

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316348255>

# AN ANALYSIS OF CITY OF GLASS BY PAUL AUSTER IN TERMS OF POSTMODERNISM

Article · January 2017

DOI: 10.18298/ijlet.1659

---

CITATIONS

0

READS

18,012

1 author:



[Mehmet Cem Odacıoğlu](#)

Bartın University

41 PUBLICATIONS 33 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Localization [View project](#)



emotional intelligence [View project](#)



Received	Reviewed	Published	Doi Number
17.01.2017	16.02.2017	24.04.2017	10.18298/ijlet.1659

---

**AN ANALYSIS OF CITY OF GLASS BY PAUL AUSTER FROM A  
POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

---

*Mehmet Cem ODACIOĞLU<sup>2</sup> & Chek Kim LOI<sup>3</sup> & Fadime ÇOBAN<sup>4</sup>*

---

**ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes *City of Glass*, a postmodernist detective novella (or anti-detective) of the *New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster in terms of postmodernist elements and techniques such as metafiction, parody, intertextuality, irony. In doing so, some information about Auster's life and the plot of the work are also offered to the reader to make the analysis more concrete. Last but not least, this study is also thought to be useful for students enrolled in English Language and Literary Departments for them to understand the movement of postmodernism.

**Key Words:** *City of Class*, postmodernist detective fiction, anti-detective, metafiction, parody, irony, intertextuality, pastiche.

---

**1.Short Biography of Paul Auster**

Paul Auster is an American-Jewish essayist, novelist, translator, poet, screenwriter and memoirist, who was born in Newark, New Jersey on February 3, 1947. Auster lived in a middle class family and spent some of his childhood in the Newark suburbs of South Orange and Maplewood. However, in 1959, his family moved into a large Tudor house. Auster's uncle, Allen Mandelbaum was a translator and left his books for him to read there when he decided to make a journey to Europe. Auster read all of these books which encouraged him to be interested in writing and in literature. As his uncle did, Auster went to Europe as soon as he graduated from high school in Maplewood. He visited Italy, Spain, Paris and also Dublin since he is a fan reader of James Joyce. When he came back to America, he attended Columbia University. However, Auster could not find what he had expected there. He, therefore, went to France and lived there for four years. Then, he returned to New York. From 1974, he has published poems, essays, novels, screenplays and translations. As soon as he released four volumes of poetry, he wrote his first novel entitled *Squeeze Play* in 1982. After gaining a reputation, Auster published other novels including *Moon Palace*

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a research paper in English Culture and Literature course at Atılım University

<sup>2</sup> Dr., Bartın University, Faculty of Letters, Dept. of Translation Studies, cemodacioglu@bartin.edu.tr

<sup>3</sup> Dr., Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup> Res. Assist., Sakarya University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Dept. of Translation Studies, fcoban@sakarya.edu.tr

---

(1989), *The Music of Chance* (1991), *Leviathan* (1992), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), *Timbuktu* (1999), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), *Oracle Night* (2003), *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007), *Man in the Dark* (2008) and *Invisible* (2009). Besides, he wrote *New York Trilogy* comprising *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *the Locked Room* (1986), which are labelled as anti detective novellas. Thanks to *New York Trilogy*, he could advance in his literary career. Furthermore, he wrote screenplays such as *Smoke* (1995), *Blue in the Face* (1995), and *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998) and he edited *True Tales of American Life*<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. The Plot of *City of Glass*<sup>6</sup>

The first volume of *New York Trilogy*, *City of Glass* is the story of Daniel Quinn, who lives in an apartment in New York and has isolated himself from the society. He is a former poet and now a writer of detective fiction under the pseudonym, William Wilson. He is thirty five years old and lost his wife and son years ago. One day, someone dials his phone number and asks for Paul Auster, a private detective. Quinn says that he is not Paul Auster and hangs up the phone. However, he thinks later that he writes detective fiction and the case which he will be hired to resolve may be an opportunity for him to play the detective role. When he picks up the receiver next time, he, therefore, says he is Paul Auster by masquerading his real identity and takes the case.

