



# Underworld

Don DeLillo  
(1997)

## PLOT AND CHARACTERS

The novel begins with the description of the final game of the 1951 championship between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. The match is finally won by the Giants with a home run by Bobby Thomson. On the same day, the Soviet Union is doing its first nuclear test: the piece of news is communicated to J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, who is watching the game from a private box. **The novel shifts to the 1990s and then goes backwards in time**, moving between **the city of New York and the south-western desert**, which is the testing ground of the American weapons. Against the background of the Cold War, DeLillo traces the story of **a brief love affair that took place in the Bronx in the 1950s between the 17-year-old Nick Shay and Klara Sax**, the wife of Albert Bronzini, a science teacher and mentor to Nick's brother, a brilliant chess player. When **Nick accidentally kills a man**, he is sent to a Jesuit school, where he turns into an introspective and bookish anti-hero. **He later becomes an executive at a Phoenix-based corporation that manages dangerous waste**, making a family of his own, while obsessively tracing the Bobby Thompson home run ball. Meanwhile, Klara has become a conceptual artist, supervising a project in the desert, painting B-52 bombers and other military wastes (→ Topic 7). DeLillo also gives an **insight into the AIDS- and drug-ravaged ghetto of the contemporary Bronx** and to the weapon factories where the cancerous legacy of American atomic testing is uncovered by Nick's brother Matt, who has become a nuclear scientist. There is also dark humour in passages about **the culture of the 1950s**, sex, celebrity, the number 13 that creates a pattern of bad luck, various forms of waste and vast mountains of trash.

## SETTING

*Underworld* covers the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, chronicling the world of the Vietnam War, the atomic bomb, the Cuban missile crisis, nostalgia, the television, Hoover, McCarthyism, the Internet, patriotism, high

Capitalism, Catholicism – a constellation of social, cultural and historical events. The Cold War may be over, but its legacy is inescapable and unresolved. During the Cold War people talked about weapons but did not think about the waste that they would produce. That is where the title of the book comes from: a sentence about plutonium in connection with Nick's work. The word 'underworld' may refer both to the burial of waste and to plutonium, whose name comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld.

## THEMES

**The book explores the consequences of quantum physics and the theory of relativity**, in which space collapses and time loses its linearity. It also deals with **memory**, and the way in which the past is constantly with us. The novel develops **the symbol of the desert** as a breeding ground and a wasteland of the modern world. The borderless desert, its oases and mirages, is the setting for the technology age of silicon chips, radioactive waste, top secret laboratories, post-modern art.

## STYLE

*Underworld* is **divided into six main parts**, with a prologue and an epilogue, plus three short inserts which move against the prevailing chronological sequence covering a period of 45 years. DeLillo builds a series of **fictional fragmented narratives around the course of history**. Individuals and incidents are held together by the **formal repetition of certain ideas and motifs**, large and small, real and fictional: the frequent mention of towers, for example, linked with various forms of waste, or of many walls, such as the Berlin Wall and the Bronx graffiti wall. Shifting perspectives keep the relationships between characters and events in constant flux. DeLillo writes in **various registers**, from the vernacular forms of the Bronx speech to the poetic virtuosity of the early chapter, where each of eight consecutive paragraphs refers to a different part of the story.

### Key idea

#### Post-modern

The work of DeLillo is distinctly post-modern, in that it presents the stories of characters who face life in a post-modern, post-industrial, televisual culture. The term 'Post-modernism' has emerged since the mid-1980s as a reaction to Modernism (→ 6.7). Basically it refers to an artistic or cultural state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organising principle and implying extreme complexity and contradiction. Post-modernism celebrates the idea of fragmentation or incoherence.

The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears: man should not pretend to give meaning to a meaningless world rather play with nonsense. Post-modernism asserts that experience can only be created by the individual, and cannot be made objective by an author or narrator. The consumer of a cultural product is free to deconstruct the meaning of a work, and different users will come to very different, but equally valid, conclusions of what that meaning is.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the texts and answer the following questions about *Underworld*.

- 1 How does the novel begin?
- 2 What is the setting?
- 3 Who is the protagonist?
- 4 What does Klara Sax do?
- 5 What does 'underworld' mean?
- 6 What does the desert symbolise in the novel?
- 7 What is the narrative structure of the novel?
- 8 In what sense is the novel post-modern?

**The cosmology of waste**

*In this text Nick Shay speaks about his work and the issue of waste in contemporary society.*

My firm was involved in waste. We were waste handlers<sup>1</sup>, waste traders, cosmologists of waste. I traveled to the coastal lowlands of Texas and watched men in moon suits bury drums<sup>2</sup> of dangerous waste in subterranean salt beds<sup>3</sup> many millions of years old, dried-out remnants of a Mesozoic ocean. It was a religious conviction in our business that these deposits of rock salt would not leak<sup>4</sup> radiation. Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard<sup>5</sup>.

