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AN ANALYSIS OF *CITY OF GLASS* BY PAUL AUSTER & *CRYING OF LOT 49* BY THOMAS PYNCHON IN TERMS OF POSTMODERNIST ELEMENTS AND TECHNIQUES*

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Abstract

This study aims at analyzing postmodernist detective fictions entitled *City of Glass*, the first novella of the New York Trilogy by Paul Auster and *Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon in terms of postmodernist elements and techniques such as simulation (simulacrum; simulacra), deconstruction, existentialism, death of author and search for identity. In order to exemplify whether these elements were available in both of the works or not some passages from them were investigated and the study was tried to come to a conclusion. The method adopted for the study is descriptive and text based. The study is thought to produce concrete data especially because it investigated the features of postmodernist detective works with examples and to find out similarities between the two works.

Keywords: *City of Glass*, *Crying of Lot 49*, Auster, Pynchon, Simulation, Deconstruction, Existentialism, Death of Author, Search for Identity.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the postmodernist movement by analyzing post modern detective fictions known as *City of Glass* by Paul Auster and *Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon with some excerpts from both of the works. In doing so, the study tries to connect these two works with one another in terms of their similarities. The method adopted for the study is descriptive and text based so as to collect concrete data showing which postmodern techniques, elements and concepts were used in these two works by their authors. The next section is the core of the study and it analyzes two works in terms of these techniques, elements and concepts such as deconstruction, Baudrillard's concept of simulation (singular: simulacrum; plural: simulacra), metafiction, existentialism and search for identity.

1.1 Research Questions

- What is the similarity between *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49* in terms of postmodernism and postmodern related concepts?
- Is deconstruction used in *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*?
- Is simulation used in *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*?
- Is metafiction used in *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*?
- Are there any traces of concepts of existentialism and search for identity in *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*?

2. Analysis of Postmodernist Elements & Techniques in *City of Glass* & *Crying of Lot 49*

In this section, we analyze *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49* in terms of postmodernist elements, techniques and concepts to find out to what extent they reflect postmodernism traits and to understand the similarities between them.

The first concept that we can associate with postmodernism is deconstruction. Deconstruction became popular in 1960s and the famous figure associated with this movement is the French philosopher named Jacques Derrida. The movement was enriched with such terminologies as "differance", "logocentrism", "misinterpretation", "supplement" and "reversal of hierarchies". Especially, "differance" is the most significant which plays on the two meanings of the verb "différer" (defer and differ), both of which do not totally encompass their silent, indication of a blurring of the signifier and the dislocation or deferral of meaning (Munday, 2001: 171). According to Davis and Schleifer, deconstruction is a strategy of reading which starts from a philosophical hierarchy in which two opposite terms are given as the superior general case and inferior special case (1989: 207). Munday states that deconstruction is based on dismantling some of the key premises of linguistics, starting with Saussure's division of "signified" and "signifier" or any concept of being able to define, capture and stabilize the meaning (2001: 171).

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We can see the presence of deconstruction in *City of Glass* (1985). This novella is a postmodern detective fiction which was created by deconstructing the characteristics of the classical detective fiction. Throughout the novella, readers try to decipher a meaning because they expect a classical end which is specific to a detective fiction. In classical detective fiction, a normal end would be the resolution of a case. However, *City of Glass* has an extraordinary end uncommon in the classical detective genre:

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

As it is clear from this excerpt, the third person narrator throughout the novella changes to the first person narrator and the story comes to an end with what he/she tells us. Started to be popular in the Victorian era especially with Sherlock Holmes series by Arthur Conan Doyle, classical detective stories always have a resolution. However, in *City of Glass*, there is even no clear mystery and no crime is perpetrated in the end. Also, the protagonist of the novella, Quinn disappeared after he had played his role as a detective by changing his real identity, which is quite different from the end of a classical detective fiction. At this point, it can be asked why the author deconstructs the classical detective genre. In postmodernist texts, the meaning is uncertain with the thought that everybody's perception is different from each other. Because of this, Auster plays with the meaning and parodies the genre through the deconstruction method.

