

5-2020

## Seeing into the *City of Glass*: An Analysis of the Postmodern Worldview as Displayed by Postmodern Detective Fiction

Katelyn Niehaus

Bowling Green State University, [katelyn@bgsu.edu](mailto:katelyn@bgsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Niehaus, Katelyn (2020) "Seeing into the *City of Glass*: An Analysis of the Postmodern Worldview as Displayed by Postmodern Detective Fiction," *WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

---

## Seeing into the *City of Glass*: An Analysis of the Postmodern Worldview as Displayed by Postmodern Detective Fiction

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my GSW professor, Jay Jones, for helping me to revise this article.

## Seeing into The City of Glass: An Analysis of the Postmodern Worldview as Displayed by Postmodern Detective Fiction

by Katelyn Niehaus

[katelyn@bgsu.edu](mailto:katelyn@bgsu.edu)

*“Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth”*

—*Marcus Aurelius*

With beloved characters such as Dupin and Sherlock, it is no wonder that detective fiction has persisted as a much-read genre with many forms and sub-genres. One such sub-genre that offers some interesting insights is postmodern detective fiction. Postmodern detective fiction is different from classic detective fiction in that it steps away from solving a mystery as its main goal; instead, it focuses on questions of being, ontological questions. As Richard Swope puts it, while the classic detective novel, or “the epistemological genre par excellence,” focuses on knowing, the postmodernist “ontological dominant” focuses instead on questions of being (208). Postmodern detective fiction transforms detective fiction by asking not the classic question of “Whodunnit?”, but rather the postmodern question of “What is truth?” Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* is an enthralling example of this postmodern genre. The interpretation of the focus and plot of postmodern detective fiction allows for the perception of several implications of the postmodern worldview.

The postmodernist worldview has two important aspects: the belief in multiple truths and the belief in the ability to create reality. To clarify, these are not the only aspects of this worldview but are important aspects to consider. The belief that there are multiple truths is also known as pluralism or relativism. According to Dennis Ford, author of *The Search for Meaning*, “postmodernists know that the world is pluralistic. That is, reality possesses sufficient complexity, diversity, and fullness to plausibly support many different ways of being symbolically or categorically organized into a coherent world. There is no single or final Truth that corresponds to that world” (128). Plurality means that truth is based on perspective, and, because of this, multiple perspectives lead to multiple truths, each of which are acceptable within their own contexts. This idea links to the belief held by postmodernists that reality can be created, because “the worlds [or reality] we discover are, to a greater or lesser degree, created by what we bring to them,” our perspectives (Ford 128). These two aspects have many different implications, based on the discernment and implementation of these aspects. One can interpret the

implications of these aspects of the postmodern worldview through postmodern detective fiction, such as Paul Auster's *City of Glass*.

*City of Glass* is about Daniel Quinn, a writer who gets caught up in a mystery. He gets a call from someone looking for the detective Paul Auster. Quinn eventually decides to pretend that he is Paul Auster, and agrees to help the mysterious caller, Peter Stillman Jr. Stillman Jr. and his wife are worried that Peter Stillman Sr. will be out of confinement soon and may try to harm Stillman Jr. Quinn writes Stillman Sr.'s every move in a red notebook, but eventually loses Stillman Sr. The novel ends with Auster and the narrator finding the red notebook, with no sign of Quinn. An interpretation of this postmodern detective fiction novel shows both aforementioned aspects of postmodernism and how these aspects have multiple implications. One implication of the belief in multiple truths is the suppression of oppression and prevention of totalitarianism. For a postmodernist, "Truth, with a capital T, is suspect to, or worse, an expression of oppression, privilege, and a will to power" (Ford 125). When there is a monolithic Truth that is held, other viable truths are discarded, creating oppression and possibly totalitarianism. Pluralism accepts all truths with equality, ensuring that none are oppressed. Multiple truths can be important and useful within certain circumstances, constituting this particular implication of the postmodern worldview as a strength.

Paul Auster's *City of Glass* has several instances that allow the reader to interpret the benefits of multiple truths as a combatant of oppression and totalitarianism. The passages throughout the novel that can be read in multiple ways, leading one to believe that they are about Quinn and his story, but also about the story of a writer, possibly Paul Auster himself. There is not one Truth within these passages; rather, there are multiple truths, with neither being better than any other. An example of this type of passage is, "He was warming up now. Something told him that he had captured the right tone, and a sudden sense of pleasure surged through him, as though he had just managed to cross some internal border within himself" (Auster 24). The reader could perceive this passage as describing Quinn and his feelings when talking with Virginia, or as describing the feelings of an author writing a novel. Both of these readings are valid, and neither is oppressed throughout the novel. This may create feelings of discomfort, as the capacity for numerous truths and interpretations often promotes feelings of peculiarity for the reader (Swope 208). However, this multiplicity of truths could also allow for the reader to get more out of the novel, as the reader receives an entertaining story as well as encouragement to think about some intriguing questions.

