

Reinventing Existential Self: A Postmodern study of Paul Auster's the *Book of Illusions*

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Abstract

Paul Auster is one of those current American novels who always go all out to discuss the battle for self-assertion amid the dilemma of contemporary American life. On human freedom and subjectivity, he is in accord with existentialists. Since Auster's novel is set in an increasingly postmodern American culture, where individuality has been marginalized, his character's quest for self-reinvention takes them on an adventure of self-discovery. The present paper examines Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002) from an existential and postmodernist perspective, arguing that the author is attempting to establish the credentials of an existential self in a postmodern culture that rejects any type of absolute. An in-depth examination of one person's endeavor to understand the complexities of life is presented in *The Book of Illusions*. Autobiographies and biographies make up the bulk of the book, with Zimmer's tale of life serving as the underlying narrative. The absurdity of living in a postmodern American society is shown, along with the problems and challenges that accompany it. The narrative accurately depicts the protagonist's attempt to reinterpret their lost identities due to an identity crisis. An intricate saga of several lives, looming deaths and difficult repairs is unfolding here. Ultimately, the book is concerned with the fundamental existential question: "Who am I?"

Keywords: Existentialism, Postmodernism, Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*, identity crisis, absurdity

Introduction

Existentialism is the study of human existence that muses the nature and significance of human life. It is concerned with matters that are both necessary and urgent to human beings lives. The authors, Burnham and Papandreopoulos, claim that — "Existentialism is a catch-all term for those philosophers who consider the nature of the human condition as the key philosophical problem and who share the view that this problem is best addressed through

ontology” (N. pag). Flynn is the first to own up to the fact that “a philosophy about the concrete individual” (x) As Gale and Panza put it “philosophy that makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world” (10). History shows that it is a protest against reason’s domination and declining morals, and it proposes to examine subjective truths. It asserts that one must discover one’s self by the exercise of one’s free will and accountability.

Many authors were compelled to establish new literary genres in the wake of post-war tragedies and other cultural disputes. Furthermore, technological and cultural progress posed a threat to mankind. These feelings of isolation and futility permeated postmodern life. As a consequence, realist writers like Norman Mailer and James Jones cleared the ground for absurdist and satirical modes of storytelling to flourish. A darkly comedic take on the absurdity of war was written by novelists like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut. As postmodernism grew, it blurred the lines between reality and fiction, which has become a hallmark of contemporary literature. Streams like existentialism, post structuralism made it even more important.

Numerous eminent authors, including Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster, forge new paths. The postmodern artist portrays the world as contingent, which seems to be the case when historical events of the last century are considered. As such, this forecast is more of a study than a prophesy. The author deals with serendipitous circumstance, but his previous experience imbues it with an air of approaching inevitability. Indeed, this is one of the distinctions between modern and postmodern philosophy; while the former views contemporary pain as a loss of previous grandeur, the latter views it as a forerunner to future devastation. This is not to imply that progress has not been made. On the contrary, enormous strides have been achieved in a variety of fields during the previous several decades. Everything from technology to living standards has advanced tremendously. However, although its trend is numerically exponential, it is substantially unlike to the human evolution upon which it was allegedly modeled. It is limited, aimed towards a certain demographic, and so unevenly dispersed. Thus, progress becomes a destructive force rather than a source of empowerment. This asymmetrical arrangement of events results in an incoherent world - one in which there is no past to return to and no future to anticipate. This lonely life is what we refer to as the postmodern world, and it is precisely this isolation that has elevated contemporary literature to the level of prophetic vision.

Existentialism in philosophy, art, and literature is one of the many distinct ideas that have come to be linked with postmodern thinking. In addition to postmodernism, American authors in the years after World War II began emphasizing the alienation and breakdown caused by the conflict. There were many American intellectuals who switched to Existentialism right after the war as a result of these distressing circumstances. Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two French authors, are credited for popularizing existentialism in the United States in the 1950s. Because of their firsthand involvement in the French Resistance Movement, which represented their political and personal disappointment, it resonated with the American mentality. Extinction of scientific objectivity and emphasis on subjective experience improved American literary

criticism after World War II. Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature, by Finkelstein, mentions Paul Tillich on this point.

