

The Void of Meaning: An Existential Inquiry into Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy

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Abstract

The existential philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard find powerful literary expression in Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy. In it, the modern person faces freedom, absurdity, and despair in their most disturbing forms. The trilogy illustrates Sartre's idea of nothingness, Camus' idea of the absurd, and Kierkegaard's idea of anxiety by showing characters

who have trouble finding meaning in a world that is quiet and uncertain. This paper offers a straight forward existential analysis of *The New York Trilogy*. Identity, isolation and the quest for meaning in a contemporary life are the central themes the trilogy focuses. The key figures adopt various identities as they struggle with their sense of self and they follow others or tries to experience life from someone else's perspective, which leads them to lose their own identity. Their journey illustrate the fragile and unstable essence of who they are. The analysis indicates that the novels embody significant existential themes. Although individuals have the right to make their own decisions, this autonomy brings along feelings of stress, doubt, and responsibility. The characters often try to escape these responsibilities by pretending to be someone else or depending excessively on those around them. Yet, their efforts to uncover straightforward answers often prove fruitless, resulting in feelings of isolation and doubt. Through these narratives, the trilogy illustrates that existence does not always offer clear meanings or assurances. Rather, individuals must embrace their freedom and take ownership of their decisions. This paper contends that the novels imply that genuine understanding arises not from avoiding confusion, but from bravely confronting it and crafting one's own significance.

Keywords: Existentialism, Identity Crisis, Isolation, Freedom and Responsibility, Absurd.

Existentialism originated in Europe in the 19th century. It developed as a reaction against traditional philosophical systems that prioritized abstract ideas and universal truths over genuine human experiences. Following the Great Depression in 1930 and the events of World War II, people around the world faced significant challenges, resulting in a prevalent sense of despair within society. Societal transformations like industrial growth, the decline of religious certainty, and the subsequent World Wars prompted individuals to re-evaluate the significance and purpose of life, paving the way for existential thought. Søren Kierkegaard is often credited as the pioneer

of existentialism. He highlighted the significance of the individual, the importance of personal decisions, and the role of subjective experiences. Thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus further developed this philosophy, each contributing their distinct perspectives. Existentialism emphasizes the individual experience, the essence of freedom and choice, the weight of responsibility, the search for life's meaning.

Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre presents the idea that individuals are not born with a predetermined essence. Rather, it is their choices and actions that shape who they truly are. This essential freedom is inescapable and can lead to unease, as there are no outside standards to establish significance. Sartre asserts that "man is responsible for everything he does"(29). Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, examines the nature of existence by emphasizing the idea of absurdity. He defines absurdity as a result of people seeking significance in a universe that provides none. He observes that this absurd state emerges from the conflict between human aspirations and the "unreasonable silence of the world" (28). Instead of proposing a method to flee from this truth, Camus promotes the idea of accepting it.

Auster's trilogy embodies the focus on individual accountability that parallels Sartre's thoughts, as well as the theme of facing the absurd that Camus addresses. The characters endeavor to find significance through their work, experiences, and reflections; however, their efforts invariably fail to achieve the outcomes they seek. *City of Glass* revolves around Daniel Quinn, a writer who finds himself emotionally isolated following the loss of his wife and child. Before any detective story unfolds, Quinn is already grappling with a sense of existential void. He lives under a false identity, writing mystery novels while avoiding contact with reality. This separation reveals an unstable self-perception. When Quinn answers a call meant for detective Paul Auster, he embraces this new identity. This choice reflects Sartre's view that people define themselves by the

decisions they make. Quinn has complete control over whether or not to accept the case, and he is solely accountable for the consequences. Quinn is convinced that watching others closely will provide him with understanding. He trails Peter Stillman throughout New York, documenting his actions in a notebook. Yet, this pursuit only leads to greater confusion.

The further Quinn followed Stillman, the more uncertain he grew regarding Stillman's behavior. This situation illustrates Camus's idea of the absurd hero, who continues to strive for something even though it is pointless. Quinn's diary fills up with terms that provide no guidance. As the story unfolds, Quinn's health worsens. He ends up losing his apartment, roams the city, and ultimately goes missing. His absence does not provide a resolution; instead, it signifies the loss of his identity. As for Quinn, "it is impossible for me to say where he is now"(133). This shows that Quinn had disappeared completely without a trace.

