

# Social Trauma and the Question of Identity in Don Delillo's Falling Man

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Lana Laslavić

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Dona DeLilla**

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* in terms of trauma that characters of the novel suffered after the terrorist attacks on 11 September, the way characters deal with their trauma, as well as their search for identity. The aim of the paper is to suggest that the trauma Keith Neudecker, his wife Lianne and their son Justin suffered is intervening with their everyday lives and they are not able to continue with their everyday activities. The characters struggle to find their identities in the world that is changed and cannot come to peace with the trauma. The first chapter of this paper deals with the happenings of 11 September and with the 9/11 literature. The next chapter analyzes the traumatic experience of Keith, Lianne, and their son Justin. The third chapter explores Keith's and Lianne's search for identity, as well as the critique of American national identity that DeLillo offers through the relationship of Nina and Martin. The following chapter analyzes the art of recovery in the novel and DeLillo's emphasis on the body. In the end, the paper focuses on the three falling men in the novel.

**Keywords:** DeLillo, *Falling Man*, trauma, identity, 9/11 literature



## Introduction

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* is a post 9/11 novel that deals with the situation in the United States of America after the attack. It focuses on one man – Keith Neudecker and follows his state of mind, but also his relationships with his estranged wife Lianne and their son Justin. This paper will analyze the social trauma of the characters in the book and how they deal with it, as well as the search for their new identities both individually and nationally. Every character in the novel was fundamentally transformed by the 9/11 attacks and they left them wondering who they really are and where they belong. Since the identity of the whole nation was now lost, the characters have to find a new sense of purpose in their lives. DeLillo's novel follows their struggles in the days after the attacks and continues to do so for a year. This paper opens up with a historical overview of the 9/11 attacks and proceeds with the overview of 9/11 literature and its main features. The second part of the paper deals with the traumatic experiences of the characters in the novel and it takes a closer look at the traumas of Keith, Lianne, and Justin which are the result not only of the attacks but also of Keith's abrupt return into their lives since he and Lianne lived separately before the events of 9/11. The third chapter deals with Keith's and Lianne's struggle of finding their identity while focusing on Keith's double identity and Lianne's fear of Alzheimer's. The fourth part of the paper analyzes the art of recovery of Keith and Lianne by presenting escapism and taking control of one's body as the main coping mechanisms for their traumas. Since the motif of the falling man is of the great importance for the novel, the last chapter analyzes the three falling men which DeLillo encompassed into it. It analyzes Keith as the falling man from the title, images of the jumpers in the novel, as well as Janiak's performances and Lianne's opinion on them. The paper concludes with the emphasis on the importance of dealing with the traumas in order to overcome them.

## 1 September 11<sup>th</sup> and Post 9/11 Literature

### 1.1 The Attack on the World Trade Center

Based on Pamela Engel's article "What Happened on 9/11, 17 Years Ago," nineteen militants hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks against targets in the United States. The first two of the hijacked planes were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the third plane hit the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. An American Airlines Boeing 767 loaded with twenty thousand gallons of jet fuel crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:45 a.m. The plane left a burning hole near the eightieth floor of the building, instantly killed hundreds of people and trapped those who were alive on the floors above the eightieth. At first, everyone thought it was an accident. However, eighteen minutes later, at 9:03 a.m., a second Boeing 767—United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the second tower. It went through the tower near the sixtieth floor and caused a massive explosion. After that, it was clear that America was under the attack.

Both buildings were on fire and people trapped inside were threatened by fire and thick, toxic smoke which was making breathing impossible. Because of the impossible situation in which those people found themselves, at least two hundred of them jumped from the Towers. One of those jumpers was captured at 9:41 a.m. in the iconic photo called "The Falling Man". Only one minute before that photo was taken, at 9:40 a.m., American Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. Five minutes later the Federal Aviation Administration ordered all aircraft to land at the nearest airport, for the first time in America's history. One hundred twenty-five military personnel and civilians were killed in the Pentagon, along with all sixty-four people aboard the airliner.

To the disbelief of all Americans, and the world, the south tower collapsed at 9:59 a.m. The structure could not withstand the heat that the burning fuel was producing. The collapse of the north tower followed at 10:30 a.m. Since the fourth plane was delayed, the passengers had the time to learn what is happening, so they resisted the hijackers and crashed the plane in a rural field near Shanksville in western Pennsylvania at 10:10 a.m. All forty-four people on the plane were killed. The target of the plane remains unknown.