Another example of deconstruction in *City of Glass* is the part explaining on what conditions the language has a function or vice versa. At this point, it would first be necessary to explain Saussure's concepts of “signifier” and “signified”. In linguistics, “Signifier” means a distinctive combination of sounds or images whereas “signified” is associated with the concept or definition “the signifier” brings to the mind (Nicol, 2009: 7). In the novella, there is a man whose name is Stillman, who focused on inventing a new language as he thinks that there is a lack of communication between people. He is so crazy that he locks his son in a dark room for nine years to understand if he is to forget English and learn the language of the God. Besides, he collects things to rename them since he believes that words do not correspond to the universe any more and thus they need to be changed. To him, every object must have a function. If an umbrella loses its fundamental function or meaning, it is impossible to call it umbrella: “When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is it the umbrella still an umbrella?” (*City of Glass*, chapter 9: 77). When he talks to Quinn about his project, he also states that:

My work is very simple. I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of spaces, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap (*City of Glass*, chapter 9: 78).

What Stillman tries to show here is that signs refer to other signs because to him, there is no certain relationship between objects. This in fact means that there is no stability of meaning as a result of the breakdown of the relationship between “signifier” and “signified” in the postmodern society, therefore this necessitates the use of deconstruction. Lacan also approaches to this situation in a different way by connecting it to schizophrenia due to the fact that he describes schizophrenia as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is to say, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers constituting an utterance or meaning (Jameson, 2000: 71-72). Jameson also argues that:

Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time (Jameson, 2000: 7).

In these respects, it can also be said that *City of Glass* has some similarities to another postmodern detective novel entitled *Crying of Lot 49* by Pynchon. In this novel, there is a character named Oedipa Mass, who is bored with staying in Kinneret with his husband. Wendell Mucho Mass and she takes the opportunity to create a mystery for herself when she is informed about her ex-boyfriend's death, whose name is Pierce Inverarity, a Californian real estate Mogul. She leaves Kinneret so as to deal with co-executing his ex-boyfriend's will and finds herself playing a detective role, which in the end leads nowhere but the same cycle that signs refer to other signs (Chambers, 1992: 99). The fact that signs refer to other signs also shows nothing is certain and the reality is relative because of the fact that everybody thinks differently from

each other. In *Crying of Lot 49*, there is no mystery like *City of Glass*. In this book, Pynchon actually tries to show the lack of communication between people by deconstructing the detective genre as Auster did in *City of Glass*. The communication barrier in *City of Glass* is represented by a language philosopher egg, Humpty Dumpty and fictional Henry Dark whereas it is shown in *Crying of Lot 49* by a symbol "muted post horn" and a sign which Oedipa saw in the toilet "WASTE" (We Await *Silent* Tristero Empire) (emphasis intentional). It can be asserted in the light of this information that the language is counted as having lost its universality in the postmodern world as a grand narrative or meta narrative. Religion, enlightenment thought, democracy, Industrial Revolution can also be included to this category. In parallel with this, it should be noted that there is always a skepticism towards totalizing and universalizing events in postmodernist texts. Especially, for Lyotard, 'metanarratives' or grand narratives tend to be dominant over the individual subject by imposing a false sense of the totality and universality (Nicol, 2009: 11). Therefore, grand narratives were replaced by little narratives which are also known as smaller contexts, anti-narrative, petite Histoire (Hassan, 1987: 6) or petit récit (Lyotard, 1984: 60) to show the social fragmentation in the postmodernity. In parallel with this according to Lyotard, the power of meta narrative as legitimating and empowering force has declined in the postmodern period, which means that people do not any more rely on meta narratives but more localized and partial concepts, contexts and things (Nicol, 2009: 12) Lyotard discusses these matters in his article entitled *Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge* from a different perspective within the framework of economy:

The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means; it can also be seen as an effect of the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism after its retreat under the protection of Keynesianism during the period 1930-60, a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods and services (1984: 37-38).

The *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49* can also be analyzed in terms of the French philosopher Baudrillard's concept of simulation due to the fact that signs refer to other signs in the postmodern world as explained before. Baudrillard uses the term 'code' for the interchangeability of signs whose function is to establish a system of signs providing everything with a meaning and a value that is relative to other things and to establish the binary oppositions on which Western culture is founded as well as generating apparent stability in essences, identity, experience and meaning (Nicol, 2009: 5). In this way, the code generates the reality and has the special ability to duplicate things in order to replace the original with the copy which is hard to distinguish. The code can generate an exact replica of the original, which is named as "simulation" by Baudrillard (Nicol, 2009: 5) For Baudrillard, simulation is not any more that of a territory, substance or a referential being. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: 'hyperreal' (2010: 3). This implies that simulations of real have taken the place of the real. Baudrillard also asserts that "simulation is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and shortcircuits all its vicissitudes" (2010: 3).

