

Research Article

**“Every Man is the Author of his Own Life”: An Analysis of the Combination of “selves” in Paul Auster’s Select Novels**

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**Abstract**

All authors write on their own lives to write their books; to a greater or lesser degree, every novel is autobiographical. What is interesting, however, is how the work of the imagination intersects with reality. The Present paper examines Paul Auster’s relationship with the novels and his characters and observes how the author creates characters in his novels. It argues that theories of character in the novels will be deficient to the extent that characters are not conceptualised as motivated creations of the author. The influential approach of Paul Auster effectively excluded the point of view that the author is in favour of a direct relationship between the fictional work and characters, as an instance of the particular related to the universal. Auster’s autobiographical writings appear to constitute straightforward and authentic retelling of events from his life.

**Key Words:** Autobiography, postmodern, eponymous, interconnected, bildungsroman, metafiction.

**Introduction**

Most of the writers are perfectly satisfied with traditional literary models and happy to produce works they feel as beautiful, true and good. Auster wanted to write what to him is beautiful, true, and good, but he infested in inventing new ways to tell stories. Like an architect building a house with all the plumbing and writing espoused, he is fascinated by the artificiality of literature. When a reader opens the book of Paul Auster, he describes the text, knowing that it is not real world. It’s something else, it is an invention. Paul Auster explained about the text of the following lines:

We all know it’s a book; when we open it, we all know that is not the real world. It’s something else. It is an invention. I think that why I found it so interesting to put my own name in the first volume of Trilogy. The name is printed on the cover and then, well, wouldn’t it be curious to have the same name also inside the book – and the see what happens? I was playing with the split between what I call the “writing self” and the “biographical self”. (92)

In a discussion of Aliko Varvogli’s *The World That is The Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction*, a study of Auster’s novels, Varvogli argues that Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, “cross ontological boundaries by creating a character named Paul Auster in *City of Glass*, and by an authorial

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intrusion in *The Locked Room*” (4). Dennis Barone is fully aware of the mingling of history and fiction in Auster’s work. In his introduction to *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, Barone argues that, “Auster’s work always contains aspects of the author’s own life, references to other literature, and descriptions of actual historical figures events. This historiographic metafiction as Linda Hutcheon defines it.” (5)

According to Roland Barthes, that fetishizing of the author should have ended long ago. In his famous 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” he sentenced the author to “death” for criminally “limiting” interpretative thought. There, Barthes replaces the author with the “modern scripiter” whom he grants only a marginal existence: as being that abides only in the process of writing” (145). In this essay ‘What is an Author’, Foucault states, the fear of such a surfeit is one of the major reasons that authors were constructed in the first place: “The author is the figure which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (119). He states that we are afraid of plurality – personal, social, textual – and thus demand the circumscribing convention of the author: “The great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world” (118) can only be reduced and encircled by recourse to the author.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, explores the ways in which female authors, Such as Aphra Behn, had been largely suppressed and erased from literary history in the 1920. Woolf invents and imaginary character – Shakespeare’s sister – and constructs a life story, radically different from that of famous ‘brother.’ Woolf insists that the established patriarchy has contributed to this eradication of female authorship, and states that in her journey of self-discovery, she has reached one definitive conclusion: “All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point – a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the nature of fiction unsolved.” (60)

*The New York Trilogy* is always going to be attached with the name of Paul Auster. Here the writer is like a person in real world as normal human being and at the same time the writer who is living in the other world altogether. The two worlds are connected like real and imagined or textual world. During a conversation between Paul Auster and I.B. Siegmeldt, he asked Paul Auster who is the writer of *City of Glass*? Paul Auster replied to him that it is a third person. He continued that it’s not Quinn, it’s not Auster, it’s another character that is nameless.