His mission is stated by Peter and Virginia Stillmans to protect them from Peter's father, whose first name is also Peter. Virginia Stillman says to Quinn that Peter's father, Stillman wrote a thesis about sixteenth and seventeenth century theological interpretations of the New World, took a job in the religion department at Columbia as a professor and Peter's mother died due to an unknown reason. She also says that Peter became mad because his father locked him in a dark room in their apartment for nine years to apply some language experiments on him and thereby to understand whether he would forget English and learn the language of the God. Later, a fire broke out and Peter was found in the dark room. As a result, Stillman was brought to trial and sent into a jail while Peter was put into a hospital for therapy.

Stillman is free after a long period of time and the couple is worried since he might attempt to kill his son. In order to prevent this, Quinn starts a thorough research and investigates similar events in history, that is, language experiments carried out upon children, and also random cases regarding the matter. For more clues, he reads the dissertation written by Stillman. Then, according to the information given by Virginia Stillman, he goes to the Grand Central to wait for him. The Grand Central is very crowded and Quinn watches people. He suddenly has the first sight of Stillman as he looks like the same as in the picture given to him by Peter's wife. However, he also sees another man looking like the same as Stillman. He is confused but decides to follow the first Stillman

---

<sup>5</sup> see also <http://www.stuartpilkington.co.uk/paulauster/manuelpollak.htm>, Atwood, 2003; Mckean, 2010; Auster 1987; 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Also see Mckean, 2010.

without knowing for certain. He starts following him in New York Streets and records on his red notebook what the old man is doing. He spends his days only writing Stillman's activities and he is now in a tendency to think that this old man will not harm his son because what he actually has found out is Stillman's wish to build a new Tower of Babel so as to form a new language.

One day, Quinn decides to meet Stillman. In the first meeting, he introduces himself not as Paul Auster but Daniel Quinn. Stillman welcomes him and starts talking about the language barrier among people since words no longer correspond to the world. He also says that he has focused on inventing a new language by renaming the things. In the second meeting, Stillman seems to forget Quinn. Therefore, Quinn says he is Henry Dark, one of the characters invented by Stillman to use in his dissertation. In the course of the conversation, the old man explains that he created this character as a reference to Humpty Dumpty, especially to his initials, and goes on to assert that Humpty Dumpty is a philosopher of language. In the third meeting, Quinn, however, introduces himself as Peter Stillman. Stillman thinks he might be his son and thereby gives advice to him.

Quinn is very confused because Stillman does not recognize him in each meeting. He thinks that the old man may be deceiving him. While the uncertainty in his mind is going on, he loses track of Stillman and therefore starts feeling helpless. In order to resolve the problem, he decides to talk to the real detective, Paul Auster for his help. He searches for the Auster Detective Agency in the yellow and white pages. In the white pages, he finds someone whose name is Paul Auster and learns his address. He goes there and meets him. However, he is not the man he looks for since the Paul Auster he has found is a writer.

Helpless Quinn decides to warn Peter and Virginia Stillman regarding the matter. He dials Stillmans' number a few times but the line is busy. Therefore, he goes to their apartment and starts waiting for Peter's father to come. He thinks that Peter and Virginia Stillman do not go outside from their apartment for security. He waits for months though nothing happens. His physical appearance changes and he consumes all of his money and energy. At this point, he understands that he cannot stand it anymore and goes to his apartment to see that it is already rented to strangers. Then, he goes to Stillmans' apartment again and finds the front door unlocked. He realizes that the floor is empty and starts writing on his red notebook in a desperate mood. When he is unceasingly in the writing process, he starts to see hallucinations. At the end of the novel, he disappears with no detailed explanation due to the limit of the red notebook, the events of which are fictionalized again. As for the case, it is over since father Stillman has committed suicide. Yet, nobody knows what has happened to Peter and Virginia Stillmans or where they are.

### **3. Postmodernist Analysis of *City of Glass***

There are many postmodernist techniques and elements in *City of Glass*. The first technique we investigated in this direction is "metafiction". Metafiction can be regarded as "fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or

departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques" (<http://www.novel-writing-help.com/metafiction.html>).