In *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*, in order to accentuate the effects of simulation in the postmodern world, authors give Quinn and Oedipa, who feel socially isolated, a detective role. Around Quinn, there are many people like him who walk alone in New York streets. Oedipa also lives in an area which a social corruption has occurred. Her husband later becomes addicted to LSD, which also affects many people. To escape from their boring lives, both Quinn and Oedipa change their identities by playing a detective role or in other words they imitate an original detective by being his/her simulacra:

Though she saw Mike Fallopian again, and did trace the text of the *Courier's Tragedy* a certain distance, these follow-ups were no disquieting than other revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she *collected* the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into the Tristero (emphasis intentional) (*Crying of Lot 49*, chapter 4: 56).

As it is clear in this quotation, Oedipa plays the detective role to satisfy her curiosity about the relationship between the play and Inverarity. As mentioned before, she actually wants to escape from her boring life or in other words from the reality by being the simulacrum of a real detective. Like Oedipa, Quinn who isolated himself from the society upon his wife and son's death, decides to masquerade himself as a detective named Auster though he is a former poet and now a writer of detective fiction so as to forget his pain triggered by the real events. So, he waits for the stranger to call again so as to be the simulacrum of the fictional Auster:

The next night, he was ready. Sprawled out in his bed, perusing the pages of the Sporting News, he waited for the stranger to call a third time. Every now and then, when his nerves got the better of him, he would stand up and pace about the apartment. He put on a record- Haydn's opera, *The Man in the Moon*-and listened to it from start to finish. He waited and waited (*City of Glass*, chapter 1: 10).

Metafiction is another concept in postmodernism that we can analyze in this study. As Nicol states, metafiction is the main technical device which is used in the postmodern fiction and may be defined as "a fiction about fiction- fiction, which is about itself or about fiction rather than anything else" (2009: 35). Waugh also describes metafiction as a "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (1984:2). As it is apparent, fiction and reality are intertwined in metafiction, which is also emphasized by Menteşe in her article entitled "Bitmemiş Bir Tartışma-Postmodernizm" (2009: 28). In *City of Glass*, the author reflects his own life by using his alter ego, Quinn. In doing so, he also creates a character which he called Auster:

'I'm sorry to disturb you', Quinn apologized. 'But I'm looking for **Paul Auster**.'

'I'm **Paul Auster**,' said the man (emphasis intentional) (*City of glass*, chapter 10: 93)

'The private detective,' he repeated softly.

'I am afraid you've got the wrong **Paul Auster**.'

'You're the only one in the book.'

'That might me,' said **Auster**. 'But I am not a detective.'

'Who are you, then? What do you do?'

'I'm a writer.'

'A writer?' Quinn spoke the word as though it were a lament.

'I am sorry,' **Auster** said. 'But that's what I happen to be.'

'If that's true, then there's no hope. The whole thing is a bad dream.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.' (emphasis intentional) (*City of Glass*, chapter

10: 94)

The fictional Auster says to Quinn that he is working on a book of essays and the new one is about *Don Quixote*. Readers can assume that the fictional Auster is the author/narrator of the story. However, the real Auster tries to undermine his authority by claiming that the author/narrator of *City of Glass* is a different person other than himself or other than the fictional Auster in the story by means of the concept of metafiction that allows him to play with the meaning. The fictional Auster, therefore, says to Quinn that

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

Claiming that Cervantes tries convince his reader he is not the author of *Don Quixote*, the fictional Auster actually refers to the fact that the author is metaphorically dead. In other words, there is no any more the idea of a Romantic author because voices have lost their origin and the author has entered his own death in the postmodern field ("the Death of Author" <<http://www.vahidnab.com/author.pdf>>). According to Barthes, the text must also be written and read as if the author were absent ("the Death of Author" <<http://www.vahidnab.com/author.pdf>>).