“It is now common knowledge in this country that existentialism in the Western intellectual world starts with Pascal in the 17th century, has an underground history in the 18th century, a revolutionary history in the 19th century and an astonishing victory in the 20th century. Existentialism has become the style of our period in all realms of life. Even the analytic philosophers pay tribute to it by withdrawing into formal problems and leaving the field of material problems to the existentialists in art and literature”. (12)

A common concern shared by both postmodern and existential thinking is that of the alienation of a person from his or her society. At the same time, both paradigms highlight the illogical and unexpected character of events that impact and shape an individual's life, while also emphasizing the absurdity of the very essence of existence. It is proposed by existentialism that each person experiences his or her own subjective reality. This, in turn, implies that there is no absolute significance in the universe, but only the significance that one assigns to reality as one perceives it. There is no meaning in the universe, and man exists in the midst of this immense emptiness, attempting to give purpose and meaning to the reality around him, attempting to interpret symbols and occurrences as pieces of a jigsaw that is much too massive for him to fathom completely. The decisions that a person makes, as well as the repercussions of those choices, determine the direction of his or her life in the long run.

Paul Auster, an American author best known for an amalgamation of absurdism, existentialism, crime fiction, and the investigation of the inner self, is one of the contemporary writers who have dealt with the link between existentialist and postmodern philosophy. While expressing his thoughts in an original and uncommon way, Auster is praised for being logical and clear in his reasoning and reasoning process. In fact, at first look, it would seem that Auster's main goal while writing his major works was not to engage in philosophical analysis of any kind. A careful study of his works, on the other hand, reveals new layers of interpretation that were previously unknown.

Literature review

Coppersmith (1998) writes in an article titled “Constructing the Self in Paul Auster's Leviathan” that characters in Paul Auster's fiction attempt to make sense of what Auster himself refers to as “*The music of chance*” (in another, later eponymous novel) - the remarkable coincidences and seemingly unexplainable nuances upon which a life is built - and, in doing so, they endeavor to understand themselves, to recreate life as an author crafts a story. (N.pag)

After reading Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and other books, Adriana Neagu (2013) wrote a piece titled “Between Fabulation and Silence: In Search of the Paul Auster Effect,” in which she looked at the major topics addressed by Auster's works in general and in particular the *City of Glass*. The Austerian book, according to the author, “veers between existential recit and a

postmodern classic, allegorizing the perpetually deferred signifier” because of its introspective and contemplative connotations, she claims. (N.pag)

According to Richard Tetek (2008), Auster’s writings are unique in their treatment of contemporary issues in our lives. The concept of solitude, which is often linked to the search for one's identity, is central to Auster’s writing and one of the primary problems he attempts to investigate. (5)

In an essay, “Narrative Disappearances: A Study of Disappearances in Paul Auster’s Works with a focus on *Invisible* (2011)”, Karl M. Duke reflects on the theme of disappearance in Auster’s novels. He makes the following claim:

The act of disappearing in Auster’s texts is more than simply vanishing, not being there, departing. This is, in itself, a static event which cannot propel a story very far; instead, disappearance is closely linked to identity and especially the transformation of identities, changing them, recreating them. The reason for characters to disappear is often to start a new life by abruptly ending the former life they have led. Identities are therefore not solid entities, monoliths which unbendingly remain in their places; in fact, they are in constant turmoil which results in identities being part of a continuum, in a state of incessant alteration. (11)

Proposed Methodology

The present study is based on the qualitative research. The content analysis would be the most suitable methodology in which I would analyse the works of Paul Auster in the light of re-inventing existentialself. An interpretative study will be conducted to analyse the existential Characters. Auster’s characters undergo huge existential crisis concerns inside the postmodern environment in which he casts them. Throughout his major works, Auster constructs his own world, where each character is on a journey to know themselves and to understand the secrets of their life. In order to understand one, we must first understand the other. Auster’s cosmos is permeated with entropy, and the protagonists encounter it in the middle of their quest. Some of the events they observe have a lasting impact on their lives, while others are only a temporary distraction from the enormous array of random happenings that comprise theirs.

