intentionally holds back valuable information because they are trying to protect their identify as the *Other of the Other*. This term refers to those who are independent from the political norm.

Branch realizes the information he is given does not give him the amenities to write a truthful history about the assassination of President Kennedy. The following is said about the information Branch has been given:

Facts are lonely things. Branch has seen how a pathos comes to cling to the firmest fact. Oswald's eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits (300).

Branch has been given many pictures and video clips of, presumably, Oswald. He states that "They all look like Oswald (300)." He thinks "they look more like Oswald than the figure in profile, officially identified as him (300)."

Branch's unawareness raises the level of suspense because the readers are eager to find out the truth. However, the more information Branch is given, the further he is getting from

the actual truth. Branch keeps diverting from discovering the murderer of Kennedy. This causes the readers to divert with him. Christian Moraru argues that: "Branch has to go through the 'historical record' to recall the 'author's note' on *Libra*'s last page. He is literally flooded with information - both real and fabricated - on the assassination. [. . .] Branch gets stuck on the surface of things, entangled in the huge narrative archive (204)." Many of the information the Curator has given him, as Moraru stated, is fabricated by the CIA.

Branch was employed to write a secret history about the assassination, however he is more a reader than a writer. His role is comparable to that of the readers. He is unaware of the truth, but he has the desire to discover the truth about the assassination. Branch realizes that there might have been a conspiracy, but he is still uncertain about the murderer of President Kennedy. Kronick states that: "For Branch, the facts possess their own logic that push him to accept the universality of conspiracy, on the one hand, and to give up in despair over having to face an assemblage of facts, everyone of which is significant but collectively are meaningless (121)."

Psychologist Andrew Ortony, Gerald Clore and Allan Collins have a theory on suspense, namely the standard account. Smuts explains that: "The standard account holds that suspense is composed of three things: fear, hope, and the cognitive state of uncertainty. On the standard account, people feel suspense when they fear a bad outcome, hope for a good outcome, and are uncertain about which outcome will come to pass (281)." The uncertainty of Branch contributes, according to the standard account, to the suspense. He is not certain about the outcome of his investigation. The readers can therefore not be informed by Branch about the truth of the President's death.

Branch mentions that perhaps no one will read his secret history. He says: "Maybe no one knows except the Curator and two or three others in the Historical Intelligence Collection at CIA. Maybe it is the history no one will read (60)." The readers are, however, part of

Branch's search for the truth. They are also made aware of a conspiracy and are eager for Branch to discover it. The retired CIA analyst has the possibility to find out the truth about the assassination. The novel mostly deals with obtaining knowledge on the assassination and unraveling the truth. The hunger for finding out the truth lingers throughout the novel.

Lee Harvey Oswald

Lee Harvey Oswald is the main protagonist in DeLillo's novel. DeLillo portrays Oswald as an outcast, who does not fit in with the American society. Oswald is shown to beat his wife, even though he loves her. He is not portrayed as a likeable character, but is also not castigated. DeLillo does not portray Oswald as a madman, but treats him rather adequately. Oswald is not very charismatic, but he is intriguing. He therefore manages to draw in the readers.

Oswald had difficulty with fitting in with the American society, which DeLillo also portrays in his novel. He is often ridiculed for his accent and has trouble making friends.

Andrew Radford wrote the following:

Throughout *Libra*, Oswald is persistently depicted as a feckless, frustrated outsider in the diverse cultures through which he drifts in search for a "home" worthy of sacrificial service: as a persecuted youth in the Bronx, he is mocked for his Southern accent: in New Orleans, he is sneered at for speaking like a Northerner. Even in this relatively modest detail, Oswald is banished to a permanent form of linguistic exile (228).

Oswald, from a very young age, alienates himself from the rest of the American society. He likes to spend time with his books, even though he is dyslexic, which is concluded by the Soviets. Oswald has to undergo tests in order to move to the Soviet Union. These tests reveal the following about Oswald's character: "Oswald tended towards emotional instability. Tended toward erratic behavior. Had some form of dyslexia or word-blindness (166)." Despite this, books made him feel part of something, unlike everything else in his life. He feels lost in American society and DeLillo makes sure his readers pick up on this.

The books were private, like something you find and hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are. [. . .] He saw himself as something vast and sweeping. He was the product of a sweeping history, he and his mother, locked into a

process, a system of money and property that diminished their human worth every day, as if by scientific law. The books made him part of something (41).