In *City of Glass*, the author turns himself into one of the characters bearing the same name, which is metafiction. As a critic, we understand that the author does it on purpose and self consciously to play with the meaning and also for the reader to question the relationship between fiction and reality:

'Hello?' said the voice again.  
 'I'm listening,' said Quinn. 'Who is this?'  
 'Is this **Paul Auster**?' asked the voice. 'I would like to speak to **Mr. Auster**.'  
 'There is no one here by that name.'  
 '**Paul Auster**. Of the **Auster** Detective Agency' (*City of Glass*, chapter I, 7).

Quinn publishes his first detective novel under the name *Suicide Squeeze*, which has actually a similar name to the author's first novel entitled *Squeeze Play* published in 1982:

She was, however, reading a book, a paperback with a lurid cover, and Quinn leaned over so slightly to his right to catch a glimpse of the title. Against all his expectations, it was a book he himself had written- *Suicide Squeeze* by William Wilson, the first of the Max Work novels (*City of Glass*, Chapter 7, 52-53).

In this quotation, the author mixes the reality and fiction by associating Quinn with himself by applying metafiction. In doing so, he actually mirrors his inner life with the characterization of Quinn as his alter ego:

'Do you have name?'  
 'I'm sorry. Of course I do. Quinn.'  
 'Quinn what.'  
 'Daniel Quinn.'

The name seemed to suggest something to Auster, and he paused for a moment abstractedly, as if searching through his memory. 'Quinn', he muttered to himself. 'I know that name from somewhere'. He went silent again, straining harder to dredge up the answer. 'You aren't a poet, are you?' (*City of Glass*, Chapter 10, 93).

This dialogue is obviously between Auster and Quinn and in the course of the conversation, Auster asks Quinn whether he is a poet or not. It should here be underlined that the author also writes poems in real life. Then, he has created Quinn by mixing the reality and fiction, which is metafiction.

Another postmodernist technique in the novella, “intertextuality” means that all texts refer to other texts and derive meaning from an understanding of the discursive environment in which those prior texts are produced (Hutcheon, 1998: 126). This technique is frequently applied in the postmodernist literature. In *City of Glass*, there are lots of references to other texts. Quinn writes under the pseudonym, William Wilson. *William Wilson* is actually a short story by Poe. In addition, Marco Polo in Chapter I, *Don Quixote* by Cervantes in Chapter 10, Humpty Dumpty in Chapter 9 are some of the examples of intertextuality in the novella. Especially, the reference to *Don Quixote* is a good example of intertextuality:

'It's quite simple. Cervantes, if you remember, goes to great lengths to convince his reader that he is not the author. The book, he says, was written in Arabic by Cid Hamete Benengeli. Cervantes describes how he discovered the manuscript by chance one day in the market at Toledo. He hires someone to translate it for him into Spanish, and thereafter he presents himself as no more than the editor of the translation. In fact, he cannot even vouch for the accuracy of the translation itself. ' (*City of Glass*, Chapter 10, 97-98)

It is argued in *Don Quixote* that the novel was not written by Cervantes but by Cid Hamete Benengeli. As the fictional Auster states, Benengeli is Don Quixote himself and his friends, barber and priest put all their adventures with him into a proper literary style in Spanish, then hire Simon Carasco to translate the whole story into Arabic. Don Quixote, however, masquerades himself as Benengeli and translates his own experiences into Spanish again. Cervantes is therefore only the editor of the book. Furthermore, according to Sancho Paza, barber and priest, Don Quixote is mad and they therefore try to cure his madness by participating in his adventures. However, according to the fictional Auster, this is actually not the case since Don Quixote pretends to be mad so as to create his own story.

“The chance factor” is also an important postmodernism trait. According to Martin, Auster uses the chance factor by connotating the possibility of unexpected and random incidents which may happen at any particular time regardless of individual circumstances or location and any following situations due to the original action (2008: 36). As Auster also puts it, life revolves around events led by chance or destiny (see Auster)<sup>7</sup>. The beginning of the novella is a good example of the use of the chance factor:

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance (*City of Glass*, Chapter I, 3).

---

<sup>7</sup> Auster 1987; 1992.