Engel further states that, over the course of the following days, it was discovered that the attackers were Islamic terrorists financed by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization of Saudi fugitive Osama bin Laden. The cause of the attacks seemed to be America's support of Israel, its involvement in the Persian Gulf War and its continued military presence in the Middle East. With almost three thousand people killed in the attacks, they are claimed to be "the deadliest attacks on US soil since the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in World War II" (Engel).

## 1.2 9/11 Literature

The happenings of 9/11 changed and influenced many different spheres of life. One of those spheres was also literature, and nowadays there is a genre called 9/11 literature that is defined as "a group of fictional books that are either loosely related to [or] directly based on the terror attacks of September 11, 2001" (Schlottman). According to Kensinton and Quinn who edited the volume *Literature After 9/11*, this kind of literature "expresses what remains unrepresentable about 9/11, it also raises persistent questions about how we interpret and represent 9/11" (2). The whole nation struggled to understand the meaning of 9/11, and 9/11 literature set out to put a framework to the events and aided people to understand them. At first, it appeared as "emotional responses to the events" (3), mainly in poems and essays posted online by anonymous authors. It is noteworthy to mention that the early 9/11 literature dealt with the pure representation and reflection of 9/11 attacks. Some of the early 9/11 poems were collected and published in a poetry collection *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11* (2002) edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson as well as in Sam Hill's anthology *Poets Against the War* (2003). Kensinton and Quinn further state that it took a few years before the first 9/11 novels appeared that "registered the reverberations of 9/11, framing representations of the events. . . within narratives that are weighted towards depicting their aftermath" (4). This kind of literature often included formal innovations like self-reflexive meta-narratives, disrupted temporality, and multiple viewpoints. The novels were often combining "exploration of the subjectivities of characters living in the shadow of no towers. . . with dramatization of contested interpretations of 9/11" (Kensinton and Quinn 4). Some of the finest fictional accounts of the 9/11 novels are Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006).

## 2 The Traumatic Experience

Even though Don DeLillo focused the traumatic experience in the novel on the character of Keith Neudecker, the trauma is not only his but rather of the whole society. Keith's presence in the World Trade Center at the day of the attacks traumatized him, while the fear for him and the fear of the unknown traumatized Keith's family. This chapter will analyze the traumas Keith, his ex-wife Lianne, and their son Justin with his friends suffered, as well as the impact they had on their lives.

### 2.1 Keith's Traumatic Experience

The novel begins with a thirty-nine-year-old lawyer Keith walking away from the towers. The World Trade Center was Keith's working place and it is where he was at the moment of the attack, yet he survived. As he is walking away from the scene he is confused, and the idea of being alive is "too obscure to take hold" (DeLillo 9) for him. In the moment of the fall of the north tower, Keith could feel that collapse "in the trembling air" (DeLillo 9), and the event is described as "That was him coming down, the north tower" (DeLillo 9). By referring to the tower as "him," DeLillo is alluding that there is a special connection between Keith and that tower, meaning that the fall of the tower in a way represents the fall of Keith himself. Therefore, Keith could be easily interpreted as the falling man from the title of the novel, highlighting the extent of Keith's trauma. On his way from the towers, Keith is lost, unsure where he is going, and the whole walk seems like a sleep in which time and space become distorted: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (DeLillo 7). The events of that day are the only thing that exists for Keith, and "everything is frozen in the 'now' created by the impact of the event" (Cvek 332). As Tomaš suggests in his article "'This Was the World Now': Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* as the Literary Memorial to the 9/11 Tragedy," Keith only exists in "terms of the tragedy" stuck in the world that is determined by the attacks and it seems "every notion of what was normal, sensible, American, had vanished" (2).

Keith's first response to the trauma is to go back to his family, even though it was dysfunctional before the attack. However, he is unable to reconnect with them because his estranged wife Lianne cannot understand the depth of his trauma. In a desperate need to try and reconnect, Lianne and Keith sleep together, only to realize that not even being physically close to each other can help them overcome the gap between them. Keith feels like Lianne cannot understand him because they underwent different types of trauma and she was not with

him in the towers. That idea is what leads him to another survivor, Florence, with whom he cheats on Lianne; “It was what they knew together” (DeLillo 120) that brought the two of them together. Unlike his wife, Florence knew what Keith was going through in the towers, she shared Keith’s trauma, and in a way, he thinks she is able to understand him better than Lianne. However, not even the relationship with Florence can lessen Keith’s trauma. What enlarges Keith’s trauma is witnessing the death of his best friend Rumsey: “Keith stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died. This was when he wondered what was happening here” (DeLillo 210). The nights of poker that Keith shared with his friends provided him with a sense of stability and belonging, and since Rumsey was an important part of those nights, his death makes Keith realize the true impact the attacks on his life and daily routine. The search for the feelings of stability and belonging that Keith lost with Rumsey, leads him later on into the poker addiction.