The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy states that: "His [Oswald's] life was characterized by isolation, frustration, and failure. He had very few, if any, close relationships with other people and he appeared to have great difficulty in finding a meaningful place in the world (376)." This description of Oswald's life, shows that DeLillo incorporated factual aspects of the real Oswald in the character of his fictitious Oswald.

These aspects of Oswald's life draw the readers in, even though Oswald is not a likeable character. DeLillo uses this background information to define Oswald's character. He wants his readers to understand what kind of person Oswald was and how he could make an attempt to, allegedly, assassinate the President. DeLillo mentions in an interview with *Rolling Stone* that "[Lee Harvey] Oswald seems scripted out of doctored photos, tourist cards, change-of-address cards, mail-order forms, visa applications, altered signatures, pseudonyms. His life as we've come to know it is a construction of doubles (24)." It is possible that DeLillo wanted to give his readers an accurate account of Oswald's life and personality. The first chapters are indeed filled with historical facts about Oswald taken from the Warren Report.

This interest in Oswald increases the level of suspense. A character that intrigues the readers, in a positive or negative manner, encourages interest. Readers want to be informed about Oswald's progress and development. If DeLillo's readers are not interested in the main protagonist, Oswald, the level of suspense is lowered.

The unawareness of Oswald also contributes to the level of suspense. Alfred Hitchcock revealed the secret of his success at creating suspense in an interview with Francois Truffaut. Truffaut states the following:

According to Hitchcock, the key to the most effective method of arousing suspense is to give the audience some crucial information that the characters lack. This

certainly is not the only technique for creating suspense, but it is an extremely effective one. We find it in most of Hitchcock's films and in almost every movie in the suspense genre (73).

DeLillo uses Hitchcock's method to arouse suspense in his novel. The readers are given more information than Oswald because of the other narratives. They receive information from Branch and the three chief conspirators of the assassination plot. Oswald is unaware of the actual plan of Everett, Parmenter and Banister. DeLillo's makes his readers wonder if, and when, Oswald will find out about their plan. They wonder if Oswald will be the one who killed the President and if he will be set up as scapegoat. Oswald is "a man whose view of the world has been twisted (*Warren Report* 375)" and DeLillo enables the readers to see how this happened to Oswald. Information and the select distributing of it is an important part of the novel. The knowledge of the readers, and unawareness of Oswald contribute to the suspense in the novel.

Conclusion

DeLillo has been shown to use multiple elements to increase the level of suspense in his novel. These elements have all incorporated some theory on suspense. Yanal argues that withholding information can increase the suspense. DeLillo incorporated this in his novel, with the use of the multiple narratives. His readers are not exposed to the entire story, but occasionally receive bits of information. They are kept in the dark because DeLillo does not provide them with frequent information. The constant shifting between narratives causes gaps in the story, which increases the level of suspense.

Libra is based on a well-known historical event, which allows the readers to be aware of President Kennedy's death. DeLillo can therefore use the paradox of suspense to increase the level of suspense. The names of the chapters show the assassination is slowly approaching and DeLillo's readers are eager to find out the role of Oswald's character. This continuing threat of the assassination therefore contributes to the level of suspense as well.

Branch is asked to write a secret history about the assassination however he seems to embody the role of a reader rather than writer. Branch and DeLillo's readers therefore embody the same role, which enables the readers to identify with him. Psychologists Ortony, Clore and Collins argue that suspense is composed of three things: fear, hope, and uncertainty. DeLillo uses the uncertainty, of Branch and his readers, to increase the level of suspense. The readers and Branch are uncertain about the murderer of the President. They do not know if Oswald is going to be responsible for Kennedy's death. Branch keeps diverting from finding out the truth about the assassination because he is given too much information. This increases the suspense in the novel because the readers are eager to find out the truth and therefore want Branch to unravel it. If Branch unravels the truth, they will know the truth about the assassination as well.

Like Branch, Oswald's character also increases the suspense in the novel. Although he is not a likeable character, he is intriguing, which enables the reader to develop an interest in him. DeLillo incorporated the secret of Hitchcock, which led to Hitchcock's success at creating suspense in his movies. DeLillo's readers are given some essential information that Oswald lacks, namely the plan of Everett, Parmenter and Banister. The knowledge of the readers and lack of knowledge of Oswald therefore play an important role in the level of suspense in the novel. DeLillo has used these elements to create an exciting and thrilling novel which draws his readers in and makes them unable to put the book down.

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