In *City of Glass*, Paul Auster introduced the character Quinn who is thirty-five years old. He had been once married, he had been once as a father and whose wife and son are now dead. Quinn writes the books in the pseudonym William Wilson; “To be precise, we know that he writes mystery novels. These works were written under the name of William Wilson.” (1) The protagonist Quinn has written many books of poetry, plays, critical essays and number of translations. Quinn’s family members died, so he could not stay with his place. So he changed his name as William Wilson. Quinn continuously, writing books after the death of his wife and son. He could not control to stop writing. Then he began to write because writing only recovers of his wife and son from death. He is interested to write mystery novels as it seemed a reasonable solution to him. Quinn wants to live an independent life and treated himself with a difference.

*City of Glass* is an appropriation of detective genre and exhibits many of the classic qualities of postmodern fiction. These include an indefinite and ironic relationship between characters and the author; an ambiguous narrative voice, the blurring of fact and fiction, and doppelgangers as a central theme. As the novel’s protagonist Quinn is a writer with the literary pseudonym William Wilson, Auster alludes to Edgar Allan Poe’s eponymous story that deals with duality. Name is very important to the writer because Paul Auster mentioned about British

Poet John Milton earlier, and he read extensively about biblical notions of language. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton gave the protagonist's name as Adam. Adam is not aware of the significance of the name given by God to him. It was crucial especially the idea of Adam naming all the plants and animals and objects in the world. This is the human enterprise; this is what God gives man as his central task to name the world. Adam doesn't know his name is the important of the world. He gave the name to all of things in the word. And so words and things were the same, interconnected.

*City of Glass* supplies a lot of hints that it is in fact a book about Auster. Larry McCaffery and Sinda Greogory asked Paul Auster; "Was there any particular reason why you chose to tease the audience with hints of that *City of Glass* is a disguised autobiography?" (14) Paul Auster replied:

I think it stemmed from a desire to implicate myself in the machinery of the book. I don't mean my autobiographical self, I mean my author self, that mysterious other who lives inside me and puts my name on the covers of books. What I was hoping to do, in effect, was to take my name of the cover and put inside the story. (14)

*City of Glass* is the emotional content of the life book. It is not philosophical puzzle. It is a real story here and Quinn is a real character a man with a body and life. The question of the child in *City of Glass* is essential, and the loss of Quinn's son resonates throughout the story. We must also think about the role of the characters in this novel. It's no accident that doing the long passage when Quinn walked around New York and sits down to record his observations, he is mostly writing about the broken down and out people on the streets.

*Ghosts* is a fable of representation, it is a more direct engagement with the deductive novel the either of the other two parts of Trilogy. This novel describes about the name of the characters because Paul Auster decided to give the name of the characters in this novel like X, Y, and Z but finally he gave the name by the colours like, Green, White, Black, Brown and Blue. They are all real names, but they are grouped artificially. We see them as colours, and they cease to refer to human beings but become indications of something else. We can read this as a comment of the defeat of Stillman's theory, and questions of language raised in *City of Glass* are opened again here in *Ghosts*.

Paul Auster is fascinated by the question of colour, philosophically, visually, emotionally, words cannot convey colour. He puts the following sentence. "I can't describe to a blind person what red is. Colour must be experienced. You only know what are when you see. In the same way, you only know how human being by interacting with that person. It is kind of tautology, but that's what me else there strange names." (105)

Auster addresses a similar topic in *The Locked Room*, the final instalment of *The New York Trilogy*. The narrator of *The Locked Room* is a writer, who inherits a readymade family with his marriage to Sophie Fanshawe. Sophie's former husband, the elusive Fanshawe on the other hand, rejects his family and literary aspirations. As the Narrator attempts to locate, and subsequently, annihilate Fanshawe, Auster highlights the process involved in the certain of a fictional character, and author's eventual and necessary desire to reclaim his own independent life. The narrator is the substitute for Auster, and it is the destruction of Fanshawe's notebook that ensures *The Locked Room*, as well as the other instalments of trilogy can be delineated to a coherent and definitive conclusion.