## 2.2 Lianne’s Traumas

Lianne saw the attacks on TV and was sure that Keith died there. This notion traumatized her, and even though Keith soon appears at her door, she becomes obsessed with the events of 9/11, and feels a strong need to find every information possible: “I don’t read poems. I read the newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy” (DeLillo 37). By incorporating reading articles into her daily routine, Lianne is learning about the events and about the past which helps her overcome her trauma. However, Keith’s presence in her life after the attacks worsened her trauma and disabled proper recovery. Her initial trauma is seeing the events on TV and instantly knowing that Keith might be dead, thus the shock of seeing someone who she thought was dead at her door, while at the same time knowing how many people did not make it home, only deepens her traumatic experience. Since they were separated before the attacks, Lianne cannot concentrate on herself and her trauma because she has to accommodate to Keith’s renewed presence. She feels like she has to “reconstitute normalcy by playing the normal social role” (Cvek 336), even though Keith was never thoroughly dedicated to their family and she does not trust him because he “Could leave tomorrow. Nobody knows” (DeLillo 37). While attempting to make their life together functional, Lianne feels alone and struggles with the realization that she and Keith want two opposite things: “There was one final thing, too self-evident to need saying. She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not” (DeLillo 132).

Like many other Americans, Lianne thought of her country as of a safe space. Now that the attacks invaded that space, she feels threatened even in her home. When her neighbor Elena starts playing Middle-Eastern music, Lianne feels like her private space is invaded once again and she is not able to look at it as only music, but rather understands it as a provocation in extremely sensitive times. Her thoughts become exceptionally racist, and when talking to Elena about the music, she “experiences a feeling of disembodiment and acts against her better judgment” (Cvek 344). Even though Lianne’s mind knows that her actions are wrong, she still hits Elena because her mind lost control over her body. Her violence is the result of the trauma she suffered and it is “an act that cannot be controlled even if recognized as irrational and based on false assumptions” (Cvek 344).

### 2.3 Children and Bill Lawton

Like adults, children were also traumatized by the events what can be seen at the example of Keith and Lianne’s son Justin. Even though they tried to protect him by not telling him how close to dying his father was, it was not possible to protect him from hearing other news. In the days after, people talked only about the attacks and it was the only thing Americans could watch on the TV. Children were perplexed and started interpreting events in their own way since they were not able to understand their full importance and meaning. In a way, they are trying to “find sense in something not even adults can wholly comprehend” (Tomaš 2). The world of Justin and his friends is deeply changed by the attacks. Knowing that something terrible happened, they start using binoculars and search the sky to see if new planes are going to come, waiting for the events to replay. Furthermore, children hear one name being repeated on the television: Bin Laden. However, unable to understand “the alien arabic name” (Conte 569) and mishear it as Bill Lawton.

Justin is not only traumatized by the attacks, but also by his father’s return since he was accustomed to his father being away, and now Keith is back without any warning. His mother describes the situation as:

His 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? He sees the man as a figure that looms over the household, the man who went away once and came back and told the woman, who sleeps in the same bed as

the man, all about Bill Lawton, so how can he be trusted to be here tomorrow. (DeLillo 70)

Just like Lianne, Justin has to accustom to living with Keith again, but even though Keith is trying, he does not know how to be a proper father and is not able to create deeper connection with his son.

When describing the impact of the events on the world of children, DeLillo deals with the influence of the mass media on their way of thinking. Lianne wanted to protect her son and even though he saw the attacks on the TV, she did not allow him to see the footage of the towers falling: “He didn’t see it on TV. I didn’t want him to see it. But I told him they came down. And he seemed to absorb it” (DeLillo 53). Even though Lianne later explained to Justin what happened and both Keith and Lianne told him that the towers fell, he cannot comprehend it. The boy is rather shaping his reality by what he sees on the TV, and since he only saw them being hit, that became his truth: “They were hit but did not collapse. That’s what he [Justin] says” (DeLillo 53).

