

On a Quest for a Better Humanity: Introductory Elements for a Deconstructive Reading of Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*

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Abstract

In *The Music of Chance*, Paul Auster establishes his postmodern appropriation of Sartrean existentialism. His protagonist has been subject to a number of literary studies: while some critics believe him to be an existentially conceived postmodern agent, others have considered him to be the embodiment of the American myth or a Bakhtinean picaro. However, this paper addresses the question of this protagonist's multifaceted identity. Through the application of Derrida's deconstruction to a set of binary oppositions in Auster's narrative, this study aims to prove that not only we cannot attribute one singular meaning to the narrative, but also no singular identity can be ascribed to the protagonist. By deconstructing the binary oppositions of chance/choice, freedom/responsibility, and absurdity/meaning, this thesis attempts to prove that neither does a hierarchical superiority exist in any of the opposing ideas nor can they be ultimately defined as contradictory. Hence, the clear-cut meaning behind the narrative and specifically the protagonist's actions are questioned. This study concludes that Auster, through the amalgamation of postmodernism and existentialism, has created a protagonist of multifaceted identity, or, a postmodern absurd hero: an absurd hero who finds his own meaning amidst the absurdity of the world, realizes the value of his reaction to contingent occurrences as his choice, and eventually finds his freedom in the responsibility he takes for these choices. Auster's innovation in this novel is creating a postmodern hero on his existential quest for identity who rises amidst the absurdity of the world. The results of this study suggest that through this creation, Auster aims to guide the readers towards a better humanity in the contemporary postmodern era.

Keywords: Multifaceted identity, postmodern absurd hero, better humanity

Introduction:

The publication of *The New York Trilogy* in 1987 marked Paul Auster's name among the influential novelists of contemporary American literature and entitled him an influential postmodern author. Auster's reputation lies in his representation of "multiplicity of postmodern worlds" by merging the fictitious and the realistic (Lee, 2012, p.2). The body of Auster's works, including *Moon Palace* (1989), *Leviathan* (1992), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), and most notably, *The Music of Chance* (1990) deal with the individual's quest for identity, the role of contingent occurrences, and questions of man's freedom and responsibility. Underlying most of Auster's works is the uncertainty of the conventional truth. Auster's interplay with postmodern notions of predominant duality, urban dislocation and authorial authenticity lay the foundation out of which the multifaceted identity of his characters are built.

This multifaceted identity is perhaps best seen in the character of Jim Nashe, the protagonist of Auster's sixth novel and twelfth published work, *The Music of Chance*. The story opens up on the road as the protagonist embarks on a relentless journey across America and "exiles himself from all remnants of his previous existent" (Martin, 2008, p.6). A Boston fire man, Nashe's life falls apart as he loses his wife to another man. Due to his inability to care after his two-year-old daughter, he hands her to his sister's family. Then, "out of the blue," Nashe receives an inheritance of approximately two hundred thousand dollars from his estranged father (Auster, 1990, p.2). Selling all his possessions and leaving his life behind, he quickly becomes besotted with the open road in his new red Saab. For a whole year he does "nothing but drive" (p.1), casually crisscrossing around America. By the time he has dissipated almost all of his inheritance, he encounters Jack Pozzi, a beaten up and bloodied hitchhiker by the side of the road who later turns out to be a professional poker player going by the name "Jackpot" (p.1). Shortly after their encounter, Pozzi mentions that he needs ten thousand dollars for a game of cards with two eccentric millionaires, Flower and Stone. Prompted by his concern about his financial sum running out -which would mean the eventual end of his journey- Nashe decides to invest the ten thousand dollars in the game in exchange for half the profit. The game takes place in the millionaires' mansion. At first Pozzi appears to do well, but then the tables are turned; Nashe loses his initial investment, the remainder of his money, and his red Saab. By the end of the game he owes Flower and Stone exactly what Pozzi started out with, ten thousand dollars. In order to pay off their debt, Nashe and Pozzi are forced to resurrect a wall with stones of a fifteenth century Irish castle which Flower and Stone purchased and transferred to the meadow next to their mansion no more than two weeks earlier. At one point during the long process of building the wall, Pozzi is beaten to death after his attempt at a

nightly escape. He disappears right after this incident, while the watchman tells Nashe that he's been taken to a hospital. Upon completing the wall, Nashe celebrates with his captors at a local bar. The story ends where it had begun, on the open road in the red Saab, as Nashe speeds headlong to the upcoming truck (Oberman, 2001).