As *The Locked Room* opens, its unnamed narrator appears to be an isolated and ostracized individual, with no immediate emotional attachments. Auster here reiterates the

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sentiment expressed in *Ghosts*, and intimates that a writer does not possess a life of his or her own. The narrator of *The Locked Room* is a writer who does not write fiction, but is a literary critic, and his scathing regard for his career choice seems related to Auster’s own assertion that criticism is detrimental to the medium of literature as a whole. The narrator notes his successes in the field of literary criticism, but insists that he has achieved relatively little in terms of authorial output. As such, the narrator is distanced from his sense of selfhood and believes that he has ultimately failed as writer. Therefore, his critical writings are relegated to an inferior and inconsequential position: “The world saw me as a bright young fellow, a new critic on the rise, but inside myself I felt old, already used up. What I had done so far amounted to a mere fraction of nothing at all. It was so much dust, and the slightest wind would blow it away.” (84)

*Moon Palace* is the story of three male generations, from son to father to grandfather, namely Marco Stanley Fogg, Solomon, and Thomas Effing. Notably, there is an atavistic similarity of physique between the grandson and his grandfather. In *Moon Palace* the narrator Marco Stanley Fogg detailed his youthful experiences from his childhood. Although Fogg is distanced from his selfhood, he discovers that his story eerily mirrors that of his father Solomon Barber and his grandfather, Thomas Effing.

*Moon Palace* takes us on an epic journey through the inner and outer landscape of young Marco Fogg. He nearly perishes in central park, he loses the woman he loves, and he walks across America and becomes a man. In the process, he discovers both his father and grandfather: Solomon Barber, the obese history professor who never recovered from his love for Marco’s mother, and the rambunctious old man in the wheelchair, Thomas Effing, whose turbulent life is told in the biography, Marco is hired to write. It’s quite a tour de force combining elements from the bildungsroman, the American road novel, metafiction, and the frontier novel in one dense and complex book.

*Moon Palace* chronicles the youthful, often outlandish adventures of narrator-protagonist, Marco Stanley Fogg. He writes from a first person narrative perspective, as *Moon Palace* is his autobiography. Fogg’s fictional narrative is interspersed with the factual detail from Auster’s life. Therefore, *Moon Palace* becomes both Fogg’s autobiography, as well as a version of the Auster story. As Auster is involved in the process of life writing, this fictional narrative adheres to the tenets of postmodern autobiography. Auster refers to his body of writing to date, and states: “If all these books were put together in one volume, they would form the book of my life so far, a multi-faceted picture of who I am” (296). As Auster writes from a personal or autobiographical perspective, his writings fall within the remit of the sentiment expressed in *Moon Palace* by Fogg’s existential uncle, Victor Fogg, “Every man is the author of his own life” (7).

Here Paul Auster mentioned about the novel that sounds autobiographical, but it is not. Almost nothing comes from his own life. Just a few incidental details and even those are utterly transformed. Uncle Victor gives to Marco totally 1,492 books. In Paul Auster’s conversation with I.B. Siegfumelt, it is evident which follows as:

The clearly refers to the books my uncle left behind in our house. You know that story. When he went to live in Italy, his library was stored in our attic and then, one day my mother and I took the books downstairs and put them on shelves. Suddenly, I had library! My parents didn’t read, but I did, by then I had become a passionate reader, and it was a tremendous resource to have those books in the house. Curiously, when I wrote about the books in *Moon Palace*, I wasn’t

thinking about my uncle at all. It only occurred to me later that fact in fact had been the inspiration for the episode. (128)

Paul Auster starts all of his books with an idea about the story, often a vague idea, and then he inches his way forward – guided by intuition and gut feeling. This book however needed a plan. Auster knew how the progression was going to be. The crucial thing for any narrative is to present the information in the right order. Here all the elements are linked, and so it becomes imperative to think about sequence. He wanted the entire story in the first paragraph and then has the rest of the book unpack those opening lines:

Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets. If not for a girl named Kitty Wu, I probably would have starved to death. From then on, strange things happened to me. I took the job with the old man in the wheelchair. I found out who my father was. I walked across the desert from Utah to California. That was long time ago, of course, but I remember those days well, I remember them as the beginning of my life. (1)

This story is mostly an evaluation of Marco's life. It is a part of the experience of reading, a physical experience as well as mental and an emotional one. The reader responds physically to what's on the page. He hears the words in his mind, meanings are produced, and images are formed. They are generated by the words that go into his head. Then something starts happening to the readers.