### 3 The Question of Identity

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, “Americans felt secure in their leadership of the New World Order” (Conte 559). However, the 9/11 attacks shattered their feeling of security. The attacks started a new era in which there was an open conflict between the capitalism and terrorism, and Conte refers to this time as “the age of terror and retribution” (559). With the sense of security lost, the Americans struggle with their identity – both individually and nationally. This chapter will analyze the national identity through Martin and Nina, as well as the identities of other characters in Don DeLillo’s novel.

#### 3.1 Keith’s Loss of Self and Double Identity

When Keith comes to the apartment on the day of the attacks, he is not sure who he is anymore. His first instinct is to go back to his family because he hopes that the sense of belonging will help him rebuild himself. His first idea is to go back to his old self, to who he was before. However, Keith after the attacks and Keith before the attacks are two different persons. Even though he tries hard to reconnect with his family and his old self, he is not able to do it. The belongings in his old apartment make him feel lonely because they symbolize the gap between his identity before and after the attacks: “A single suitcase, that was all, and birth certificate, his passport, checkbooks and a few other documents, the state papers of identity. He stood and looked and felt something so lonely he could touch it with his hand” (DeLillo 26). It is not the things he found that made him lonely, but rather knowing that he was looking at the proof of his lost identity which he is not able to get back.

Because of his trauma and the search for his personality, Keith develops double identity after the attacks. DeLillo is emphasizing that polarity by involving Keith with two different women. On the one hand, Keith is trying to fix his marriage with Lianne and be a husband and a father even though that role has never given him satisfaction. He wants to hold onto the person that he was before the attacks, but Keith and Lianne can both feel that this is not where he belongs: “Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself, or always had, but it was different now because he was watching” (DeLillo 50). On the other hand, when he meets Florence, the connection he has with her awakens the other personality in him. This relationship allows him to explore himself after the attacks and analyze the trauma he has been through. However, that relationship “disagrees with all that he imagines he needs in his new life with his wife and son” (Babae and Hashim 6). After acknowledging the absurd



of the duality of his identity, Keith realizes that in order to stay with Lianne he has to end the affair with Florence, while hoping that this will help him in construction of a single, true self.

### 3.2 The Importance of Alzheimer's for Lianne

Lianne is struggling with the image of herself since everything she knew suddenly changed. Instead of moving forward after the attacks, like Keith, she is also regressing and trying to find herself by going back and trying to make her relationship with Keith work. Unlike Keith who instinctively chose to go back to the family, Lianne was in a way forced to it when he came to her apartment. However, she is not strong enough to ask him to leave and soon learns that sleeping next to him makes her feel safer.

The attacks are not the only thing that affects Lianne's view of herself. Because of the family's medical history, Lianne faced the possibility of a loss of meaning and identity through Alzheimer's disease:

The truth was mapped in slow and certain decline. Each member of the group lived in this knowledge. Lianne found it hardest to accept in the case of Carmen G. . . Lianne herself, bearing her father's mark, the potential toll of plaque and twisted filaments, had to look at this woman and see the crime of it, the loss of memory, personality and identity, the lapse into eventual protein stupor. (DeLillo 82)

The state in which Alzheimer's patients find themselves is oddly similar to the consequences of the trauma so through the Alzheimer's sessions in the hospital Lianne "feels threatened by the possibility of the loss of memory, meaning and, in general, representational ability, aggravated by the trauma of 9/11" (Cvek 343). Alzheimer's represents the ultimate loss of meaning since those who suffer from the illness lose every psychological trait of their personality, and therefore remain only a shell. Once only physical traits are left, people lose connections with the society, and without proper social functions, a person has no meaning, and thus no identity. The idea that she might end up like the patients in her group scares Lianne, but at the same time, she finds those meetings comforting and they are her way of escaping the reality which she is not able to face.

While looking for herself, Lianne also struggles with her idea of religion and God. Throughout her life, Lianne was taught that "religion makes people compliant" (DeLillo 48) and that its purpose is "to return people to a childlike state" (DeLillo 48). However, after the

attacks, she questions her beliefs and wonders how can someone kill in the name of God and why God allows for it to happen.