---

As it is clear in this quotation, Quinn is dialed by someone to ask for Paul Auster, a private detective. This coincidental call actually encourages him to play a detective role since he is a writer of detective fiction and therefore takes his chance by masquerading his identity.

Directly behind Stillman, heavying into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's (*City of Glass*, Chapter 7, 55-56).

As clear in this quotation, at the Grand Central, Quinn sees another man who is the exact copy of the old man he investigates. It would be rare to see such a scene in the regular flow of life. He is, therefore, confused and makes a choice between them by taking his chance. At this point, it would also be appropriate to ask such a question: "What might have happened if Quinn had followed the other one?". The reply to this question may also be related to the chance factor.

Another postmodernist concept that we can find in the study is "irony". Irony is predominantly used in postmodernist texts. As defined by Nicol, irony is a non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant either deliberately or unwittingly (2009: 13). The end of the novella is a good example for the irony applied by the author. Detectives are generally hired to resolve a case or to find criminals. Quinn, however, fails to unravel the case but gets lost in the last page of the novella and identity or existential crisis occurs accordingly. It would be ironical for a detective to lose himself when investigating a case under normal conditions. In addition to this, Quinn is somehow playing a detective role. However, he learns what happened to Stillman from Auster. It is ironical as well.

There is also parody in *City of Glass*. As a postmodern technique, parody is defined by Jameson as "deviations from a particular norm which then reasserts itself through the systematic mimicry of their willful eccentricities" (1991: 16). It should be noted that parody is different from pastiche. Parody is transformational in its relationship to other texts whereas pastiche is imitative (Hutcheon, 1998: 38). Although *City of Glass* seems to have some features of the detective novel, it is indeed an anti-detective novella. This can be proved if the last page is considered carefully:

As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now. I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations. The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand. As for Auster, I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout. If our friendship has ended, he has only himself to blame. As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck (*City of Glass*, Chapter 13,133).

Generally, detective novels end with a resolution. However, the end of *City of Glass* instead brings confusion among readers because Quinn, who is the hero of the novella disappears and no crime is perpetrated. Then, it can be asserted that the conventional norms of detective stories are deconstructed by the author in his piece through the use of parody, which is similarly confirmed in Barone's book titled *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (1995: 84). Rubenstein also claims that "the contemporary novelist Paul Auster uses the framework of the detective story but with a postmodern twist and as a result the search loops back to the identity not of the murderer but of the detective himself and irresolution replaces resolution" (2008: 245). Furthermore, the last page is told by a first person narrator though the other pages are written in third person. This is probably done to prove that *City of Glass* is narrated by someone else other than the author so as to maintain the fictionality as Cervantes did in *Don Quixote*.

In this regard, it should be said that *City of Glass* is the parody of *Don Quixote*. The narrator also says that he/she has refrained from any interpretations when he/she is putting what is written in the red notebook into words again. Then, he/she only narrates the events as far as the red notebook allows. It therefore ends with uncertainties. In other words, all of the pursuits are proved to be in vain in the end due to the fact that they do not bring nothing new but only "me watching you watching me watching you, and on to infinity" (Walker, 2002: 405). The reader also does not know where Quinn is now, what has happened to him or whether he has died or not. *City of Glass* then pushes him/her to ask questions and in order to reply these questions, they are forced to read the whole text paranoidly or in a skeptical way and may also be confused about the narrator's identity, whether he is the author himself or someone else if they consider that the red notebook only contains half of the story.

From the beginning to the end, Quinn does not write with his real name. He always keeps it secret except for his first meeting with Stillman and the fictional Auster in which he introduces himself as Quinn. As a solipsist, he mostly identifies himself as William Wilson, Max Work, a detective named Auster and even Henry Dark, all of which lead to exhaustion, silence, identity problem and disappearance in the end.

In postmodernist works, life is questioned as there is always an incredulity towards it. In the novella, Auster uses this aspect of postmodernism:

'For thirteen years the father was away. His name is Peter Stillman too. Strange, is it not? That two people can have the same name? I do not know if that is his real name. But I do not think he is me. We are both Peter Stillman. But Peter Stillman is not my real name. So perhaps I am not Peter Stillman, after all.' (*City of Glass*, Chapter 2, 18).