Auster, among other American postmodern writers, specifically employs Sartrean concepts of nothingness, the ego-less self, and responsibility as ways of depicting the identity of contemporary individual. During an interview, Auster mentions the significant influence of prominent existential writers on his literary style: "Of prose writers, unquestionably Kafka and Beckett. They both had a tremendous hold over me. In the same sense, the influence of Beckett was so strong that I couldn't see my way beyond it" (Auster, 1993, p.265). Through these influences, Auster bridges the perceived gap between postmodern thought and existentialism. His protagonists are the reinvented existential selves fitting postmodern contemporary consciousness. The result of his postmodern appropriation of existential tenets is the predominant duality created throughout his fiction.

Much attention has been paid to Auster's central character in *The Music of Chance* by contemporary critics; Oberman (2004) has known Nashe to be a "reiterated" American on the open road, reliving the American myth (p.46). According to Shiloh (2002), Nashe qualifies as a "the figure of the picaro on the temporal and spatial framework of the road" (p.4). Alptekin (2013) believes Nashe to be "a meta-existent," a character in search of identity. Shaped by forces of coincidence and solitude, the protagonist's identity can never be static (p.5). Some critics also believe him to be an existential subject modeled after Roquentin, the central figure in Sartre's *Nausea* (Oberman, 2001), while others have identified Nashe as an absurd hero who tries to overcome "his Sisyphean task of hauling the stones to build a wall" (Oberman, 2001, p.147).

Irrespective of how close these identifications might get to the character of Jim Nashe, none appears to be able to justify the ambiguities, contradictions and obscurities of his identity. This in turn leaves the reader with obscurities and gaps in the course of the narrative. This thesis intends to reveal these ambiguities through a performative display of the deconstruction of a range of conceptual pairings or binary oppositions in the text. What follows is the exposition that how any of these singular identities deconstruct itself through these binary oppositions. Once these oppositions break apart, the reader will have the opportunity to consider all the layers of meaning attributed to the character of Nashe. This study concludes that through this character Auster has introduced a postmodern absurd hero to the contemporary American literature: a hero on a quest for a better humanity.

Theoretical Framework

This study will consider Auster's postmodern style along with his use of Sartrean existential concepts. Later, certain qualities of Auster's literary notions and their direct relation to traits of Derrida's deconstruction will be discussed.

Auster's postmodern style in *The Music of Chance*

In "Postmodernism: What Are They Talking About," Gitlin (1988) associates American postmodernism with a number of definitive features:

"Postmodernism usually refers to a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works: pastiche, blankness; a sense of exhaustion; a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony; acute self-consciousness about the formal, constructed nature of the work; pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of history." (p.58)

He further argues that postmodern fiction, "... self-consciously splices genres, styles, attitudes." It delights in the amalgamation of forms (fiction-non-fiction), stances (straight-ironic), moods (violent-comic), cultural levels (high-low) (p.58). In the collective mindset of postmodern world all universal certainties are replaced by perceptual doubt and anxiety (Hassan, 1987). Calinescu (1987) maintains the defining traits associated with literary postmodernism: "... references to epistemological problems and concepts, such as the crisis of determinism and the place of chance and disorder in natural process," which distort the notion of the "conventional truth" (p.300). Bauman (1993) argues that the late twentieth century society has moved from an unquestionable faith in certainty to an awareness and acceptance of the inexplicable. As such, postmodernism "opts for chaos and a sense of dislocation" (Martin, 2008, p.5). This sense of dislocation, along with his emphasis on undecidability and rejection of history highlights Auster's postmodernity throughout his body of fictions. Auster is concerned with "the perennial postmodern anxiety of neurosis and paranoia about the extent to which everything is plotless or totally plotted: whether one lives in a world of hermetic containment on complete meaning or in a world of undifferentiation and pure randomness" (Wood, 1995, p.108). Auster's creation of a postmodern road in *The Music of Chance*, which lacks a beginning or an end, highlights his rejection of history. Martin (2008) also notes Auster's investigation of authorship: "... the author is removed from the compositional process, with the reader held responsible for the fate of Auster's various and somewhat interchangeable protagonists" (p.ix). The disappearance of Pozzi, as well as the ending of *The Music of Chance* are examples of reader's participation: Auster leaves no clue as to whether or not Nashe and Pozzi