In *Ghosts*, Paul Auster showcases an example of Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of bad faith, where an individual avoids acknowledging their own freedom by confining themselves to a set identity. Sartre elaborates that bad faith is present when someone ignores their obligations and freedom by acting as though they are unchanging, stating that "bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth" (372). Blue engages in bad faith by completely identifying as an observer. His existence revolves completely around watching Black. There is no progress, discovery, or transformation. He persuades himself that his sole role is to watch Black, despite the fact that he is not compelled to do so. Blue admits that "over time, he felt more and more connected to Black" (173). Rather than recognizing this as a loss of his individuality, Blue considers it to be inevitable, justifying it through his work. Because of this viewpoint, he is able to escape the stress of establishing his own importance.

Auster depicts isolation as a deliberate choice rather than a chance occurrence. This aligns with Sartre's thoughts on being, freedom, and responsibility. Blue's existence is meticulously organized to avoid obligations, emotional bonds, and real relationships. The narrator explicitly states that “everything about his life to this point has been part of a determined plan to remain alone, and it would be absurd to read his willingness to talk as an effort to escape the throes of solitude” (180). This demonstrates that Blue's solitude is not something forced upon him; it is purposefully designed, reflecting Sartre's view that people are responsible for their situations, even if those situations cause suffering.

Blue experiences his existential awakening when he realizes that “there is no master above him anymore”(159). This realization reflects an important existential idea that power, meaning, and support are not provided by others but need to be claimed by oneself. Viewed through an existential perspective, especially with Camus' philosophy, this moment represents a confrontation with a reality that lacks any deeper significance or assurance. Blue's decision to be self-reliant does not erase his feelings of fear and suffering; instead, it represents his acceptance of his duties in a universe that remains indifferent. By acknowledging the absence of a “master,” Auster illustrates that freedom emerges from loss and isolation, emphasizing that authentic self-identity, from an existential viewpoint, is developed not through comfort or guidance but through the courage to persist without external control.

In *The Locked Room*, the narrator's decision to accept responsibility for Fanshawe's unpublished works marks a significant turning point. The narrator assumes a character that is not truly his by claiming Fanshawe's works as his own, raising questions about self-deception and authenticity. From the view of Sartre, this scenario could be seen as self-deception since the

narrator avoids his own freedom by focusing on the achievements of others. Instead of developing his own creativity and life, he finds meaning in Fanshawe's life.

Within existential philosophy, there's a principle known as the "Other." This idea implies that individuals frequently shape their identities through the perceptions of others by adhering to another person's journey. The narrator acknowledges that Fanshawe was the focal point of his existence. It wasn't merely an admiration; he believed he couldn't survive without Fanshawe. He expresses, "He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am" (201). Because of this, the narrator is experiencing what philosophers refer to as an inauthentic existence. Rather than making independent decisions, he relies on Fanshawe to outline his life. When Fanshawe departs, the narrator essentially assumes his identity. He publishes Fanshawe's works, marries Fanshawe's spouse, Sophie, and even takes care of Fanshawe's child. Although he thinks he is being supportive, he is merely diminishing his own identity. He transforms into a replacement, a false individual leading a false existence.

Existentialists explore the concept of facticity. This refers to the concrete details of a person's life, such as their birthplace or occupation. However, philosophers contend that the details don't provide a complete picture. An individual is far more than merely a collection of information. In *The Locked Room*, the narrator attempts to compile a biography of Fanshawe. He collects various items such as old letters, school reports, and photos. He believes that by collecting sufficient information he might uncover the true identity of Fanshawe. As he digs deeper, his understanding diminishes, indicating that a person cannot simply be distilled into a list of facts.

At the end, the narrator finds Fanshawe stays behind a locked door. They talked through the wood, but they never see each other. Fanshawe gives the narrator a red notebook. This notebook is supposed to solve the mystery behind Fanshawe's disappearance. As the narrator examines it, he

finds the material to be illogical. He notes: “Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible”(313) . This situation is known as negation. The writing fundamentally contradicts itself. This reveals an important truth about existence: there are no clear answers regarding human life. Existence should not be seen as a puzzle to solve, but as a journey to experience. The narrator makes an important choice. He tears the pages from the notebook and throws them away. By doing this, he ceases to reflect Fanshawe’s influence. He gives up his quest for answers about the past and decides to focus on the present. He realizes that the world may appear gloomy and faint and hard to comprehend, but it is now his, not Fanshawe’s.

This study presents Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* existentially, emphasizing ideas like identity, freedom, responsibility, solitude and the pursuit of meaning. The research explores how Auster’s characters attempt to define themselves through their choices, only to be confronted with ambiguity and absurdity drawing on the philosophical ideas of Jean- Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. It looks into how their personal journeys and explorations do not result in stable identities, emphasizing the fragile nature of the self. Auster presents life as fluid, uncertain, and wholly dependent on individual decisions in a universe devoid of clear meaning.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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