

Existential Being and Non-being in Paul Auster's "Disappearances"

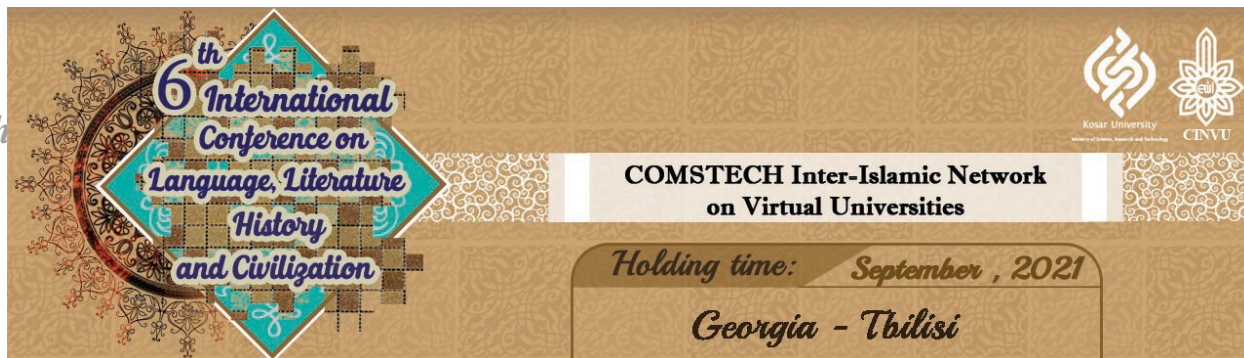
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Abstract

With the emergence of the school of existentialism, many writers began to write about the existence of human beings in the world, including the famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who played a crucial role in advancing existential goals. Existentialist themes have since appeared in novels, prose, and poetry. Although Paul Auster's "Disappearances" (1975) has been studied from different views, it has not been studied from the Sartrean existentialism. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the mentioned poem's existence crisis through Sartre's description of being and non-being. It claims that Auster represents the matter of being and non-being through the poem by referring to the description of a man who wants to highlight his being. Auster highlights the being in which is negated in the core of being. Also, he describes the life in which the man needs to find his true self for describing his existence. In order to find and describe the self, man must be responsible for the choices he has in his life.

Keywords: Paul Auster, Being, Non-being, Disappearances, Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre



1. Introduction

Paul Benjamin Auster (1947-) is an American novelist, screenwriter, translator, screenwriter, and poet who is well known for his notable works like *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990), *Winter Journal* (2012), and *4 3 2 1* (2017). Besides his fictional works, Auster is a talented man in poetry. He published most of his famous poems like “White Nights,” “Scribe,” and “In Memory of Myself” in the *Collected Poems* in 2004. Auster’s main concern is to search for identity and personal meaning in his writings. His famous poetry in the *Collected Poems* is “Disappearances (1975)” that this study is going to analyze it. Auster’s works both in poetry and fiction, are in the same theme, and he tries to seek human reality. He, in his works, writes about some life experiences he had during his life. Also, Auster’s “Disappearances” is about the same theme and in this poem he portrays the existential crisis. Moreover, the poem’s name in past is referred to a number of poems then it changed to the *Collected Poems* because of it Steven Kellman maintains that “*Disappearances* is the appropriate name that Auster, the self-erasing author, gave his collected poems, 1988”(227). This poem has been analyzed from different perspectives like mystical or negative feelings,

François Hugonnier in “Unsayings: Mystical Aspiration and Negativity in Paul Auster’s Poetry” represents the mystical aspiration in Auster’s poems, especially in “Disappearances.” Hugonnier states that the poet portrays a megalopolis that has people with stony language. He highlights the threatening progress of the poem in which Auster by the stones portrays the confusion of the bodies and buildings. Moreover, Hugonnier mentions Auster’s world, which is the semiotic one, and as the poet sees more, he becomes blind and blinder. Also, he refers to the poem’s Jewish mystical tradition in which language creates the world. And this language “allow[s] a reading of God’s attributes” (7). Moreover, it mentions Auster’s world, which is the semiotic one, and as the poet sees more, he becomes blind.