survive. As for the ending, even the motives in Nashe's final action are open to question. The reader is left uncertain if Nashe freely intended to speed into the truck, making the crash a murder/suicide, or if it was an actual accident, a last chance event. Auster refuses to provide a clear-cut resolution, leaving it to his readers' participation in the possible interpretations.

Thus, undecidability plays a key role in Auster's creation of a multifaceted identity; in his search for a better humanity, no single identity appears to fit the contemporary consciousness.

Sartrean Existentialism and its Embodiment in Auster's Fiction

Heller (1993) identifies existentialism as the post-World War II cultural movement that would develop into a fully formed postmodernism. Existentialism is the portrait of an uncaring universe where man is solely responsible for his own actions. Existentialists' focus on the individual's freedom and responsibility forms their often-repeated motto: existence precedes essence. According to this school of philosophy, the identity of any person – their essence- can only be found by examining his or her actions, which in no way can be caused by either other people or the economic, social, or psychological systems. Moreover," existentialism revolves around this basic question that "whether humans are, or should be, free" (Galens, 2002, p.226).

Auster's ideology as a writer has been aligned with the philosophy of existentialism throughout a number of his works. *The Music of Chance*, along with *Moon Palace*, *Leviathan*, *Timbuktu* and *Mr. Vertigo*, explores "the individual's existential descent into the abyss and his subsequent quest of discovery" (Martin, 2008). *The Music of Chance*, in particular, shares its Sartrean elements with a number of notable existential works, including Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Kafka's *The Castle*, and Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. Resembling the previous generation of existential heroes, Jim Nashe is also on a search to find his own identity in the haze of absurdity and alienation. As Martin (2008) puts it, Nashe is "blinkerered, indifferent," and yet in the midst of his "estranged isolation" he embodies the postmodern agent looking for a better humanity as well (p.27).

The novel also deals with the loss of meaning. In the depiction of a world governed by irrational forces of contingency where any cognitive certainty is decentralized, the individual finds himself dislocated and alienated. The prevailing presence of absurdity throughout the whole narrative is perhaps best symbolized in Nashe and Pozzi building the wall; a wall out of ten thousand stones of an old Irish castle which serves no purpose and will be visited by no one. Thus, the wall stands as a symbol of the meaningless, the futile, and the absurd.

Derrida's Deconstruction and its Reflection in Auster's *The Music of Chance*

According to Eagleton (1983), “deconstruction is the name given to the critical operation by which ... [binary] oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning” (p.132). Deconstruction calls for new definitions of identity while celebrating its uniqueness (Dobie, 2002). To Derrida, human identity cannot consist of one singular self, since he is multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties and intentions. Consequently, the meaning behind any literary character's identity is not a stable element capable of producing singularity. The multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings behind every text actually mirrors the dynamism of human identity (Tyson, 2006).

Since the meaning of the text is really an indefinite, undecidable, plural, conflicting array of meanings, the centrality of a conventional truth in the text is primarily questioned. This unstable system of meaning in the text is a result of the dynamic play of language (Lee, 2003). The meaning is produced through the play of limitless differences of legitimately rival truths that supplement, disseminate, differ and defer the center. As a result, the reader is challenged to resist the closure, finality, and coherence in constituting the meaning of the central character. Much like the meaning of the text itself, the multifaceted identity of the character is created through a game of difference: the blend of different dimensions with deference of the cognitive center of identity has made possible the presentation of human's character.

