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Putting the Puzzle Together: An Analysis of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* as an Anti-Detective Novel

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Abstract:

Contemporary fiction is a multifaceted exercise whose purpose is not only didactic in the manner of traditional literature, but also in that the modern novelist acquires the role of a philosopher, a sociologist and a psychologist. It is wrapped in so many layers of interpretation that only superficial reading is not sufficient to unfold its meaning. A similar trend is seen in American novelist Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* which apparently seems a detective novel but on deeper analysis illustrates the features of anti-detective novel. Here Auster has taken a new approach towards understanding the fiction in a different way by combining the features of existentialism and postmodernism with anti detective traits. This paper shall attempt to analyze the first novel of the *Trilogy*, the *City of Glass*, as an anti detective novel. It will also compare and contrast the characteristic features of contemporary and traditional detective fiction with Auster's usage of the genre, as well as explore the implications of the absence of the traits which are usually associated with traditional detective fiction. Finally, it will also analyze the consequences of Auster's juxtaposition of the genre with postmodern and existentialist themes, and how this deviation affects the structure of the novel and disqualifies it from being included amongst the works of contemporary detective fiction.

Keywords: Detective fiction, anti-detective fiction, postmodernism, existentialism.

The New York Trilogy is Paul Auster's first foray into fiction. As in his later works, he moves away from traditional aspects of the form and uses it instead to achieve his own ends. Indeed, in the hands of Auster the detective novel becomes an instrument to gauge and evaluate the workings of the unconscious mind. The *Trilogy* consists of *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986). The three books are only loosely connected by vague continuations in the plot and some recurrent characters which only appear in flashes. Thus, the books are largely independent and only related by Auster's particular usage of form and narrative technique and when read in continuation it appears that the boundaries that separate the three novels are entirely arbitrary and unnecessary, and the books might have been a colossal whole instead.

To begin with, even a cursory look at Paul Auster's *City of Glass* is sufficient to warrant the claim that it is not, in fact, in the tradition of conventional detective fiction. Although many critics have argued otherwise, and have justified their argument by attributing the difference in Auster's use of the form from the genre itself on the ground that novelty itself cannot determine adherence or deviation from the norm. They maintain that this alone does not incriminate him as not being a detective novelist. Indeed, *City of Glass* contains many elements of conventional detective fiction as well, and certainly some of these elements are central to what is commonly known as a detective novel. For instance, the protagonist in *Ghosts* is a private detective, and in *City of Glass* the protagonist is a detective novelist who

undertakes the task of a private eye to protect a client when he is thrown in the midst of a case. But, in agreement with many critics, who justly point out, these arguments alone are not sufficient to place *City of Glass* among novels and Auster among novelists who belong to the tradition that began with Poe and his Dupin. In comparison with Poe and later novelists who followed his example with a plethora of plots which centered on eccentric detectives tracing the course of the occurrence of a crime and the journey of the detective on his way to solving it and finding the culprit, Auster has taken on a new approach. All of these followed some general guidelines which, with some distinction in details in which they were implemented by each according to their own peculiar style, still can be traced back to a common locus as having the same genealogy. Auster's *City of Glass* lacks these technicalities, and so instead of being an anti-detective novel, the novellas which comprise the *Trilogy* can better be classified as having detectives in them.

To form any definitive conclusion, a mere superficial opinion is not sufficient. To start with, *City of Glass* employs many traits of detective fiction. The protagonists in the *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* are detectives, more or less. Here again, they are not detectives in the traditional sense but unlike Poe's Dupin and Chandler's Philip Marlow, Auster's protagonists are makeshift detectives. Quinn, in the *City of Glass*, is a detective fiction writer who is thrown into a mystery after he receives a phone call meant for some detective, Paul Auster.

The aspects which qualify the *City of Glass* as being anti-detective novel are numerous, some being more overtly visible than others. Firstly, the detective is placed in the midst of a chaotic absurdist world, where he has to grapple with finding roots in reality and attempts to establish his own sense of sanity. The focus of the novel thus shifts from the external to the internal. The protagonist's sense of security in his own identity is shaken, and as the novel progresses he becomes less and less interested in solving the crime and becomes more and more engrossed within himself. Indeed, it is even difficult to say whether or not any crime is actually committed in *City of Glass* as for example in *The Locked Room*. As opposed to traditional detective fiction where the detective follows a series of clues and solves the crime through logical conclusions and where the reader is placed alongside the detective on a parallel plane to solve the mystery, *City of Glass* lacks such sequence of events.