### 3.3 Martin and Nina – The Critique of American Identity

Martin Ridnour, “an international art dealer with ties to West German student radicalism of the late 1960s” (Conte 563), is Nina’s boyfriend. His identity is a mystery among the members of Nina’s family and Nina herself: “She wasn’t sure what he did exactly or how he did it but suspected that he bought art and then flipped it, quickly, for a large profit. She liked him. He spoke with an accent and had an apartment here and an office in Basel. He spent time in Berlin. He did or did not have a wife in Paris” (DeLillo 37). Only after the attacks does Lianne begin to question it and realize that she does not know a lot about his terroristic past. Because Martin looks like an average American it is hard for Lianne to comprehend that he might have done terrible things: “Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her—one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white” (DeLillo 120). The idea of Martin as a terrorist brings the children’s picture of Bill Lawton to life. Anglicization of Bin Laden’s name scared the adults because it showed that he could have easily been a part of the western world, and now Martin’s past emphasizes those fears by transporting the attributes of the mass murderer on someone that was part of the American society (Conte 570).

Because of his past, Martin has a better insight and a clearer understanding of the situation after the attacks, while Nina’s point of view puts America in the center. DeLillo uses the difference in their ways of thinking to incorporate the critique of the cultural identity of the United States into the lovers’ arguments. Unlike Nina, Martin is able to see the towers for what they were – a provocation:

But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It’s a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down. (DeLillo 77)

He understands that the attacks are not of a religious nature, but rather a way to show America that they are not as untouchable as they thought. The World Trade Center was a “representative

of the gigantism and hubris of global capitalism” (Conte 563), as well as the symbol of the western culture which the terrorist saw as “a disease that's spreading” (DeLillo 39). Early on, however, the majority of Americans could not comprehend any other reasons for the attacks apart from the religious one. Because of the suffered trauma, they failed to recognize the politics behind the attacks and were not able to detect that “such enormous wealth and aspiration for world domination should meet with catastrophe” (Conte 563). Through the character of Martin, DeLillo criticizes the tendencies of American society prior to the attacks, as well as “the failure of dialectical reasoning” (Conte 563) during the apocalyptic times which prevented them from seeing beyond the religious fanaticism.

## 4 The Art of Recovery

All principal characters in the novel suffered a trauma during the attacks. In his novel, DeLillo follows their path from the events of the days to the complete recovery, while incorporating their prior traumas in the story. Every character has their own way of fighting the trauma and trying to find themselves. However, in the end, it all comes to one – gaining control over your body to gain control over your life. This chapter will analyze the means that characters used in the novel to fully recover.

### 4.1 Escapism

In the early days after the attacks, no one is able to comprehend what actually happened, no one wanted to face the harshness of the events and of the state in which their country was. They needed a distraction in order not to think about the pain. As mentioned before, Lianne's escape are sessions with Alzheimer's patients. At first, she thinks she is going to those sessions because of the people she met there, but soon realizes that she needs those sessions because of herself. They help her come to peace with her father's death and her own fear of the disease, while at the same time helping her deal with the chaotic world after the attacks. Keith's first escape was going back to his family, going somewhere he thought he belonged. He thought that the sense of belonging would protect him from the trauma that he went through. However, once he recognizes that the family is not helping him, he escapes into the relationship with Florence. Florence and Keith create their own universe in Florence's apartment. Since they shared the same experience, they needed each other to recover:

She talked about the tower, going over it again, claustrophobically, the smoke, the fold of bodies, and he understood that they could talk about these things only with each other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too detailed because it was inside them now and because he needed to hear what he'd lost in the tracings of memory. This was their pitch of delirium, the dazed reality they'd shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of spiraling men and women. (DeLillo 64)

Keith needs to listen to Florence's stories in order to "recover the experience to which he refuses to return" (Moncef 103). By communicating their trauma, they are trying to come to terms with themselves and it helps them create a relationship that is purely sexual and based completely

