

The dilemma of the postmodern writer as seen



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Dilemma of the Postmodern Writer; (In case all assumptions had not been thrown out) The core idea of modern nothingness is best portrayed in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* from *The New York Trilogy*. In the novel, the individual identity withdraws; the protagonist (shall he be called such) Daniel Quinn finds himself challenged by the inexplicable mysteries of his own analysis and identity. The main character divides, and here, New York is the acting catalyst in the progression.

Characters, be they human or other chief elements to the story line (i. e. the city streets) begin to melt into one another.

Eventually, the events taking place in the story are intermingled, actual importance is lost, and the meaning is completed by an untailed disposition. The story is incredibly experimental and perhaps the utmost example of Metafiction. *City of Glass* can be compared to Don DeLillo's *White Noise* in that both are considered postmodern fiction, and have some basic similarities (though not on the surface level. While *White Noise* is more related to the interdependence of characters and institutions, and Auster's story is related to the actual individual and his loss of importance, both portray an interpretation of society and culture, and both analyze the dilemma of the postmodern writer. *White Noise* consists of subversions of disaster stories, thrillers, and traditional American fiction.

Auster's story is a definitive archetype of the postmodern imagination, in that it evokes compulsions to reveal an order that may cause lack of resolve.

The irony in both *White Noise* and *City of Glass* is the basic lack of omniscient perception. Both embellish the incompetence of innate orders of

meaning through atypical postmodern recourse to a narrated unpredictability and existential possibility. One could say that the point of *City of Glass* is that there is no point. The point or lack thereof can be used to establish the degree to which assumptions in literature can be liberally implemented or not, it permits realistic outcomes (or consequences) on insignificant interactions.

The postulation of significance, where none exists is a presupposition malfunction. First, the verbal exchanges between the characters are habitually symbolized by the catastrophe of presupposition: the most significant being exemplified by Peter Stillman Jr. Though, Quinn himself begins with a typical, if not unadventurous view of his surrounding world, he undergoes a gradual loss of himself as subject and the world as object, confusing everything in between the self and the world. The story has a discursive quality, facilitating a resemblance between it and other works.

As a genre *City of Glass* may be confusing; it has qualities of a standard detective novel, though by the end of the story has twisted itself to portraying something more of a parody or, rather, something that is less of a distortion and more of a misrepresentation.

Auster uses linguistics to manipulate the story as well. “” No questions, please,” the young man said at last. “ Yes. No. Thank you.

” He paused for a moment. “ I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes.

That is not my real name. No.

Of course, my mind is not all it should be. But nothing can be done about that.

No. About that. No, no. Not anymore” (Auster, 1988: 15).

) Stillman Jr. begins the account of his life. Through the monologue Stillman is able to put a name to ideas or objects, though he seems to have no tangible realization of the existence or classic perception of their meanings. Stillman conveys importance not of literal words actually said or their conventional meaning, but what is implicated; ‘ I will tell you.

Or else I will not tell you’ (Auster, 1988: 15).

Quinn retreats from a meaningless world into his ‘ work’ (as William Wilson, writing for Max Work) into something more alive for him; “ In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant it has the potential to be so – which amounts to the same thing” (Auster, 1988: 8.) Quinn’s discernment of the strength of his individuality is represented with his correlation to Max Work. Work’s constancy is guaranteed, regardless of the fact that his immovability is interchangeably reliant on Quinn to produce his permanence.

Quinn finds his strength as individual through writing himself into the secure life of Max Work: “[Quinn] had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work ... It was not precisely that Quinn wanted to be Work, or even to be like him, but it reassured him to pretend to

be Work as he was writing his books. " (Auster, 1988: 9.) The story also plays with the concept of home.

Quinn is in a sense slowly moving away from his home, which ironically does not exist by the end of Quinn's journey.

Hiding in the alley across from the Stillman apartment, Quinn literally becomes homeless: " one of the inexplicable inhabitants" of the city who defies the detective's logic that accords to every subject a place of physical as well as ontological certainty. Operating under a false identity, Quinn continues to believe that his eventual situation is still just a game or illusion; he assumes that his home is still intact and waiting for him, along with his true ' identity. ' When Quinn finally does leave the alley he notices his reflection in the glass of a shop window. Yet, " he did not recognize the person he saw there as himself..

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He tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult" (Auster, 1988: 142-43). However, upon attempting to find his apartment, he discovers that, just as his former name and identity have moved beyond his grasp, his apartment as an anchor for his ' true' identity has vanished as well. Just as his former name and appearance have slipped from his grasp, the apartment that acted as a spatial anchor for his sense of identity has also vanished. At this moment he realizes, " He had come to the end of himself. He could feel it now, as though a great truth had finally dawned in him.

There was nothing left” (Auster, 1988: 149).

Quinn has no identity at all: his former self has been swallowed up as if it never existed. *City of Glass* can be compared to an abstract work of art in which the ‘idea’ is in the eye of the beholder. In Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, a description of an encounter between two characters abruptly changes into a statement directly addressing the reader: “One thing is immediately clear to you: namely that this book has nothing in common with the one you had begun” (Calvino 1981: 53), which brings the act of reading the book – something the narrator should have no knowledge of – into the book itself.

Two different people can read either (interchangeable) novel and come up with two different ideas as to what happened in the end.

Auster’s use of an unlimited narrator effectively involves the reader and prevents readers from just simply coming to the end to have it all explained, demanding analysis and imagination. Auster is calling for the reader to do work; he refuses to give in and make the ‘game’ easy.

He employs an unlimited narrator, though in a final twist (in case by this point in the novel all assumptions had not been thrown out) the narrator is revealed to not be omniscient but merely a character attempting to recover facts through his own detective findings. That character is exposed as being the sort of detective Quinn was attempting at being in the beginning of the story “his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable.

” Is all meaning lost?

The reader finds that there is no crime, no solution and by the end no hero. All the mystery is contained in Quinn's "desire to lose himself", his disappearance constituting a recapitulation of his initial search for the senior Stillman by the junior Stillman. "For every soul lost in this particular hell, there are several others locked inside madness-unable to exit to the world that stands at the threshold of their bodies. Even though they seem to be there, they cannot be counted as present," (Auster, 1988: 131.)