Auster's plots are absurdist, having thus no beginning and no end, and the story ends just as abruptly as it began. There is no crime, and thus there are no clues presented either to the detective or the reader. The protagonist does initially attempt to decipher the mystery on his own, and even employs some amateurish detective work to find clues and put the puzzle together, as when Quinn tries to follow Peter Stillman around the city, trying to see where he goes and whether he will try to trace his son and harm him. But these alone are by far not substantial enough to qualify the *City of Glass* as a detective novel. The very fact that the detective in the novel is unable to gather clues and thus is unable to solve the crime, or even understand the nature of the crime, or if a crime has been committed at all, renders it unsuitable to be labeled as mystery fiction.

City of Glass opens with a statement that marks the onset of mystery. Like Chandler's Marlow, Quinn seems to be a victim of trouble that starts with a wrong number. "It was wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of the night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not." (3) Consciously or unconsciously, he feels a temptation to assume the role of a detective as the situation demands. Assuming the role of Paul Auster, the detective, he finds himself caught in an inescapable situation from which he can find no way out and the search for Peter Stillman

slowly turns into a search for himself. At the start of the novel, Quinn is seen as a lonely soul without a care in the world. His wife and child had been killed in a car accident, and after that incident in his life Quinn is unable to recover to a normal life. But his entire life is turned upside down by that single phone call. It is as if “Quinn is roused from this invisible existence when a midnight phone call gives him a chance, like Don Quixote whose initials he shares to inhabit and make real one of his own fictions. Don Quixote manages to turn himself into a medieval knight; Daniel Quinn is given the opportunity to play the detective” (Rowen 226).

One of the features which demarcate *City of Glass* from a conventional detective fiction is the portrayal of the protagonist, Quinn. It becomes explicit in the beginning of the novel that Quinn is not a detective but the writer of mystery novels. Being a writer which he writes under the pseudonym of William Wilson, Quinn has invented a private eye, Max Work, a feature of detective fiction. “In the triad of selves that Quinn has become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise” (Auster 6). As for Quinn “the writer and detective are interchangeable” (8). William Wilson reminds one of Poe’s *William Wilson* and the theme of ambiguous doubling or duality of selves. But unlike Poe’s *William Wilson* who kills his rivalrous double, Auster’s *Wilson* serves as a bridge between Quinn and Max Work. Quinn’s imaginary person of Max Work gives him assurance that he has it in him to be Work whenever the situation arises. And so he takes on the identity of Auster the detective. Once taken, he embodies another self inside him: the self of a detective whom he doesn’t know. This adventure takes him to his client Peter Stillman and his wife Virginia Stillman. Time and again he thinks of the action of Max Work in a particular situation. This gives him impetus to involve deeply in the case.

An interesting feature of *City of Glass* is that contrary to traditional novels written in this genre, no crime actually occurs here. While this is not an entirely new phenomenon, and even one of the pioneers of modern detective fiction, and perhaps the name most commonly associated with this genre after Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, employed this technique in many of his works which featured the great detective Sherlock Holmes, Auster’s approach is completely different here. The purpose is not to introduce novelty or freshness into the genre itself, but rather something that is entirely antithetical to the above. It is not a coincidence either, that what Quinn is looking for in the *City of Glass* turns out to be nothing at all, and it is this nothingness which transfers itself from the case to Quinn’s own life. Although there is a hint of a crime, rather a premonition that Peter Stillman is out to harm his son, and though it is Quinn’s task to prevent such a thing from happening, thereby giving him a sense of purpose and a direction in which to concentrate his efforts, this task is not the equivalent of a mystery in the traditional sense. For one, the details of the task itself are vague, and the guidelines are so blurred that even Quinn himself does not understand the intricacies of the job at hand. Secondly, the way the job comes to Quinn is also of much significance, since it reflects the absurdity that is manifest in the nature of the task to be performed and the chaos to which it will descend later. Then, even in the manner of execution of the job, the way Quinn sets about to solve the case, is exemplary of Auster’s unconventional approach. Near the end of the novel, Quinn breaks off all connection with reality and with the outside world to the point of insanity, and the case itself gets lost somewhere in the process. Towards the end of the novel, the case is reduced to Quinn monitoring Stillman’s hotel continuously, and to achieve this he separates himself from the rest of the world and takes up a small area opposite the entrance of his hotel as his lodgings. He moves farther and farther away from sanity every day. The case moves more and more into the background, and finally is blurred completely, so that the novel becomes entirely postmodern and no traces of the genre of detective fiction are left.