What is skeptical in this quotation is that Peter questions his name due to his captivity in a dark room for nine years by his father. Due to this, he even does not rely on Quinn who he thinks is a detective.



Besides, when Quinn first meets Peter's father, they have a conversation about the language and Stillman says in the course of his speech:

'When I say the word "umbrella", you see the object in your mind. You see a kind of stick, with collapsible metal spokes on top that form an armature for a waterproof material which, when opened, will protect you from the rain. This last detail is important. Not only is an umbrella a thing, it is a thing that performs a function- in other words, expresses the will of man. When you stop to think of it, every object is similar to the umbrella, in that it serves a function. A pencil is for writing, a shoe is for wearing, a car is for driving. Now my question is this. What happens when a thing no longer performs its function? Is it still the thing, or has it become something else? When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is it the umbrella still an umbrella?' (*City of Glass*, chapter 9, 77)

Peter's father is crazily obsessed with inventing a new language because he thinks that people have lost their sense of purpose and in parallel the language to speak of it. He also believes that words do not correspond to the universe any more and they thus need changing. So, he questions the language by using Henry Dark and Humpty Dumpty to show the impossibility of the communication. According to Söderlind, Humpty Dumpty actually represents roundness and fragility but his status as a philosopher of language is more significant (2011: 1). This quotation is also important in terms of Saussure's "signifier" and "signified" which both constitute the sign. "Signifier" implies the pointing finger, the word, the sound image whereas "signified" brings to mind the concept, meaning or the thing indicated by the signifier (see [http://changingminds.org/explanations/critical\\_theory/concepts/signifier\\_signified.htm](http://changingminds.org/explanations/critical_theory/concepts/signifier_signified.htm)). Stillman questions the function of the word "umbrella" and clearly implies that a broken umbrella is nothing but a functionless material, which proves that the relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified' might be broken down. The questioning of language, as it is clear, also causes Stillman to have a schizophrenic point of view towards the understanding of the universe.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is apparent that *City of Glass* is an applaudable postmodern detective novel including many of the postmodernist techniques and elements. Throughout the novella, Quinn, plays a detective role and tries to resolve a case which, however, results in uncertainties, madness, exhaustion, identity crisis, silence and disappearance. It can therefore be said that the author follows a different way from those of conventional detective novels by deconstructing them. In doing so, he questions life and in parallel touches upon questioning of the language and the breakdown of the relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified'.

## 5.References

- Atwood, Margaret. "Paul Auster, The Art of Fiction No. 178. Interviewed by Michael Wood". *The Paris Review*. New York: Paris Review Foundation, 2003.59-89.
- Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. London: Bloomsbury House, 1987.
- . *The Art of Hunger. Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun&Moon, 1992.
- Barone, Dennis. *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. America: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . *A Theory of Parody: The teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*. New York:Methuen, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Martin, Brendan. *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Mckean, Matthew. "Paul Auster and the French Connection: *City of Glass* and French Philosophy". *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 101-118.
- Nicol, Brian. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Doubling, Intertextuality, and the Postmodern Uncanny: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy". (Ed.Lee A. Jacobus&Regina Barreca) *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 245-262.
- Söderlind, Sylvia. "Humpty Dumpty In New York: Language and Regime Change in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*". *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. John Hopkins University Journal: John Hopkins University Press, 2011. 1-16.
- Springer, Carsten. *A Paul Auster Sourcebook*. Frankfurt & am Main & New York: Peter Lang Pub, 2001.
- Walker, Joseph S. "Criminality and (Self) Discipline: The Case of Paul Auster". *MFS Modern Studies*. John Hopkins University Journal: John Hopkins University Press, 2002. 389-421.

### 5.1. Internet Sources

"Paul Auster". 6.10.2011. <http://www.stuartpilkington.co.uk/paulauster/manuelpollak.htm>

<http://www.novel-writing-help.com/metafiction.html> 17.02.2017.

[http://changingminds.org/explanations/critical\\_theory/concepts/signifier\\_signified.htm](http://changingminds.org/explanations/critical_theory/concepts/signifier_signified.htm) 17.02.2017.