on their shared experience. However, not even that relationship can provide an escape which Keith needs. In order to “avoid facing the burden of both private and collective history in New York” (Moncef 103) and because of his “tendency toward escapism and withdrawal from the task of tackling both the traumatic event and his own reaction to it” (Moncef 103), Keith decides to abandon his family again, chooses his passion for the game of poker, and decides to move to Las Vegas in order to become a professional poker player. Poker has always had a special meaning for Keith because those poker nights with his friends made him feel like he belongs somewhere, while providing him with a sense of routine: “They enjoyed doing this, most of them. They liked creating a structure out of willful trivia” (DeLillo 68). Since a number of friends did not survive the attacks, Keith chooses an extreme option in order to try and recreate the feeling of those nights with them. He chooses a life that “provides him no stability” (Babae and Hashim 6), and therefore allows him to keep running away from his problems, while offering him “the sensation of timelessness and repetitive routine” (Cvek 332). The casinos of Las Vegas are a safe space where Keith feels like himself after the attacks and can hide behind the routine, which allows him to forget: “These were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards” (DeLillo 139). However, because he keeps using the routine and his cards as an escape, he is not able to reach full recovery. Instead of learning how to deal with his trauma and emotions, the constant routine that does not require thinking leads him into the state of “a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot that understands two hundred voice commands, far-seeing, touch-sensitive but totally, rigidly controllable” (DeLillo 139).

#### 4.2 The Importance of Body

The motif of a body is a very important one and Cvek says that *Falling Man* is actually “a novel about bodies: about how they fall, fail, become photosensitive surfaces for recording memories, how they come into violent contact with other bodies, about how they are penetrated by images” (Cvek 342). Americans saw their country as one body that was safe from the intrusion and now that that body is invaded, they feel like they are losing control. It is not only a political body invaded but also the body of people through “organic shrapnel:” “The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who’s in striking range” (DeLillo 23). Since DeLillo gives such importance to the body, the loss of control over one’s life is shown through the loss of control over the body. The feelings of

disembodiment and the loss of control are shown during Keith's walk from the World Trade Center to Lianne's apartment where he has no control over his body and is not aware of his motions. The other example as already mentioned is Lianne's attack on her neighbor Elena. In order to gain control over their life, DeLillo's characters have to gain control over their body and it becomes one of the main means of recovery. Because of his injury, Keith is required to do the therapeutic exercises for his hand. However, those exercises soon become his way of gaining some kind of control. They are the ritual that brings him calmness and he continues to do them even after his injury is healed: "The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist, thumb up in certain setups. He recalled phrases from the instruction sheet and recited them quietly, working on the hand shapes, the bend of the wrist toward the floor, the bend of the wrist toward the ceiling" (DeLillo 143). Just like Keith, Lianne starts exercising excessively. She would run during early mornings and it is during one of those runs that she realizes that she is in control again. In order to come to peace with everything that had happened to her, she had to come to peace with her body: "It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn't even something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she'd always known" (DeLillo 144). However, she is only able to come to peace with herself and gain control again after Keith left.

## 5 The Falling Man

Inspiration for the title was a famous and controversial Richard Drew's photography of a man falling from the North Tower. He was one of the jumpers whose existence was denied after the attacks. The photo was printed in the newspapers only once and they got accused that they "exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography" (Junod 2016). However, the photograph is one of a kind. The man in the photo is "suspended equilaterally between the darker façade of the north tower to the left and the lighter façade of the south tower to the right" (Conte 574). The photograph offers a stillness and calmness in hectic and confusing times. It shows the last act of freedom – a man who chose the way in which he is going to die. The man in the photograph was speculated to be one of the workers from Windows on the World.

Following the title, DeLillo encompasses falling men in his novel. One of those falling men is Keith himself. At the moment Keith is introduced, he is already falling. He has a failed marriage behind him, a son that he does not see much, and a job that he does not enjoy. The only thing he seems to be enjoying are poker nights with his friends and even those nights are filled with quarrels. Lianne's mother describes Keith as "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" (DeLillo 46). It seems that surviving the attacks and getting out of the World Trade Center alive is a new chance for him. However, instead of taking his chance and turning his life for the better, Keith continues his fall. He is not able to overcome his trauma and by going back to Lianne, he slows down her recovery and therefore confirms Nina's theory about him. At the end of the novel, he is not a better man than he was before the tragedy. By beginning and ending the novel with Keith's descent from the tower, DeLillo is emphasizing Keith's trauma which is not allowing him to become a complete human being and to find his identity. He is not able to find "satisfactory amends for his psychological loss" (Conte 576) and continues his fall.