An in-depth examination of these occurrences and their subsequent actions and repercussions has been carried out in this work. In Auster’s works, the quest for one's identity is a fundamental issue. There are many writers who have attempted to grapple with the meaninglessness and futility of life, and he is not the only one who has done so in the setting of the twenty-first century. For Auster, it’s a matter of following in the footsteps of previous authors and expressing his own thoughts on the matter. Authors such as his focus on the personal toll of development, as well as the societal effects it has on those who live in the world today. In his stories, his protagonists confront an enormously difficult job that may take them a long time to achieve, or they may fail totally and succumb to despair or death. The search for one's own unique identity and a sense of direction and meaning in life is at the core of this plan. The

protagonists in Auster's novels relentlessly challenge their own subjective realities in order to develop a foundation for their own sense of self. These people are well aware that they have been denied spiritual freedom and are working to free themselves from this social and material enslavement in order to achieve mental independence. Rather than solving a mystery in the story, the Austerian hero seeks some deeper, hidden significance inside himself or herself.

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Analysis

The Book of Illusions is the tale of Hector Mann, a mysteriously vanished silent film comic from the 1920s, as narrated by a professor, David Zimmer. Following his family's loss in an aircraft tragedy, he publishes a novel on Hector Mann. The terrible jet crash seems to be a reference to the devastating September eleven assaults on the World Trade Center in America. The tragic loss of his wife and children propels him into a state of unconsciousness from which he is unable to recover. Zimmer has lost his zest for life and has severed social relationships in order to survive the gloomy days. While lazily flipping through television channels one day, Zimmer comes upon a humorous sequence from Hector Mann's silent film, which causes him to burst out laughing. That unexpected burst of laughter rips him out of a protracted catatonic state of emotional stoicism, and he understands that some part of him still wants to live. As with Nashe in *The Music of Chance*, Zimmer receives a handout in the form of insurance money upon the death of his wife, which enables him to see all of Hector's films stored in various museums worldwide. As with *The Music of Chance*, money provides him with the opportunity to work on the project. He publishes a book, *The Silent world of Hector Mann*, on the films of Hector, who vanishes from the cinema world in the 1920s, just as his career is reaching its pinnacle.

The epigraph of *The Book of Illusions* is a passage from French writer Chateaubriand:

Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery.

Auster seems to foreshadow the notion of a human having several lifetimes from the start of this work. Indeed, the reinvention of identity is a synthesis of several periods of life, as Chateaubriand relates in his *Memoires*. Auster's anxiety is shown in one of Chateaubriand's words that Zimmer interprets in the novel: "The shifting shapes of my existence are so entangled

with one another” (Auster 66). According to Mark Brown, by referencing Chateaubriand’s emotion, Auster implies that the individuals portrayed in *Illusions* live several lives inside their one existence and that we should be alert to the various phases contained within them while reading these literary lives (219). The epigraph emphasizes the notion of several lives as a critical cog in the machinery of identity development, yet the passage from one to the next is fraught with sadness and sorrow. The tragedy in Zimmer’s life compels him to start on a voyage of self-discovery, which he undertakes as he progresses through each phase. Similarly, Hector’s remorse motivates him to take on multiple tasks. Thus, the concept of several lives serves as a mechanism for Auster’s narrative to maintain sane while engaging in ontological research.