Both Effing and Marco learn to embrace blanks, each in his own way and with very different outcomes, Marco discovers that, "the more air left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own; to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind travelling toward the thing I was describing for him" (123). This is important, because it allows the reader to become actively involved in the process of creation.

The author discovered himself. The more he wrote, the more he understood that what reader left out is just as important as what he put in. In Auster's experience as a reader, he has always found it most pleasurable when the author writes in such a way that it becomes fully engaged. In other words, not everything should be told. There must be room for the reader to fill in the blanks. It's more stimulating. In this way, the book is a collaboration between the writer and the reader, and in a sense, every book is a different book for every person who reads it. The readers bring his past, his own characters, and his own story to whatever text they read. There are writers who overwhelm readers with too many words. There's not enough space.

This is a valuable lesson of representation Marco learns as he struggles to describe everyday things to Effing. Thomas Effing retells his story in an authentic manner, comments upon a number of factual individuals, including the painter and Thomas A. Edison. His largely unflattering descriptions of these individuals are his opinions, rather than those of either his grandson, or indeed of the author, Paul Auster.

In *Moon Palace* the three characters are portrayed as writers. Thomas Effing, Soloman Borber and Marco Fogg have written books and stories etc., One day Fogg finds three books lying in his bed. These books have been written by Soloman Barber. Thomas Effing advised Fogg to read the three books. He noticed all the three books published in various different presses: "Bishop Berkerly and the Indians" (1947), "The Lost colony of Roanke" (1955) and "The American Wilderness" (1963). Fogg reads all the books of Soloman Barber and appreciate the author. He completed his Ph.D. Degree in 1944. Effing questioned about these books to

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Fogg: “Why did you think of the books?”(188). Fogg, replied to him that it is admirable, well written, tightly argued and filled with information and surprised him.

*The Music of Chance* may resemble a fairy-tale, as usual Auster borrows from three genres as well, only to subvert them and frustrate the reader’s expectations. Nashe starts out as the main character as a road narrative and, Auster continues to explore, and explode, the cherished myths attached to the American dream, and his protagonist experiences what he perceives as total liberty and self-sufficiency; his travels become not so much journeys of self-discovery as assertions of his individuality.

*The Music of Chance* recounts the strange story of lonely fireman’s quest of personal integrity. When Nashe inherits a large sum of money, he divests himself completely over to the freedom of the road until he meets the gambler Jack Pozzi. They lose everything to a pair of dangerously eccentric millionaires and end up detained at the end of a maze carting the stones from an ancient Irish castle across a meadow to build a wall that has no function whatsoever. Auster connect with this novel *The Music of Chance* to his previous novel *Moon Palace*. Once Auster opined:

*The Music of Chance* was inspired by the end of the previous book, *Moon Palace*. Marco is driving out west in a red car, the car is stolen and he makes the rest of the trips to the coast on foot. After I finished the novel, I said to myself, “I want to get back into the red car.” So, the next book begins with a man driving around in a red car, in this case a red saab. (146)

Nashe’s journey in *The Music of Chance* starts from fairly radical divestment through unrestrained freedom to bondage. Auster describes Nashe’s journey as a slow process of moral awakening. When he was free to decide whatever he wanted, his life was empty. He had abdicated all his connection to other people: he reluctantly left his daughter behind and neglected his relationship with his girlfriend, Fiona. He was living what one might call life of selfishness and self-indulgence. Essentially an absurd life, it’s not until he’s finally constrained and put in a position of bondage, as he puts it, that he’s forced to stop running away from himself and take responsibility for someone else. In this interaction with the other, he grows into a different kind of human being, and the period in the meadow is fundamental for this development.