Auster not only celebrates uniqueness of identity, but masterfully displays the decentrality of narrative in his fictions. Auster's fictional world is dominated by duality in which there are no universal truths. His narrative dismisses all epistemological certainties, and through the multiplicity of meaning creates fragmented, distorted and decentralized subjects. Martin (2008) asserts that Auster is “preoccupied with a recurrent set of themes and issues, such as the plight of the individual, the role of the author, the inadequacy of language, and the overwhelming lack of cognitive certainty associated with the contemporary, largely indifferent, and contingent world that Auster and his protagonists inhabit” (p.31). Throughout his work of fiction, the only centrality is the lack of certainty. His employment of elements of ambiguity and duality as well as his narrative's openness to various interpretations result in the decentrality of meaning, language, identity and truth; a quality shared by his text and the fundamental premise of deconstruction. By deconstructing Auster's narrative, the centrality of its meaning, as well as that of the Protagonist's character, come into question.

Based on this deconstructive reading, the multifaceted identity of this protagonist is later discussed.

Deconstructive Reading of Nashe: The Multifaceted Identity

Much like any other text, Auster's *The Music of Chance* is founded on sets of binary pairs. The oppositions of chance/choice, freedom/responsibility, and absurdity/meaning prevail his narrative. The primary reading of this novel might result in the establishment of a hierarchical system which misleads the readers into the recognition of a singular identity for the central character, Jim Nashe. This section will deal with the deconstruction of these oppositions, proving that they either overlap or are fundamentally dismissed as being opposites. Finally, Auster's creation of a multifaceted identity in his protagonist will be explored.

Binary Oppositions in *The Music of Chance*

The binary opposition is the structuralist idea that acknowledges the human tendency to think in terms of opposition. For Saussure the binary opposition was the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not. Derrida, however, argues that these oppositions are arbitrary and inherently unstable. The structures themselves begin to overlap and clash; ultimately these structures of the text dismantle themselves from within the text. Therefore, deconstruction is primarily concerned with exposing and challenging binary opposites in the text, to expose the unacknowledged (and perhaps unconscious) taken-for-granted power hierarchies within the text, to reverse them, and finally to pull them apart.

Auster has employed a number of binary pairs in *The Music of Chance*: the forceful role of chance, contingency and randomness as opposed to the role of free choice; the notion of freedom in the lack of commitments and restraints as opposed to one's responsibility for his actions; and the prevailing absurdity in life as opposed to one's individual meaning and purpose. In each set of oppositions, the novel appears to suggest the superiority of one notion over the other. The prominence of chance over choice is suggested throughout the whole narrative, from the title to the chain of occurrences which seem entirely contingency-based. Jim Nashe's freedom also appears to be in opposition to and superior than his responsibilities, as it is derived from the breaking of all ties and connections, leaving Nashe to be free in his irresponsibility. The same superiority can be applied to the notion of absurdity in contrast to meaning; nothing seems to make sense in the world of Nashe, and the absence of a transcendental dimension has given way to meaninglessness and the protagonist's alienation and solitude. However, a closer study of the text can offer a different view on these notions, deconstructing the opposition between

them by proving that they either overlap with one another or, contrary to what they may appear, are not opposites in the first place.

Deconstructing the Binary Oppositions in *The Music of Chance*

Chance vs. choice. Martin (2008) asserts that no Austerean fiction is void of the “continual presence of random and arbitrary happenings” (p.ix). Auster’s protagonists constantly find themselves confronted with contingent occurrences whose significance they cannot dismiss. Auster’s concept of chance involves the prospect of unexpected and apparently random events happening at any particular time, regardless of individual circumstance or location, and any subsequent circumstances that result as a consequence of the original action. During the course of his narratives, unexpected happenings, such as an inheritance, enables Auster’s character to abandon the trappings of his every-day surroundings.

Similar to most of Auster’s fictions, *The Music of Chance* is a narrative primarily dominated by a chain of chance events. This dominancy emerges in the opening paragraph of the narrative, introducing its central theme:

“For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out. He hadn’t expected it to go on that long, but one thing kept leading to another, and by the time Nashe understood what was happening to him, he was past the point of wanting it to end.” (Auster, 1990, p.1).