The sad demise of his family in an aircraft disaster marks the beginning of Zimmer’s journey. His existence is filled with emptiness and meaninglessness, and he slowly loses touch with who he is. The loss of his family has diminished the significance of his existence, as he says that “most of him had died along with them.” (6). At some point, he has to confront the existential concerns of identity, misery, alienation and agony amid the seclusion he has chosen for himself through the years. After losing his zest for life, he withdraws from society and prepares to live the remainder of his days alone in the shadows. With their toys, books and even their bed, he tortures himself. In addition, he dresses and smells like his wife, too, as well as doing her cosmetics. Destroying himself in this way symbolizes the end of his old existence, and by doing these acts, he feels like “temporarily inhabiting them again – carrying on their little phantom lives for them by repeating the gestures they had made when they still had bodies” (7-8). In this way, it represents a transition from his previous existence to the life of a living dead, which carries with it a great deal of trauma and fear. Momentary comfort from Zimmer’s unhappy and absurd existence is provided by a glimpse of Hector’s film:

...it was the first time I had laughed at anything since June, and when that unexpected spasm rise up through my chest and begin to rattle around in my lungs, I understood that I hadn’t hit the bottom yet, that there was still some piece of me that wanted to go on living... I was forced to conclude that there was something inside me I had not previously imagined, something other than pure death. (9)

As a result of Hector’s film igniting his natural human desire for self-preservation, Zimmer is propelled into yet another unfamiliar territory filled with love, death, suicide, discovery, and loss. He is a professor of Comparative Literature at a college and chooses to write a book on Hector Mann’s films. There are twelve two-reel comedies by Hector distributed over the globe. He examines all of his films and concludes that Hector should be given a chance to be rediscovered (18). As a result, Zimmer sheds his old self and adopts a new one: that of a writer. It’s time for him to move on because “the time to move on marks the end of that identity, and the emergence of a new one” (Brown 220). In addition to *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, Zimmer begins translating *Memoires* by Chateaubriand, which helps him overcome his depression. Alma’s entrance in Zimmer’s home is another significant factor in his identity transformation and/or creation. Hector's Blue Stone Ranch in Tierra del Sueno is where she tells him the

narrative of his life. With Alma's aid, Zimmer digs into Hector's past and ends up becoming a savior for him. As Zimmer starts to find hope in Alma, he shifts from a cynical outlook on life to a desire for a fulfilling relationship with her.

Auster's writing, like that of other postmodern American authors, has always included a lot of identity play. Paul Auster, on the other hand, approaches the subject of identity crisis from a purely existential standpoint, unlike other American novels. In agreement with this, noted contemporary fiction critic Madeleine Sorapure says:

... "in Auster's work, the question of identity is repeatedly the site of a profound struggle for characters whose postmodern sense of themselves and of their place in the world shifts, multiplies, disintegrates, and must be reconstituted, if only provisionally....Indeed, many of his characters experience a trauma or rupture that causes them to break down completely....They strip away all that is familiar to them, all that had previously sustained them, pursuing a self sacrifice that leads (or fails to lead) to redemption – or at least to an ability to return to the world." (20)

Both Hector and Zimmer have had life-altering events that have led them to assume several guises. They are forced to reexamine their life as a result of their lack of self-awareness, which finally aids their return to the real world.

In Hector's journey of self-discovery, Frieda Spelling's unexpected encounter becomes yet another milestone. Because she had watched his movies, she recognizes him as he walks into a bank. Even if she could not recall who he was, it would not take her more than thirty seconds to come up with the answer despite the fact that she was acquainted with his features (193-94). Her mouth was about to drop open when she felt the pressure of a pistol being thrust against her skull by a masked assailant. Despite his own injuries, Hector manages to rescue his girlfriend from the armed thieves. Zimmer is told by Alma that this is the case:

"It wasn't that Hector made any conscious decision to do what he did next, but the moment his knee touched the floor, he found himself standing up again. He wasn't intending to be heroic, and he certainly wasn't intending to get himself killed, but whatever else he might have been feeling at that moment, he wasn't afraid.... he had no memory of hearing the gun go off, no memory of the bullet that tore into his chest and knocked him to the ground, no memory of seeing Frieda break loose from the man". (194-95)