*The Book of Illusions*, Auster’s eighth work of fiction was published in 2002. The protagonist David Zimmer decides to write a book about the less known comedian Hector Mann after losing his family in a plane crash. This may indicate that a character which plays only a subordinate role in one story is doubtlessly the main character of some other. The basic outline is very similar to the rest of Auster’s novels, but the western and Midwestern setting gives it a different colouring and set of reference. The story is told in first person by David Zimmer. He lost his wife and two sons in a tragic car crash. Left high amount from the insurance settlement, and gets a job as an English Professor at a Vermont College and becomes reclusive alcoholic.

*The Book of Illusion* can be read as study of how human beings cope with tragedy. Auster captures the reader’s attention from the very first line of the book: “Everyone thought he was dead” (1). So, there’s death accompanied by the possibility of return, and intimate relationship between the narrator and reader is established from the very beginning, one that triggers expectation and suspense. The most important sentence in a book is first sentence. Everything follows from it. The first word has to stop the reader in his tracks and tell him that he is in a different place now. During Auster’s conversation with I.B. Siegmundfeldt, he says about the novel *The Book of Illusions*:

I wrote *The Book of Illusions*, Hector Mann had already popped into my head. I'd been thinking about him for a long time. Then he was – the moustache, the white suit, the light-footed dance steps – the 'torques pavaues' and all his movements before the camera. I didn't quite know what to do with him. At one point, I thought I would write a series of short stories, each one a description of another make-believe film comedy. That was how *The Book of Illusion* began. (204)

Auster brings the protagonist David Zimmer from the previous novel *Moon Palace* to *The Book of Illusion*. In *Moon Palace* David Zimmer is a minor character. He starts out as poet and student of literature, but towards the end of the book, when Fogg runs into him years later, Zimmer has changed the course and is studying about film.

*Oracle Night* is not just the story about the marriage of an ailing writer, Sidney Orr, who is struggling to get back on his feet both physically and mentally. It's also a book about the process, the labour and the mystery of writing. Orr struggles to complete his haunting narrative of Nick Bowen, who, one day, for reasons that are not entirely clear, decides to divest himself of his former life and ends up trapped in an underground bomb shelter that servers, strangely, as Holocaust archive. We're not always sure whether we're inside or outside Orr's mind.

Paul Auster developed *Oracle Night* very slowly. He started writing something about an enchanted notebook – a book you could enter and actually walk around in – a strange little poetic text that never amounted to anything and that is topped working on after ten or fifteen pages. Paul Auster struggles to write this novel, because he started this book in 1982. He couldn't complete after finishing *Timbuktu* in 1998. Then he started *Oracle Night* and stopped with in twenty pages only. After that Auster completed another novel *The Book of Illusion*. After three years he didn't start this novel *Oracle Night*. Finally he has written seven different endings until, finally, he found what he was looking for.

### Conclusion

The complicated relationship between the author and the character, between text and voice, leads in trilogy to his inconclusive endings. *The New York Trilogy* ends with the disappearance but not the death of the writer and Fanshwe in *The Locked Room*. Paul Auster would not be displeased with ten key words; after all, he has remarked that all his books are really the same book, "the story of my obsessions... the saga of things that haunt me" (285). Although his novels display a remarkable diversity concerning tells, there are certain themes that inform his main ideas. Themes are important as much for what they exclude as for what they include, and throughout Auster's writing. In *City of Glass*, Quinn leaves his apartment and goes to live in a dustbin, the better to watch the man he is supposed to protect; as he has to keep each twenty-four hours a day, he learns to live on the minimum amount of food, barely keeping himself alive. Once Paul Auster says about the connection between Nashe in *The Music of Chance* and Quinn in *City of Glass*, both cases have constitutive phase of aimless movement. Quinn walks, Nashe drives, yes, but the impulse is the same. *City of Glass*, *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* of the windfall or inheritance that creates a suspension of the daily routine for the main character, followed by a gradual dissipation of the money until the character is left with nothing. Auster's suggestion of various postmodern literary devices continues to be a staple of his ongoing literary project. For instance, in *Oracle Nights*, the protagonist Sidney Orr, is a novelist who improbably rescued from a near death situation Orr inadvertently discovers a notebook and embarks fought process of composition.

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