Upon reading the next few lines, the reader is told of how Nashe inherits “a colossal sum” of money from his long lost father. Receiving this inheritance is what Martin (2008) names “the original action” (p.36), the moment that will define the subsequent life of an individual: “If it had not taken the lawyer six months to find him, he never would have been on the road the day he met Jack Pozzi, and therefore none of the things that followed from that meeting ever would have happened” (Auster, 1990, p.2). As a result of the timely fashion in which the money finds Nashe, he is unable to save his marriage: “...the fact was that his father had died a full month before Thérèse walked out on him, and if he had had some inkling of the money he was about to inherit, he probably could have talked her into staying” (p.2). What follows is his subsequent journey on the open road, simply because one day, driving back to Boston after his visit with his daughter Juliette, “he ... found himself traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the freeway—a common enough mistake—but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road” (p.7). Nashe’s one-year-long journey ends upon his encounter with Pozzi, who happens to be a card player in need of a ten-thousand-dollar

investment for a Poker game with two eccentric millionaires, Flower and Stone, which Pozzi describes as “the chance of a lifetime” (p.20). In addition to the sequence of contingent occurrences which move the plot forward, Auster’s emphasis on the role of chance is also evident in his employment of the emblematic Poker game: Oberman associates Poker with “a situation of risk and uncertainty” (p.198). Sartre (1992) also places man’s existential being in the context of gambling: “For the future dimension is ignorance, risk, uncertainty, a wager. If each human being is a risk, humanity as a whole is a risk. The risk of no longer existing, the risk of indefinitely stagnating in one aspect of its history” (p.467).

Therefore, the concept of chance and its domination over Nashe’s life appears to be in contrast to that of choice; on the surface, the narrative appears to undermine the significant role of man’s choices in the course of life. However, as Martin (2008) points out, Auster’s protagonists are profoundly affected by their own “reactions” to random, contingent happenings. Auster implies that while the irrationality of chance may be determinant of an individual’s “subsequent existence,” it is the individual’s reaction to random events that can be rationalized. As Martin discusses: “each action influences every subsequent reaction” (p.35). While contingency is predominant within Auster’s fictional world, his primary concern lies with human reaction and interaction. Lyotard (1979) characterizes this reaction as “... a choice, itself left up to chance, between a number of possible, pure statistics” (p.57).

For each contingent occurrence in this narrative, Nashe shows a reaction, including his decision to leave his former life behind after inheriting his father’s money, stopping to pick up Pozzi, investing his remaining money in a Poker game, and even deciding against using the money from Juliette’s bank account to pay of his debt to Flower and Stone in the first place. As Sartre famously puts it: “not choosing is still a choice” (556).

The overlapping consequences of chance and the protagonist’s reaction to it, which is his choice, breaks this binary opposition apart, proving that Auster does not intend to ignore the importance of man’s decision. The arbitrariness he creates is not random in itself, but reveals Auster’s intention to encourage the reader to probe deeper in what may appear random.

Freedom vs. responsibility. In *The Music of Chance*, the novel places its male protagonist in “an existential confrontation with his own freedom” (Oberman, 2001, p.117). This is perhaps one of concepts that links this novel with Sartre’s ideologies. Existentialism derives from the principle that human behavior is based on nothing except free choice, which marks the struggle between freedom and responsibility (Galens, 2002). “Existential freedom comes through a courageous facing of fear and dread that a recognition of nothingness necessarily evokes” (Oberman, 2001, p.83). Auster, however,

blends the existential notion of freedom with that of postmodernism, creating an opposition between the protagonist's freedom and responsibility.

As Oberman (2004) asserts, Nashe is an individual freed from social and economic constraints. Shiloh (2002) argues that for Nashe, freedom is associated with anonymity, lack of commitment, and absence of human contact (p.491). He forsakes his family ties, breaks from the past, and seeks to re-create himself through the freedom of the open road (p.492). Furthermore, from the very beginning Nashe associates his freedom with irresponsibility: "Little by little, he had fallen in love with his new life of freedom and irresponsibility, and once that happened, there were no longer any reasons to stop" (Auster, 1990, p.10). He believes himself to be free only in a state where he does not need to commit, to take responsibility, or maintain any social or familial ties.