There is no pre-established objective in a man's life, according to existentialists, and therefore he must build a meaningful existence by making conscious decisions. In existentialist philosophy, the concept of choice is crucial, and it always has a positive connotation. When we pick between this or that, we are affirming the worth of that which is chosen, since we cannot ever choose the worse. Everything that we pick is always the best for us, and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for everyone else as well (6). Zimmer's decision to write a book on Hector's films serves as the sole impetus for him to go to several locations and shake himself out

of his slumber. Zimmer had been living the life of a zombie until seeing a snippet from his film on television. This footage, though, gives him the impression that he can do something about it. For him, the decision would have been arbitrary at that point; he decided to go around the globe looking at silent comedies since he had been inspired by two minutes of film and a little chuckle (Auster 13). By making this decision, he not only discloses the short film career and creative genius of Hector, but also restores Hector to the public domain. Hector's originality may be discovered by focusing on the minutiae of movies, the plot, the technicalities, and by studying him as a comic. Because of the films he's studied, Zimmer says he's "the only way I could live now without crumbling" (27). When he initially sees it as a pointless endeavor, it becomes a way for him to mend his shattered self. Frieda Spelling writes to Zimmer, pleading for him to come to her ranch in New Mexico and say goodbye to the dying star. Despite the fact that Zimmer's decision has taken him from one location to another, he seems to be unconscious of its importance. Alma shows up unannounced to Zimmer's house to pick him up and take him to New Mexico. She threatens him with a revolver when he refuses to accompany her. As a consequence of what happens, he has no choice but to accompany her. In spite of his skepticism, Zimmer embraces the mystery and takes the biggest risks when it comes to his decision to accompany her on her trip to New York City. The existentialists believe that in order to provide meaning to one's life, one must take chances and be open to uncertainty.

Alma's initial contact with Zimmer reveals profound existential truths to the reader. When Alma points a pistol at him, he doesn't feel frightened in the slightest. Instead, he seemed enthralled by the prospect of dying. He steals the rifle from Alma and aims it towards his own head when it seems that she would not shoot him. Due to the gun's safety catch, he presses the trigger despite thinking the weapon was empty. The arbitrary nature of life and the need of actively participating in it dawn on Zimmer at that very moment. Because of his gun skills, he's come to realize that "the universe was full of holes, the small apertures of meaninglessness, microscopic rifts that the mind might wander through". (Auster 109).

When it comes to Auster's characters, their capacity to make decisions that help them define who they are is a recurring theme. Because of this, Hector's life shows how in a godless environment, it is inevitable to make choices and create values. As Sartre put it, he is "the sum of his own actions" because he acts without thinking about the implications of his actions. As Hector comes to terms with the meaninglessness of his existence, he sets out to reinvent himself via a process of ongoing decision-making and the creation of new values. In relation to the idea of cultivating human values, it has been claimed with authority that:

"If God doesn't exist, no external, objective measure of value exists, and nothing has any inherent meaning. This doesn't mean, however, that life has no meaning or value at all. It's just that every meaning and value is a human meaning or a value. And because human beings have no human nature and no inherent values or meaning, we're constantly creating those human meanings and values". (Panza and Gale 173)

Hector, a Jewish immigrant, made his debut in Hollywood in 1925, and his career was over in less than four years when he mysteriously vanished. Many ladies fall in love with him throughout his cinematic career. Hector has a romantic relationship with Brigid O'Fallon, a journalist, a year before he vanishes. He has many relationships with other women, but Brigid never complains and waits for his frenzied womanizing to come to an end. Hector, on the other hand, is smitten with Dolores Saint John, an actress. He can't bring himself to take Brigid out of his life now that he has Dolores in it.