In the previous example, the author raises questions about what roles art and work, writing being a form of both of these, play in our lives. Auster furthers this question by naming the character in the story that Quinn is writing Max Work, often

simply calling him Work and allowing the reader to, again, have duplicate interpretations. This is exemplified in the passage “and little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn’s life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude” (Auster 6). Auster’s skillful implementation of these passages with double-meanings permits the reader to see how writing (or perhaps another form of work or art) can be intertwined so closely with one’s life that it is what gives life meaning. This demonstrates the postmodern idea of creating meaning through intention. This example portrays how relativism can limit oppression, ultimately allowing for more perspectives that are each valuable in their own way. Auster’s passages contain double-meanings that allow for the reader to gain insights, however uncomfortable this duality of truths may be.

Yet, the acceptance of all truths can, in some cases, lead to confusion and even nihilism.<sup>1</sup> What happens when no truth is better than any other? How does one make decisions or have values with postmodernism based upon truths that are not fixed? If no truth is better than another, then making choices or having values can be hard and confusing, because it is nearly impossible to know which truth to base a choice or value on. This can be likened to the metaphor that “if all paths lead to nowhere then it’s just as well to choose any of them” (Ford 134). This creates a sort of meaninglessness that can be termed as nihilism; in some cases, “nihilism results if no choice is better than any other” (Ford 134). Nihilism is “a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless,” basically the belief that life is meaningless (“Nihilism”). This is a limitation because believing that life is meaningless is a rather depressing way to live. However, for a postmodernist “totalitarianism is a greater threat than nihilism” (Ford 131). The belief that there are multiple truths has various implications depending on perspective. There are multiple truths for this aspect, which is ironically a very postmodern idea.

A reader can interpret this confusing side of pluralism from *City of Glass* when Quinn sees two Stillman Sr.’s and has to decide which one to follow. Each Stillman Sr. can be seen as a truth; neither of them are the Truth, or else Quinn’s decision of who to follow would be simple—he would follow the True Stillman Sr. However, the fact that both people were true Stillman Sr.’s shows the confusion that pluralism can lead to. The author writes that “Whatever choice he [Quinn]

---

<sup>1</sup> Another example of a limitation of pluralism is that it can lead to immoral behavior. This is shown with the psychopathic narrator of the postmodern detective fiction *The Good Son* who “admittedly has a ‘slippery relationship with the truth,’ whose goal to become a defense lawyer is fed by the belief that ‘morality [is] all about painting a picture to help your case...Being true to life wasn’t the only way to tell a story’” (Nolan, 2018). This shows a limitation of the aspect of postmodernism that all truths are valid, as it is evident that not all truths are moral. Indeed, the belief that all truths are valid can lead to one being immoral and, in this case, psychopathic.

made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end” (Auster 56). Thus, pluralism can create not only confusion, but also haunting uncertainty. For Quinn and anyone living within the postmodern worldview, “there [is] no way to know: not this, not anything” (Auster 56). This example leads to another limitation of nihilism due to pluralism and postmodernism. Not knowing which truth to follow, which Stillman Sr. to tail, leads Quinn to question the basis of everything. This questioning can create meaninglessness, which it eventually does for Quinn. Auster’s choice of creating such confusion within detective fiction is playfully ironic. Detective fiction is typically very straightforward and teleological, with all confusion being eliminated when the case is solved. Creating a story in this genre that not only lacks a solution but also raises more questions than it answers is a juxtaposition that creates both humor and discomfort.

The aspect of creating realities within the postmodern worldview can give freedom and allow for purpose to be found through intention and within context. First of all, creating realities sounds like man taking on the role of a higher power, but this is not necessarily what it means to create realities for a postmodern person. Indeed, “for the postmodernist, our ideas and symbols do not correspond with reality, they produce reality through an act of interpretation or construction, in which we select and reify one of many possible worlds according to our social and individual needs” (Ford 126). Creating realities for the postmodernist is about bringing in personal perspectives and interpretations to do so. When done intentionally, this can create purpose within contexts. For example, “if the meaning of ‘it all’ remains unclear, we can nevertheless find or create meaning within specific contexts and for specific moments while running, growing a business, or being a good parent” (Ford 137). Because of the ability to create realities, postmodernists have the freedom to actively create their own reality and find meaning by doing so.

A commonality throughout Auster’s work is the setting of an urban city. This urban setting is representative of a postmodern idea. Just as “there is no reason to be here [New York City], except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together,” so the world is meaningless without intention (Brown 2). This quote, describing New York City, can also describe how postmodernists view the world; it is meaningless, but individuals can find purpose by creating reality, through intention within context. This, and the reoccurrence of the theme of urban cities throughout Auster’s work, can show the implications of the aspect of the ability to create reality. For, although the world is meaningless, purpose can be discovered through intention and within context.