The second motif of the falling man in the novel are the jumpers that Keith sees during his descent from the tower and on his way home. Just like many other people, Keith is not able to comprehend that those are people: "There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river"

(DeLillo 15). The scenes are DeLillo's way to honor all those who were forced to jump to their death when forced with the impossible choice – suffocate in the toxic smoke or jump to death. The number of people who jumped was not “acknowledged nor recorded in the official accounts of the 9/11 disaster” (Conte 577) because no one was able to comprehend the horrible truth. Since the novel is the literary memorial of 9/11, DeLillo did not want to leave such an important part of those events out, but instead of mentioning the photograph directly, he chose the “verbalization of the visual” (Cvek 349).

The third falling man in the novel is the performance artist Lianne saw. David Janiak is the street performer who in the days after the attacks kept recreating the position of a man from Drew's photograph. His performances caused the same reaction as the photograph itself. Lianne first saw one of his performances at Grand Central Station and his sudden dive over the crowd left her in surprise. The crowd is outraged by his performance, however Lianne seems to understand: “She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes” (DeLillo 102). Unlike the majority who keep turning their heads when it comes to the jumpers, and now Janiak's performance, Lianne thinks that in order to understand, one must look at the performance and analyze it. Only by facing the truth can “the awful terror of an impossible exchange of death for death in lieu of death for life be confronted. . . only thus is the ‘collective dread’ of victimization overcome” (Conte 578). She understands that what she is looking at is art that is not meant for the performer himself, but rather for the society to see. It is meant to shock the viewer and awake some kind of reaction. Janiak's performances are meant to emphasize “the deliberateness of the leaper's action” (Conte 579). Lianne, who is able to think about those performances critically, compares the position of the man in the photograph and Janiak in his performances with the Hanged Man card in Tarot. The Hanged Man “signifies a time of trial or meditation and evokes selflessness and sacrifice” (Conte 580) as well as invites one to change their perspective to be able to improve their situation. In a way, Janiak's performances have the same purpose since they force their viewers to face their traumas and want to inspire them to think about the events of 9/11, as well as about their meaning. By including these performances into his novel, DeLillo wanted to accentuate the role which art has during the times of high social trauma.



## Conclusion

In his novel *Falling Man*, DeLillo tried to describe post 9/11 society and all the problems that the attacks created among the American people: individual and national trauma and their respective identities. On an example of one man and his family, the author shows how America dealt with new fears while trying to overcome the trauma and reestablish themselves, both as individuals and as a nation.

DeLillo puts the main focus on Keith, the only character in the novel who experienced the attacks first-hand. After the attacks, Keith is unable to move forward. His first instinct is to go back to his family, even though he did not belong there even before the attacks. He is lost in time and space and unable to connect with his wife and son. First, he is lost walking away from the towers, however, symbolically he continues to walk aimlessly throughout the whole novel. Furthermore, witnessing the death of his close friend only deepened his trauma and his identity splits on Keith before the attacks and Keith after the attacks. That double identity is emphasized through his affair with Florence while he is still with Lianne. At the end of the novel, it seems that Keith did not improve his state of mind, but is rather still where he was at the beginning of the novel. One of the possible reasons lies in the fact that he was not ready to face his trauma but rather kept running away from it.

Lianne is traumatized by the events but also because she has to learn how to live with Keith again. She loses control of her life and her body. She feels like her safe space was invaded by the attacks and that leads to conflict with her neighbor. She also struggles with traumas from the past – her father's suicide and the fear of Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's results in the ultimate loss of meaning and identity – what is similar to the situation in America after 9/11. Lianne, therefore, struggles with her own identity. However, she faces her fears during the meetings with patients that suffer from Alzheimer's and once Keith is gone from her life, she is able to gain control of her mind, body, and life again. By facing the problems and her past, Lianne is, unlike Keith, able to move on.

DeLillo shows many struggles Americans had to deal with after the attacks. By showing how even the lives of children and their points of view had changed, he emphasizes the seriousness of the situation. However, with Martin's points of view, DeLillo also provides his readers with a critique of American society saying that in a way they were to blame for the attacks. Since Martin is not American and used to be a terrorist, he has a clear overview of the

situation. Therefore, he is able to conclude that the Americans were provoking the whole world with thinking that they are powerful and safe in their ivory towers.

Although *Falling Man* is a novel about the aftermath of 9/11, and through the character of Martin a great critique of American society, it also teaches one great life lesson. In order to be able to move on, one has to come to peace with what happened in the past. When one continues to run away like Keith, they will not be able to find answers and their past will continue to linger over them. In order to overcome the trauma and find lost identity again, one must face the traumas and fears, but also stop looking back constantly.

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