



Don DeLillo: *Mao II*
AP English Literature
Summer Reading 2023

“The future belongs to crowds.”



Andy Warhol's silkscreen paintings of Mao Zedong

AP English Literature Summer Reading Assignment

2023 - 2024

Students enrolled in AP English Literature for the 2023-2024 school year are required to actively read and complete a series of journal entries on the novel *Mao II* by Don DeLillo. This assignment will comprise a major portion of the first quarter grade. The journal will comprise two test grades, and a conventional test on the book will also be given the day of journal collection. Much of September will be devoted to study and discussion of *Mao II*, and it will continually be referenced throughout the year. Your efforts on this assignment will have substantial consequences, so please put in your strongest effort.

Below are some specifics about *Mao II* and the accompanying journals.

Mao II

Don DeLillo (1936—) was born and raised in an Italian-American neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City, the son of a coal miner and an ex-schoolteacher. After graduating from Fordham University, he worked for five years as a copywriter for an advertising agency, before quitting to pursue writing seriously in 1964. He published his first novel, *Americana* in 1971, and has written seventeen novels to date. His fiction is particularly focused on anxieties of modern life: his darkly humorous narratives explore issues such as terrorism, corporate corruption, artificial intelligence, suburban alienation, and the threats of environmental and nuclear annihilation.

Mao II, DeLillo's eleventh novel, opens with a mass wedding at Yankee Stadium, where 21-year old Karen Janney is married along with hundreds of others in a blessing ceremony of the Unification Church. We then are introduced to Bill Gray, a famous but reclusive literary novelist who agrees to be photographed by Brita, a photographer who has devoted her career to photographing artists and writers. (Her image of Andy Warhol, the famous artist responsible for a series of silkscreen paintings of Mao Zedong, hangs in a New York gallery.) When Bill is coerced by his editor to travel to Beirut and help negotiate the release of a fellow writer who has been kidnapped by terrorists, he is forced to reckon with how the traditional role of the writer has been supplanted by mass media, violence and groupthink. Published in 1991, *Mao II* eerily predicts cultural trends of the 21st century in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It is an unusual and complex short novel, but if you rise to its challenges you may find it to be a rich and memorable reading experience.

You are to complete five reflective journal entries while reading *Mao II*, one on each of the following readings:

- Journal Entry 1: Prologue ("At Yankee Stadium,"; Part I, chapters 1-3)
- Journal Entry 2: Part I, chapters 4-7
- Journal Entry 3: Part II, chapters 8-10
- Journal Entry 4: Part II, chapters 11-12
- Journal Entry 5: Part II, chapters 13-14; Epilogue ("Beirut")

Active Reading Strategies for *Mao II*

- Read something about DeLillo's life and work prior to reading. There currently is an interesting film narrated by him on YouTube called "A Don DeLillo Documentary"; it concerns both *Mao II* and his previous novel, *Libra*, about the assassination of President Kennedy, and will give you some idea of the tone and thematic concerns of his work.
- Read about some of the cultural and historical figures alluded to in *Mao II*: Sun Myong Moon and the Unification Church; Mao Zedong; Andy Warhol; Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan; Beirut and the Lebanese Civil War.
- Do not read SparkNotes or any other such materials with *Mao II*. I want you to have an original reading experience.
- Read with a pen or pencil in hand, making notes in the margins of the text when you are confused, amused, moved, or find some startling significance in a particular passage. Read wide-awake, actively and carefully: this isn't easy beach reading.

Specifics about the Journal Entries

- The journal entries are to be completed as you read *Mao II*, not afterwards. They are meant to help you read the novel actively.
- You may type or handwrite the journal. If you type it, please sensibly format and double-space; if you handwrite it, make sure it is written neatly.

- Label the journal entries accurately, so I know which chapter(s) you are referring to. (For example: the third entry should be labeled "Part II, Chapters 8-10.")
- The journal will be collected the second week of school and will comprise two test grades.
- Grammar and mechanics matter. I expect words to be spelled correctly, sentences properly punctuated, apostrophes properly used, etc.
- See the "Journal Entry Addendum" supplement about on the last pages of this document.

In Summary

Just to make it clear what you have to do, here's the summer reading assignment simplified as far as possible:

- Read *Mao II* and complete five accompanying journal entries while you are reading.

That's it...enjoy the summer!

Journal Entry Addendum

What constitutes a good journal entry? Simply put, I want the journals to be interesting, lively, well-written discussions that evince engagement with the text. There are various ways to accomplish that. Below is a list of what to do and not to do when writing journal entries.

DO NOT: Summarize the plot as an end in itself.

DO: Provide context for your insights about the readings by providing some plot specifics to clarify what part of the text you're referencing.

DO NOT: Pretend to love the book because you think that's what an English teacher wants to read; or, conversely, complain and blame whatever struggles you're having with the reading on what you imagine to be the author's ineptitude.

DO: Provide an honest and thoughtful reflection of the experience of reading the book; regardless of whether you're finding it a joy or a struggle, read and write with an open mind and the aim of deepening understanding and appreciation.

DO NOT: Get bogged down in endless specifics without connecting those specifics to any larger point, or write in broad generalizations without much in the way of specifics.

DO: Balance broad generalizations with specific illustrative detail.

DO NOT: Go off on tangents about life or your own experiences without a clear connection to the reading.

DO: Write germane tangents about life or yourself that relate clearly to the reading, if you feel it's appropriate and interesting; and make sure to make the connection to the book clear.

DO NOT: Stick quotes from the novel into the entry without regard for grammatical integrity or context.

DO: Weave direct quotes from the reading into your own writing, and make sure you elaborate on the significance of the quotation and properly explain the context.

DO NOT: Write the entry as one long block of text with no paragraphing, or—and this is even worse—randomly indent once in a while to provide the appearance of paragraphing.

DO: Use paragraphing as an organizational tool, to indicate a shift in topic.

DO NOT: Write mechanically, with every sentence the same length.

DO: Vary the sentence structure to help make your writing more readable.

DO NOT: Try to make the entries sound academic by using unnecessarily complex language.

DO: Write clearly, naturally, and with the aim of making authentic, sensible insights about the readings.

DO NOT: Use ChatGPT or any other AI software application for any of this. Writing is concentrated thinking, and having anyone or anything else do it for you instantly short-circuits any intellectual growth that should occur from the task.

DO: Write the entire journal yourself, using your own brain.

DO NOT: Write boring journal entries. I will be reading every word of these, and no reader wants wants to be bored.

DO: Write interesting, lively responses to the readings.

Please let me know if you have questions about the journal, or any questions about the AP Literature summer assignment.