

Quinn's character in paul auster's city of glass



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Paul Auster has said that The New York Trilogy is centrally concerned with "the question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are." Use this remark as a point of departure for a discussion of the character Quinn - his presentation in the novel and his experience - in City of Glass.

In the City of Glass, Auster creates a sense of uncertainty around the identities of the different characters in the book. One does not really grasp who is who in the novel because of the complex and multiple layers of the story Auster creates. The City of Glass asks questions about identity and in this essay I will look at the protagonist (Quinn) and his search to understand himself and to discover his true identity which ultimately leads to his identity being changed with each new character role he takes on to forget his past self.

Daniel Quinn is a complicated character and our knowledge of him is limited because the narrator does not reveal much about him. Where he came from and who he was seem of little importance in the novel we are only told his age, that he was once married but his son and daughter are dead (a past which he seems to be running away from). He is writer of detective stories under the pseudonym of William Wilson (a name Quinn takes on to forget his past). William Wilson's character mirrors Auster's, the author, own life. Quinn creates his own character Max Work, a private eye narrator.

In his stories the protagonist Max becomes very real and moves away from merely being a fictitious character, subsequently causing Quinn himself to take on some of the characteristics of Max, thinking and behaving in a similar manner to him. Eventually Quinn "stopped thinking on himself as real." (Auster 10) So already Auster creates this sense of doubt about Quinn

and his true identity and eventually Quinn is consumed by the persona of Max Work and "the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent works presence in that world became. (Auster 10). Quinn runs away from his 'real' life because he finds some form of attraction in the world of being a fictitious detective. Quinn finds the role of a detective appealing because it puts him in the role of an observer, analyzing the world much like a reader of a novel, and in essence he forgets himself and his reality by doing so. Max work is essentially an escape from Quinn's life as a writer (William Wilson) and from his past life as the 'real Quinn'.

By becoming the character he created (Max work) Quinn embarks upon seeking the truth and reality, which in a way is what Quinn is trying to do in terms of discovering an identity. Quinn becomes so consumed in the life of Max Work and the idea of being a detective that when he receives a phone call intended for the private detective Paul Auster, he impersonates him and begins to focus on Peter Stillman. Peter is a young man who feels threatened by his father who had been let out of prison.

So now Quinn, under the name of Paul Auster, places himself onto another story, another reality through which of he can further delve into the life a 'real' detective. Quinn at this point has already taken upon three identities, each of which has served its purpose and been forgotten. The question of who is who now begins to become raveled in layers and doubles so the reader and the character himself is unsure of whom the real protagonist of the story is. Quinn becomes obsessed with Stillman senior and his interest in the man deepens as every day passes, "he had lived Stillman's life, walked at his place, seen what he had seen. Quinn becomes Stillman during the

case in a way and so another character shift seems to be inevitable. Peter Stillman junior resembles Quinn's deceased son (whose name was also Peter), Stillman junior had been locked up by his father for nine years in order to test whether 'God's language' would resurface (that is the language uncorrupted by the world, its origin during the time of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.) Roberta Rubenstein argues that Stillman junior is a representation of Quinn's childhood, isolated from the world with a sense of loneliness.

When the two men disappear it creates a sense of anxiety for Quinn, he longs to be 'non-existent' as well and eventually he morphs into a mad street walker, homeless and in the end crazy. Auster uses this dilapidation of Quinn to emphasize the conflict within the character and how his 'self forgetfulness' leads to his eventual downfall and leaves the question of who he is and who he is meant to be unanswered. Peter Stillman is a character used by Auster the author as a way to further explore the different identities in the book.

Stillman junior, after having being isolated from the world has no clear grasp on his own identity, much like Quinn. In a conversation with Quinn he says, "I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Peter Rabbit." Stillman junior is able to change his name to suit him much like Quinn has done throughout the book, and as seen in the quote Stillman loses the meaning of his name and loses his sense of identity. This quote shows how Auster is very obviously asking the question, who is who and are we who we think we are.

Stillman sums it up by saying, "I cannot say who I will be tomorrow. Each day is new, and each day I can be born again." The red notebook is the only

thing in the book that keeps Quinn's real name. He writes it in the book during the Stillman case for the first time in over five years and it is the only record or conception of himself that does not change. Quinn recognizes the importance of knowing who he is when he says, " most important of all: remember who I am supposed to be. " And he later echoes the words of Peter Stillman Junior when he says, " all I can say is this: my name is Paul Auster.

That is not my real name. " This shows that Quinn, like Stillman, is confused about his own identity. Because he is trying to be four people at once he loses the origin of his name and character, his true self. Therefore the question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are is not really answered in this book. Auster provides a multi layered and complex understanding of what identity is and how it is used. For Quinn, identity is used as a way of escape, perhaps from the past or from himself (the person he was and whom he grew tired of).

Although Quinn is the same person but under different names or aliases, he takes on different identities and makes them a part of his life which eventually leaves no definite answer to who the ' real' Quinn is.

Works cited

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