Crime is the most significant thread that binds the plot of a detective story and since it is not present here, *City of Glass* becomes much detached from the genre.

The fact that this element is missing from the *Trilogy* creates a unique dilemma for the detective as he has to first figure out whether any crime has been committed at all. The convoluted plot thus formed is in sharp contrast to conventional novels that fall in this genre. An archetypal illustration of this is Edgar Allen Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where the detective Dupin solves the murder of two ladies with the conclusive evidence being the clue of the hair of the monkey. Auster's plots are not that simple, however, and the focus is not on the detective and his activities but on covert forces that are otherwise. Quinn's work is only to keep an eye on Peter Stillman Sr., father of Peter Stillman, a play on names. Soon like a typical detective Quinn follows Stillman Sr. through the streets of New York. Dan Holmes in his essay "Paul Auster's deconstruction of the traditional hard-boiled detective narrative in *The New York Trilogy*" says, "Both Chandler's and Auster's detectives show the difficulty of reading the city, whether it is the deceit of Los Angeles' rich or the confusion of Peter Stillman's path and the message it spells out in New York.... Both authors have their detectives crossing the city in search of answers, both about the cases they are working and cities themselves."

Being set in urban environment gives the novel the feature of hard-boiled fiction. This wandering through the city teaches him to understand the connection of inner self and the outer world. Quinn gets caught in a universe of chaos and his object of detection turns to something else. David Pinter in his piece *Ghostly Footsteps* says, "The figure of the detective has long been associated with the complexity of modern urban life. It rests on the idea of confronting the city's apparent unknowability in its infinite spread and diversity, and of following clues to tame and make intelligible its secrets and scrambled paths"(6). From the start of following Stillman, Quinn feels a premonition of aimlessness, as if "little by little, Quinn began to feel cut off from his original intentions, and he wondered now if he had not embarked on the meaningless project" (Auster 60). He accepts the duality completely and follows Stillman "as if inside the body of Paul Auster" (51). He jots down every moment and path traced by Stillman. To his surprise he finds certain pattern in his wanderings. Finding some hieroglyphs, Quinn elucidates the figures as "TOWER OF BABEL" (70). In conversation with Peter Stillman, Quinn comes to know the motivation behind his torturous behaviour towards his son as his attempts to find the language of God. With this allusion Auster attempts to investigate the role of language in the search for identity and the relation of the self to the external world. Again, when Auster delves into what are seemingly existential issues, he leaves behind the traditional genre of detective fiction, in that the form used is conventionally traditional, but the context changes from the narration of events in the real world to a search for abstractions in the philosophical world. Indeed, it almost seems that in this regard the only commonalities between *City of Glass* and any other detective novel is that there is a detective in it, and everything from there begins to take on a whole new shape. When Auster questions the very nature of language and the role that it plays in the relation of man to himself and to the universe, he raises his novel to a plane which lies at the intersection of art and philosophy, the postmodern and the existential.

In a similar manner, when Auster uses features of postmodern literature he moves away from detective fiction and towards something which is a consolidation of different stylistic techniques. For instance, in the final pages of the *City of Glass* time ceases to be a linear entity, and moves in an abrupt manner. This distortion gives the reader an impression that there is no plot in the text, or if there is one, that it is highly convoluted. This is in sharp

contrast to detective fiction where the plot is merely a narrative of events and incidents and moves forward in a highly linear fashion. As a postmodern novel, the *City of Glass* is manifest with examples of absurdity, and indeed the entire plot is constructed in an absurd and chaotic manner. This lies in strict opposition to conventional detective fiction where the plot is straightforward, and the progression of the plot depends upon the interconnectedness of its various elements. Each element is a direct result of that which preceded it, and in turn causes the events that follow it. This cause and effect chain is absent in Auster's *Trilogy*, so much so that the plot seems to be made up of disjointed and fragmented components. These characteristics of Auster's work are in direct opposition to traditional fiction in general and detective fiction in particular.

It can thus be said that on one level, and in the interpretation of one construct, the *City of Glass* is a detective novel. But to go any further than that prerequisites an in-depth analysis of philosophy, and hidden meanings have to be unearthed before any conclusions can be drawn. The novel acquires a whole new magnitude, and any further interpretation would require a reader to decipher many constructs within which the meaning of the work lies dormant.

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