I saw a man on the via della Spiga standing in front of a mirrored column smoothing<sup>6</sup> his hair, running both hands over his hair, and the way he did it, the cast of his eyes, the slightly pitted skin<sup>7</sup>, both hands guiding the flow of his hair – this was half a second in Milan one day – reminded me of a thousand things at once, long ago.

The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste? We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability. White containers of plutonium waste with yellow caution tags<sup>8</sup>. Handle carefully. Even the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage<sup>9</sup> differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context.

My son used to believe that he could look at a plane in flight and make it explode in midair by simply thinking it. He believed, at thirteen, that the border<sup>10</sup> between himself and the world was thin and porous enough to allow him to affect the course of events. An aircraft in flight was a provocation too strong to ignore. He'd watch a plane gaining altitude after taking off from Sky Harbor and he'd sense an element of catastrophe tacit in the very fact of a flying object filled with people. He was sensitive to the most incidental stimulus and he thought he could feel the object itself yearning to burst<sup>11</sup>. All he had to do was wish the fiery image into his mind and the plane would ignite and shatter<sup>12</sup>. His sister used to tell him, Go ahead, blow it up, let me see you take that plane out of the sky with all two hundred people aboard, and it scared him to hear someone talk this way and it scared her too because she wasn't completely convinced he could not do it. It's the special skill of an adolescent to imagine the end of the world as an adjunct<sup>13</sup> to his own discontent. But Jeff got older and lost interest and conviction. He lost the paradoxical gift for being separate and alone and yet intimately connected, mind-wired<sup>14</sup> to distant things.

At home we separated our waste into glass and cans and paper products. Then we did clear glass versus colored glass. Then we did tin versus aluminum. We did plastic containers, without caps or lids<sup>15</sup>, on Tuesdays only. Then we did yard waste<sup>16</sup>. Then

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Part I, Chapter 2

- 1 handlers. Manipolatori.
- 2 men ... drums. Uomini in tuta spaziale che seppellivano bidoni.
- 3 salt beds. Giacimenti di salgemma.
- 4 leak. Filtrare.
- 5 we discard. Gettiamo via.
- 6 smoothing. Ravviarsi.
- 7 the cast ... the slightly pitted skin. Il taglio degli occhi, la pelle leggermente butterata.
- 8 caution tags. Etichette di avvertimento.
- 9 garbage. Immondizia.
- 10 border. Confine.
- 11 yearning to burst. Desideroso di esplodere.
- 12 would ignite and shatter. Si sarebbe incendiato esplodendo in mille pezzi.
- 13 adjunct. Aggiunta.
- 14 mind-wired. Mentalmente collegato.
- 15 caps or lids. Tappi o coperchi.
- 16 yard waste. Rifiuti organici.



we did newspapers including glossy<sup>17</sup> inserts but were careful not to tie the bundles in twine<sup>18</sup>, which is always the temptation.

The corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world<sup>19</sup>. But things tend to drift dimly inward<sup>20</sup>. Gossip, rumor<sup>21</sup>, promotions, personalities, it's only natural, isn't it – all the human lapses that take up space in the company soul<sup>22</sup>. But the world persists, the world heals<sup>23</sup> in a way. You feel the contact points around you, the caress of linked grids<sup>24</sup> that give you a sense of order and command. It's there in the warbling banks<sup>25</sup> of phones, in the fax machines and photocopiers and all the oceanic logic stored in your computer. Bemoan<sup>26</sup> technology all you want. It expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived<sup>27</sup>.

- 17 glossy. Patinati.  
18 not to tie ... twine. A non legare i pacchi con lo spago.  
19 face foursquare into the world. A faccia aperta verso il mondo.  
20 to drift dimly inward. A rivoltarsi debolmente su se stesse.  
21 Gossip, rumor. Pettegolezzi, dicerie.  
22 human lapses ... soul. Debolezze umane che prendono spazio nell'anima dell'azienda.  
23 heals. Guarisce.  
24 the caress of linked grids. La carezza di griglie collegate.  
25 warbling banks. File squillanti.  
26 Bemoan. Lamentatevi della.  
27 in your well-pressed ... unperceived. Nei vostri abiti ben stirati alle cose che scivolano nel mondo altrimenti inosservate.

## VISUAL ANALYSIS

### 1 READ the text and write down a heading for each section.

- Part 1 (lines 1-7): .....
- Part 2 (lines 8-11): .....
- Part 3 (lines 12-17): .....
- Part 4 (lines 18-32): .....
- Part 5 (lines 33-37): .....
- Part 6 (lines 38-47): .....

### 2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

-  .....
-  .....
-  .....
- It's  .....
-  .....

### 3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- 1 Where did the narrator travel and what did he witness?
- 2 How do people regard their litter?
- 3 Focus on the phrases where the narrator describes the handling of waste. What connotation is it given?
- 4 What narrative technique does DeLillo mainly use? To what effect?
- 5 What themes related to contemporary society does the narrator hint at in the text?

## COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

### 4 DISCUSS with the rest of the class.

- 1 Are you for or against nuclear power stations?
- 2 Are you interested in the environment? What environmental issues are you most concerned with?