As existentialists say, "a human being is essentially nothing," thus he understands he must make a decision. The only thing you have at the core of your being is the power to choose (174). Dolores is his choice, and Brigid is informed about his planned marriage. Hector does not comprehend that Brigid would suffer greatly as a result of his decision since the effect of a choice is always ambiguous. The moment Brigid learns she's expecting a child, she heads over to Dolores to lay blame for everything that's gone wrong. Dolores accidentally kills Brigid and her unborn child during the battle when she accidentally shoots her in the left eye. Hector is shaken by Brigid's death and believes he will meet his end as a result. In order to save Dolores' and his own lives, Hector disposes of the deceased corpse in the following manner: "Choose your poison. Hector was forced to make a decision. He was forced to make a choice on their behalf, and there was no correct answer" (Auster 140). Afterward, he departs, leaving everything behind and lurks in the shadows with this remorse in his heart. His decision to give up both his work and the love of his life sends him on a path of self-discovery that he has never been on before. Because of his self-reproach, he continues to exist despite the lack of purpose, and so tries to construct ideals and provide meaning to his pretty worthless lifeexistence.

The Book of Illusions, along with other notable Austerian literary experiments, has an explicit allusion to film, which is a first for the author. Postmodern authors use a variety of tactics, one of which is the intermixing of genres. SuzenKayhan makes the following statement in this context:

"Even if blurred, mixed and chaotic, the characteristics of specific genres are visible in postmodernist text. Accepting that postmodern literature is not genreless, we can look at the way the genres are mixed or changed. Blurring or mixing genres indicate a new way of thinking. Postmodern literature broke the reader's/viewer's auto-categorization of genres by mixing them". (42)

BorbalaBokos writes in his article, *Intermedial Thematizations and Imitations in Paul Auster's The Book of Illusions*, that "...in the novel, descriptions akin to scripts serve as sites of medial interactions and overlappings, connecting the cinematic and literary media" (2). He continues by stating that the novel's protagonists are affected by specific mediums and that these scripts aid in the creation of these characters' identities. Along with the scripts, the book makes use of different filmic methods such as cuts and camera angles, zoom shots, voice-overs, and editing to amplify the novel's cinematic impact.

Auster's novel *The Book of Illusions* pays tribute to the silent film era of the 1920s via the fictitious cinematic comic Hector Mann, who appears in the novel. A visual language and a method of conveying tales, according to Auster, silent cinema is "an art form" that "projects images onto a two-dimensional screen" (Auster 14). Hector's physique and moustaches serve as a significant medium for conveying his emotions in Auster's work, which is full of such vivid descriptions:

"Before the body, there is a face, and before the face there is the thin black line between Hector's nose and upper lip. A twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, the moustache is a seismograph of Hector's inner states, and not only does it make you laugh, it tells you what Hector is thinking, actually allows you into the machinery of his thoughts. Other 104 elements are involved – the eyes, the mouth, the finely calibrated lurches and stumbles – but the moustache is the instrument of communication, and even though it speaks a language without words, its wriggles and flutters are as clear and comprehensible as a message tapped out in Morse code". (29)

Zimmer understands that Hector's moustache and white suit are the trademarks of his character, and that these characteristics indicate the type of character he is supposed to portray and define who he is in the eyes of others. (30)

The movies, together with his work, are the mainstays of Hector's nourishment and self-affirmation. If you look at his career before to and after his absence from Hollywood, you'll notice him as a very talented slapstick performer with an incredible body control. Alma recounts how Hector defies the rules:

"Voice-overs, for one thing. Narration is considered a weakness in movies, a sign that the images aren't working, but Hector relied on it heavily in a number of his films. One of them, *The History of Light*, doesn't have a word of dialogue. It's wall-to-wall narration from start to finish....He was out of the commercial loop, and that meant he could work without constraints. Hector used his freedom to explore things other filmmakers weren't allowed to touch, especially in the forties and fifties. Naked bodies. Down-to-earth sex. Childbirth. Urination, defecation. Those scenes are a bit shocking at first, but the shock wears off rather quickly. They're a natural part of life, after all, but we're not used to seeing them presented on film, so we sit up for a couple of seconds and take notice. Hector didn't make a big point of it. Once you come to understand what's possible in his work, these so-called taboos and moments of explicitness blend into the overall texture of the stories". (208-9)