Nevertheless, he becomes so obsessed with his ultimate freedom that he appears to lose control over it: "He was like a crazed animal, careening blindly from one nowhere to the next, but no matter how many resolutions he made to stop, he could not bring himself to do it. Every morning he would go to sleep telling himself that he had had enough, that there would be no more of it, and every afternoon he would wake up with the same desire, the same irresistible urge to crawl back into the car" (p.7). Even upon his experience of love with Fiona, he cannot bring himself to exchange his wild freedom with the familial commitment. Eventually, Nashe turns his freedom into a prison from which he cannot escape. For him, freedom itself turns out to be the worst and most severe threat to freedom.

Ironically, it is only upon taking responsibility for his debt to Flower and Stone and his agreement to be in a state of confinement –not much unlike a prison- that Nashe is finally in peace with his freedom. In an interview with Mark Irvin (1994), Auster admits that the freedom of his protagonists lies in their confinement: "When the characters in my books are most confined, they seem to be more free. And when they are free to wander, they are most lost and confused." (p. 111)

Nashe's escape from responsibility, which results in his living in bad faith, justifies this contradiction in his identity. As Auster (1993) states in an interview, Nashe is "imprisoned by his own desire for what he construes to be a notion of freedom". This freedom "isn't possible for Nashe until he stops and plants himself somewhere and takes on responsibility for something, for some other person" (p.328). "Nashe's unexistential view of his own freedom as something either won or lost and dependent on money makes him a victim of the freedom that in actuality and before all else, in Sartrean terms, defines and structures his self-hood" (Oberman, 2001, p.140). Nashe believes that "The money was responsible for his freedom" (Auster, 1994, p.17); however, in Sartre's famous explanation:

“... human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of ‘human reality.’ Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free” (p. 25).

This outlook necessarily connects the notion of freedom with that of responsibility, thus negating their oppositions. The blend of the two together also contradicts the characterization of Nashe as either a postmodern agent or an existential subject, but a unique combination of the two. By deconstructing the opposition of freedom and responsibility, Auster brings his protagonist to the point of self-determination. His search for a postmodern humanism requires the overcoming of “epistemological and ontological anxieties” that rise from the opposition of one’s freedom and his responsibility (Wood, 1995, p.143). In *The Music of Chance*, Nashe’s self-determination happens at the point in which these two notions are finally united.

Absurdity vs. meaning. Perhaps the most important theme of Auster’s novel can be named that of absurdity, a term coined by Camus in his famous essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; an old story from the Greek mythology which tells the tale of a sinner condemned in Tartarus to an eternity of rolling a boulder uphill then watching it roll back down again. Camus identifies Sisyphus as the archetypal absurd hero, both for his behavior on earth and for his punishment in the underworld: a situation devoid of meaning, with the least connections with reality and its conventions, where the individual is left out, alienated from the others and himself. In his Philosophical Suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that: “One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it.” (Oberman, 2004, p.192).

In *The Music of Chance*, Nashe realizes that since the world is devoid of meaning and purpose, that it is morally indifferent, all decisions become equivalent (Shiloh, 2002). Nashe’s world is the evocation of a world stripped of a transcendental dimension, in which God is absent, nonexistent, or deposed by the power of money (505). Thus, his sense of alienation, disorientation and loss primarily brings in mind a character lost in the middle of an absurd play.

Although his world is dominated by absurdity and meaninglessness, yet Nashe’s actions, decisions and viewpoint somehow differs from those of conventional absurd heroes. Especially evident in the symbol of the wall as the ultimate absurd element, Nashe’s justification of his situation, his high spirit upon accepting the task of building the wall and the eventual bond he forms with his labors on resurrecting the stones, are telling of an existential quality much encouraged by Sartre, who believes that it is the individual’s responsibility to create his own meaning amidst the meaningless (Galens,

2002). This existential mindset is reflected in Nashe's reaction to the meaningless task: "It's less than two months, Jack, no big deal. They'll feed us, give us a place to live, and before you know it, we'll be gone. Why worry about it? We might even have some fun" (Auster, 1990, p.64).