This idea of deriving purpose from creating a reality with meaning and within context is also shown in *City of Glass* when Quinn deciphers Stillman Sr.’s

steps to mean “Tower of Babel.” He finds these symbols and, through this, creates his reality. This creation of reality gives Quinn’s actions of fully dedicating himself to follow Stillman Sr. purpose. The author states “how much better it was to believe that all his [Quinn’s] steps were actually to some purpose” (Auster 61). It was beneficial for Quinn to create the reality of Stillman Sr.’s steps meaning something because by doing this intentionally, Quinn found purpose within the context of being a detective and recording Stillman Sr.’s every move. From this example, the reader can see how the ability to create realities can lead to a meaningful life by finding purpose through intention within specific frameworks.

Conversely, the ability to create realities can also have the opposite effect. In fact, the ability to create reality can generate feelings of meaninglessness, even nihilism, as “the fragmentation and incoherence it [the ability to create reality] fosters, the existential burden of necessarily having to create one’s own reality, and the knowledge that there is no decisive appeal” can cause this (Ford 127). Knowing that one is burdened with creating reality (instead of feeling freed) and that there is no “right” or True reality (as opposed viewing this positively as limitless realities and truths) can foster nihilism. In accepting that one has the ability to create reality, one also accepts that the universe is inherently meaningless, besides the intentional purpose that we create. Quinn discovers his ability to create reality in this passage:

Then doubts came, as if on command, filling his head with mocking, singsong voices. He had imagined the whole thing. The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he had wanted to see them. And even if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke. Stillman had nothing to do with it. It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself (Auster 71).

When an individual discovers that they create their own reality, he or she may feel nihilistic. This realization can cause feeling of fallaciousness of the world, that ultimately leads to the idea that the world is meaningless in itself. Without actively finding purpose through intention, life also becomes meaningless, which is an implication of this aspect of the postmodern worldview.

Additionally, Auster’s novel portrays implications of the ability to create reality through the focus of the novel on Quinn’s decline. Whereas the classic detective fiction genre “comments upon the process of sifting through signs, and ultimately upon the possibility of deriving order from the seeming chaos of conflicting clues and motives,” postmodern detective fiction often focuses on what happens when chaos, which is the natural state of the universe according to the postmodern worldview, reigns (Nealon, 91-92). In *City of Glass*, this is seen by the

mystery never being resolved; Stillman Sr. commits suicide and the reader never hears what happens to Virginia and Stillman Jr. However, this is not even the focus by the end of the novel. The reader is instead seeing Quinn basically have an existential crisis.<sup>2</sup> He barely eats or sleeps, only writing in his red notebook, and not caring about anything else in the world; why would he if the world was meaningless? In fact, “the last sentence of the red notebook reads: ‘What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?’” (Auster 129). The red notebook had become a symbol of purpose for Quinn, as it was this that he dedicated the most recent months of his life to, giving up everything else. Therefore, a reader can interpret the last line he wrote in it as meaning “What will happen when there is no more meaning, no more purpose driving us forward?” This shows a possible implication of the aspect of the postmodern worldview of the ability to create reality. When one can no longer find purpose, nihilism may ensue because postmodernists must actively create their realities in order to live a meaningful life.

To conclude, there are multiple implications for both the ability to create reality and the existence of multiple truths, which are two aspects of the postmodern worldview. The possible implications of these aspects can be seen from interpretations of postmodern detective fiction, such as *City of Glass* by Paul Auster. The recognition of these aspects and their possible implications can help an individual to understand his or her own worldviews and their aspects and respective strengths and limitations. When an individual better understands his or her own worldviews, it is likely that she or he will be able to more actively engage them and therefore live a more meaningful life. The interpretation of postmodern detective fiction also allows for a deeper appreciation of this genre.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a common occurrence for characters in Auster’s novels. This is seen when Lewis talks about another of Auster’s characters, Fogg, saying, “Like other Auster protagonists who have become swamped by possibility, Fogg deteriorates rapidly toward a degree-zero level of existence...” (56).



### Works Cited

- Auster, Paul. *City of Glass*. New York, Penguin Group, 1985.
- Ford, Dennis. *The Search for Meaning: A Short History*. University of California Press, 2008.
- Lewis, Barry. "The Strange Case of Paul Auster. (Cover Story)." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 53. *EBSCOhost*, [ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9410281953&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9410281953&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. "Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Apr. 1995, [muse.jhu.edu/article/21024](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/21024).
- "Nihilism." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nihilism](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nihilism).
- Nolan, Tom. "Mysteries: A Postmodern Procedural." *Wall Street Journal - Online Edition*, June 2018, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, [ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&AN=130188674&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&AN=130188674&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Swope, Richard. "Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Detective Fiction: Hawthorne's 'Wakefield' and Other Missing Persons." *Taylor & Francis Online*, 26 Mar. 2010, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111619809599531](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111619809599531).