Hector is given the opportunity to direct a picture by financier Seymour Hunt, owner of production firm Kaleidoscope Pictures, early in his career. Hunt turns out to be a con artist who has no idea what he's doing and ends up bankrupting the whole production firm. Because of his Spanish accent, Hector's career is in risk due to the phasing out of silent movies by talkies. As a result, Mr. Nobody, Hector's eleventh silent picture produced before his disappearance, merits

particular attention. Hector's life would soon be riddled with difficulties and misfortunes. When it comes to Mr. Nobody, he has a look of irritation on his face because of Hunt's financial difficulties and unethical business tactics. Because he is who he is as an artist, his career being ruined represents the erasing of his identity. In the absence of art, Hector is like a guy without a soul. Even the name of the film implies a sense of fragility and anonymity. In Hector's eleventh silent film, *Mr. Nobody*, the actor is attempting to reimagine his own identity in an attempt to escape the emptiness and meaninglessness of life.

Mr. Nobody is a film in which Hector takes the role of the proprietor of a soft drinks firm. Vice President C. Lester Chase is the villain, as he attempts to seize control of his estate and strip him of his identity (39). In exchange for this, he provides Hector a mystical potion, which causes Hector to become invisible. Everyone is taken aback by Hector's departure, even Hector himself, who is baffled by his circumstances. Meanwhile, Chase forges a letter to Hector's wife, claiming that Chase has purchased the firm and is the new owner of the business. Because of his invisibility, Hector is perplexed as to how he might reclaim his lost identity. Then, in order to teach Chase a lesson, he goes about stealing jewelry and placing it on Chase's table, leaving a trail of jewelry on the walkway leading to his office. Despite the fact that Chase is caught, Hector has been reduced to nothing (50). He returns to his house, but he is unable to communicate with his family. The next day, however, upon awakening, he is once again visible. But he is no longer the same Hector he used to be; instead, he has transformed into a "new man" (52). Auster's core preoccupation with recognizing the absurdity of life and the necessity to recover one's own identity is emphasized more than anything else in *Mr. Nobody*, which is more than a meditation on the loss of one's own identity.

"He doesn't fight against his condition so much as try to understand it, and rather than look for a way to make himself visible again (by confronting Chase, for example, or by searching for an antidote that would undo the effects of the drinks), he embarks on a series of weird and impulsive experiments, an investigation of who he is and what he has become". (45)

Hector Mann's whole life is dominated by this existential questioning. "He has been renewed after working through the trauma of disappearance," as Hector explains at the film's conclusion, "and is now making movies at the ranch as the "new man" he transforms into" (Shostak 78). A postmodern American culture demonstrates the mobility of identity by making Hector Spelling his new identity. Jim Peacock argues, "Mr. Nobody may be understood as an allegory of the commercialization and eventual effacement of the individual under a postmodern capitalist society" (65). Hector's career is being wrecked by the money-minded American culture symbolized by Hunt. By solving the mystery of his invisibility, he has gained 'all the benefits of the American capitalist ethos: his business, his family, and his money (Shostak 78).

Auster also discusses epistemological difficulties in *The Book of Illusions*. It is necessary to contemplate issues such as the nature of truth, morality, and religious convictions. It is clear that the characters are looking at certain parts of reality. Existential skepticism is a consequence

of questioning accepted notions of self, truth, and existence. Disappearances and losses open up a landscape of epistemological quandaries when they are investigated. According to Daniela Rogobete, “the attempt to find out the truth and the solution of the enigma” in Auster’s novels becomes “a profound epistemological interrogation of the means we use to understand the world around us, to map the spaces that define us and to know ourselves” in Auster’s work (43). Postmodernism is preoccupied with questions of epistemology and its consequences. There is no such thing as preset modernist concepts that guide human life, and Auster shares this view with the existentialists. To him, the act of being entails imbuing anything with meaning. In order to have an essence, one must first have existence.