Thus, not only the notions of absurdity and meaning are not in opposition in *The Music of Chance*, but also they overlap with each other. By bringing the two apparently opposite concepts together, Auster adds another layer of meaning to the identity of his central character.

Auster's Postmodern Absurd Hero: A Quest for a Better Humanity

The existential subject appears to benefit from the decentering and fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern era and specifically Derrida's deconstructive theory, where the certainty of meaning and truth is lost. The world Auster creates is one ruled by chaos, randomness and contingency. Martin (2008) argues that in this artistic anarchy, the construction of reality is replaced by the construction of mere possibilities, grounded of the distortion of truth, certainty and meaning. This distortion leads the postmodern subject to a quest for discovery, rebirth and self-identity. In Auster's *The Music of Chance*, this quest takes up a literal meaning in Nashe's journey on the open road.

By creating Nashe, this existentially conceived postmodern agent, Auster examines the "hidden, changing identities" of contemporary man (Stolarek, 2015, p.2). As Alptekin (2013) points out, in a world where no ultimate truth can be found or established, having one identity is not possible. "The subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity" (Sim, 2001, p.367). This argument disproves Nashe as merely an existential hero, a postmodern agent, or a Camusean absurd hero. Hence, an opportunity is provided to consider the multiple layers of his identity, which Auster has masterfully crafted by fusing the notions of absurdity, meaning, freedom, responsibility, contingency and free choice. It is through this admixture that Auster gives birth to a postmodern absurd hero: an existential subject in confrontation with his own freedom, which he can only find in responsibility, whose reactions to the contingent and the arbitrary randomness of events are of equal value, thus attributing to the Sartrean free choice, and above all, who not only does realize and confront the absurdity of his universe, but also strives at the creation of his own meaning amidst the abyss of the meaninglessness.

Auster's protagonist and his quest for identity, as unique as it is, appear to point at a greater picture. By blending the existential self and the postmodern consciousness, Auster ultimately and quite indirectly, guides his reader towards a postmodern humanism that seeks "positive alternative models for being-in-the-world" (Oberman, 201, p.108). Nashe's quest for identity is in itself a search for a better humanity, as he maintains a

commitment to the decentered truth without undermining his freedom and agency. In the image of this protagonist Auster reflects a way of being “beyond humanism”, a re-evaluated and re-situated critical humanism for a postmodern world (Oberman, 2001, p.12). It is the development of identity, or, the process of becoming, that leads the protagonist towards better humanity. Following in the footsteps of Sartre, who rightly condemns the humanism that “considers living beings as finished, closed totalities” (Sartre, 1996, p.68), Auster creates this protagonist of multifaceted identity to emphasize that existence is a process, and it is in this development of existence that Nashe becomes the emblem of the subject on the road towards a better humanity.

Conclusion

Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* is a masterful reconstitution of an existential subject in a postmodern context. Although many studies have found the protagonist of this novel to possess a singular identity -be it an absurd hero, the American myth on the road, a Bakhtinean picaro, or a postmodern agent-due to the contradictions the narrative provides, neither one can be attributed to Jim Nashe. Given the relation between Auster’s narrative and Derrida’s Deconstruction theory, the multifaceted identity of this protagonist is only perceived by the deconstruction of the text’s binary pairs, each of which will lead to the reading of a singular identity. The deconstruction of these oppositions of chance/choice, freedom/responsibility, and absurdity/meaning results in a better reading of Nashe’s multiple layers of identity. The blend of existential and postmodern doctrines has enabled Auster to create a postmodern absurd hero, in whom the notions of chance and choice, freedom and responsibility and absurdity and meaning are intermingled: an absurd hero who strives to find his own meaning amidst the meaninglessness, finds his freedom in the responsibility for his actions, and recognizes his reactions to contingent occurrences to be his choices. Auster’s unique characterization serves as more than an artistic creation *per se*. Nashe, as a postmodern absurd hero, can be an icon of the individual on a search for a better humanism that fits the fragmented and decentered contemporary consciousness. It is only by investigating the narrative’s intended gaps, obscurities and ambiguities that the reader can come to a better perception of this multifaceted identity.

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