Barthes also assumes that the author can be regarded as a father whereas the text is the son. Due to his fatherhood position, the author can be expected to nourish the text. However, the modern writer is born simultaneously with his writing. Besides, he is not offered a being preceding or transcending his text, which makes him co-author ("the Death of Author" <<http://www.vahidnab.com/author.pdf>>). In postmodernism, the author rejects and attacks "godlike narrator" or in other words an omniscient narrator which is confirmed by Barthes in "Death of Author". In the light of this fact, it can be argued that the fatherhood position of the author has lost in postmodernist texts. At this point, it is also necessary to explain two types of texts suggested by Barthes, which are directly related to this matter: Lisible (readerly) and scriptible (writerly) texts. Readerly texts show the authority of the writer and they are accordingly associated with the period when Modernism movement was prevalent. Readerly texts only aim to give pleasure to their readers who rely on the authority of the writer for the end of the story, Writerly texts, on one hand, belong to the postmodern period. This means that readers are free to take action in creating the text, which enables them to become writers and complete the story according to their own expectations which brings to the mind that everybody's perception is different from one another. Because of this, in writerly texts, the

authority of the writer is undermined especially by the application of metafiction¹. According to Barthes, "the writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing" (qtd. in Ball: 1326).

City of Glass and *Crying of Lot 49* are writerly texts which end in an uncertain way and thereby readers are expected to complete them. In the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn disappeared and readers do not know what happened to him when he was still going on writing in Stillmans' empty flat. Therefore, they are forced to write a conclusion: he died or went mad or preferred to stay as Quinn in the story and embarked on a new adventure. The end is completely up to the reader's minds. Similarly, in *Crying of Lot 49*, we find Oedipa awaiting the crying of lot 49. "How this is going to end" and "who the mystery bidder is" remains uncertain, which means that the conclusion waits for being written according to each individual's expectations.

Another postmodern concept that is analyzed for the study is existentialism. Existentialism focuses on the meaning of life through free will, human existence, personal responsibility, choices and finding self. People, throughout their lives, search to find out who and what they are and make choices by taking into account their beliefs, experiences, traditions and ethnic rules (<<http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existentialism.htm>>). Sartre defines "existentialism in a following manner: "Existentialism has an essence, the sum of its purpose and qualities, which precedes its existence" ("Existentialism is a Humanism" <<http://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/273/documents/sartre-existentialism-squashed.pdf>>). As Nicol also states, "Sartrean existentialism begins with the recognition that human existence is pointless, as there is no inherent purpose to life and insists that one's responsibility is therefore to determine the meaning of one's life for by making committed, responsible choices" (2009: 107).

At the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn disappears with no detailed explanation and nobody knows where he is or what happened to him. As is clear, he is a man who prefers loneliness in the streets of New York. Therefore, throughout the novella, he masquerades himself by adopting different identities such as William Wilson, Max Work, a detective named Auster by making his choice to take the place of him. There are only a few instances in which he introduced himself as Quinn. The fact that he avoids his real identity most of the time shows *existential* (emphasis intentional) or identity crisis which also leads to silence, exhaustion and disappearance in the end.' As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now' (*City of Glass*, chapter 13, 133) 'As for me, my thoughts remain with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck' (*City of Glass*, chapter 133). Like Quinn, Oedipa in *Crying of Lot 49* also suffers from an existential crisis. She lives in a socially corrupted area and is not happy with her husband. Everything seems boring in her life. Therefore, when she goes to San Narcissus to co-execute his ex boyfriend's will, she creates a mystery for herself by playing a detective role to make something interesting. However, she finds herself in a more complex situation.

3. Conclusion

In this study, we presented some excerpts from *City of Glass* by Auster and *Crying of Lot 49* by Pynchon to see to what extent these two works reflect postmodernism related concepts, techniques, elements and the traits of this movement. To this end, we analyzed the works in terms of simulation, deconstruction, existentialism, death for author search for identity and compared them with one another. It is clear as a result of the analysis we carried out, both of the works were proved to be rich in these respects and there are postmodern similarities between these postmodern detective fictions. More importantly, we found out in the study that postmodern detective fictions, though they begin as if there were a mystery, actually deconstruct the genre and mostly focus on an existential crisis. This is successfully applied in both of the works by the authors in the light of the analysis in the study. Auster and Pynchon also reject the universality of the language as a grand narrative which causes a lack of communication in the society, especially with the breakdown of the relationship between signifier and signified, which brings to the mind "poststructuralism", the opposite of structuralism movement.

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¹ <<http://www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/ReaderlyWriterlyNotes.htm>> 05.01.2012.

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