To die is a human constraint that serves as a reminder of one’s own fealty. According to existentialists who advocate for a conscious understanding of death, this awareness gives the circumstances and urgency for a person to be real since it lends death its finitude. In *The Book of Illusions*, the idea of death pervades the whole work. Hector Mann is said to have died at the beginning of the book, and Zimmer makes this claim right from the start. Afraid to leave the shadow of death, Zimmer and Hector do not move one inch. He thinks that one must confront the truth of death or non-existence in order to grasp life. It is also said by Heidegger that in order to become a really true person, one must face death front on.

“Being unto death, a phrase Heidegger borrows from Kierkegaard, is a way of life that looks at the possibility of death as an intimate part of life: it isolates man, it throws him back upon himself, it offers him the possibility of becoming a personality”. (J. Gray 123)

Consequently, *The Book of Illusions*, by Paul Auster, is an anthology of existential questions that takes into account topics such a person’s sense of self-identity, emptiness, freedom of choice, mortality, and anxiety. Here, the protagonists are engaged in an exhausting battle for self-esteem. “It is an unending journey, without promised outcomes, which can never attain a closure”: Harold Bloom in the book, Paul Auster states (48). It becomes an effort of self-making for Zimmer, who uses the book on Hector Mann as an attempt to make meaning of his own life and the life of Hector Mann. Hector’s resurrection is an attempt to resuscitate his own spirit. The protagonists in Auster’s book attempt to escape their bleak lives by exploring the world of illusionary existence via the lens of the novel’s cinematic connections. Cinema is portrayed as a means of portraying one’s self via the use of illusion as a strategy to reconcile oneself with the external environment. They learn about themselves as a consequence of their travels. Finding one’s true self is presented as an ongoing, never-ending quest. Self-affirmation and existential honesty become crucial to Austerean protagonists as they embark on their journeys of exploration.

Conclusion

To conclude, the paper focuses on Auster’s existential mode of operation and analyzes *The Book of Illusions*, where the characters fight to recreate their identities in an illusory world

they live in the face of arbitrary and frequently catastrophic occurrences. Auster argues in this book that societal factors are not necessary to generate alienation, since it may be brought about by unexpected, random, unpredictable, and irrevocable occurrences that may be beyond an individual's control. David Zimmer's life has been irrevocably altered by the untimely deaths of his wife and children. For all his prior happiness and contentment, he now realizes that there is no such thing as everlasting happiness or contentment, and that everything is determined by chance and happenstance. He had no choice but to find another way to go on in his life. Here, Auster makes it apparent that he feels that fragmentation does not have to be chronic and slow; rather, it might be rapid, violent, and explosive. I realize that it might be difficult to define or otherwise locate a sudden accidental transformation in a person, but Zimmer's instance affected his life permanently as well as drastically reshaped his vision of the world around him. In an instant, he found himself in a state of utter confusion and disbelief. Zimmer and Hector employ the play of identities and film to recast their characters' sense of self in order to survive the exponential existential misery in their lives, which is also examined in this chapter. In the middle of the main narrative, Zimmer becomes enamored with Hector Mann's comedic work and is approached by the late actor's widow to see his last pictures. In the development of this persona, Auster most clearly displays the existential aspects of absurdity and randomness. Ultimately, Mann destroys his last films so that no one would be able to witness them. No rational explanation can be given for this behavior, which is clearly outlandish and ludicrous. It's possible that Auster's protagonists might genuinely accomplish this because of the circumstances in which they find themselves in the novel. Zimmer's infatuation with Mann's comedies, Mann's motivation for making these films is really merely to escape from his existential dread. As a result, the films are self-sufficient and do not need any extra encouragement. Mann carries out his responsibilities and makes his own decisions in order to alleviate his existential anxiety. Various parts of Existential philosophy in a postmodern mix have been covered in this article.

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