The other study by the same author, François Hugonnier, in “Poetry in and out of The New York Trilogy,” highlights Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* with his poetry. Hugonnier discusses some elements of “Disappearances” in comparison with the trilogy. He denotes that the world “breathe” is described as a means of survival in Gnomon, and Auster rewrites the story of recreation in the poem. Also, Hugonnier mentions the darkness and nothingness in the poem representing death/birth and inside/outside. Afterward, he declares that Auster has some adaptation from Emerson in which he changes Emerson’s I am nothing into he is nothing in the poem.

After reviewing the studies about Auster’s mentioned poem, this study is going to analyze Auster’s “Disappearances” through Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist view. He, in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* asserts that “‘existentialism’ is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity” (18). Existentialism refers to the fact of existence, and Auster’s poem brings some existentialist facts. Therefore, this study uses Sartre’s concept of “being” and “non-being” to portray Auster’s use of existential crisis in his poem: “Disappearances.”



2. Being and Non-being

In the beginning part of the poem, Auster defines the whole poem in this line. There is a clash between being and non-being in Auster's poem; he defines one's being by saying, "Out of solitude, he begins again---" (Auster 107). Man's being is highlighted by his beginning; he begins his life and his being in the life. This beginning shows that he has his consciousness and is aware of his being. For continuing the life, he first needs to know himself and his being; in other words, conscious of it. For this, in his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre asserts that "consciousness is to realize its concept by becoming conscious of itself in all respects, it tends to make itself valid externally by giving itself objectivity and manifest existence" (236). Auster uses the word "begins" to represent the man's consciousness who begins his life again by defining the life in which he will continue.

Following Auster's representation of being and non-being in the first line, he continues his poem by mentioning the non-being element of that beginner. Auster suggests that the man is in the last moments of his life, and he will die. He states that "As if it were the last time / That he would breathe" (Auster 107). This line shows that he negates his being by bodily features like breathing. The last breathing is the nihilation of man's being and tries to deny his being, for it Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* declares that, "The meaning of human reality as nihilated is constituted by this nihilation and this presence in it of what it nihilates; hence the self-as-being-in-itself is what human reality lacks and what makes its meaning" (88). Thus, Auster refers to the last moment to show the nihilation of man and his lack of meaning in life. Also, he refers to the non-presence of that man in his being, and by this last breathing, he loses his true being.

In the same spirit, Auster obviously refers to the negation of the man; and his being is not valuable. His being is absurd. Auster composes that, "He is alive, and therefore he is nothing" (Auster 117). Auster's direct representation of non-being in the core of being is clear and shows that man in his conscious mode negates the being; the being is negated by "he" itself and his choice. Sartre believes that as a denial of being, non-being depends on existence in the ontology. However, unlike Hegel, he does not believe that existence is ontologically dependent on non-being. For Sartre, being is not only to reveal being, nor is it necessary to exist: it is not only necessary to understand that being logically takes precedence over nothingness, but also that nothingness obtains its effect from being. This is what we mean when we say that nothingness follows being. This means that being does not require nothingness (Cox 5). Therefore, Auster tries to highlight man's being by mentioning the nothingness of the beginner. Also, non-being or the lack of man brings him his presence.

After seeking the mode of non-being and negating his total being, Auster highlights that man is searching for his being as he says, "he feels there has never been another / time---as if for the time that he lived / he might find himself" (Auster 110). For highlighting the true being, man needs to find his being, the being in which needs man's description of himself. He needs to emphasize the being, which is negated in the core of being. And as Natanson declares, "'The Search for Being' is a clue to the essential problem" (20). Auster refers to finding the being to find the possibilities that can help him introduce the man's identity or being during his lifetimes.



On the final page, Auster suggests the difficulties in finding the man's self, and during it, he has doubts in his being by referring to the stone, which is known as the gravestone. According to Auster, "He is alone. And from the moment he begins to breathe, he is nowhere. Plural death, born in the jaws of the singular, and the word that would build a wall from the innermost stone of life" (Auster 113).

In defining the being and self, Auster portrays its difficulties. He refers to man's solitude, that man must find it in his loneliness, and nobody will help him because the self is just related to the man itself not others. Moreover, as he is trying about the self, he faces doubts. The doubts are about his true defining of the being. Doubt can lead the man to lose the being again and by losing he again negates being and enters to the mode of non-being. As Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* asserts, "Doubt appears on the foundation of a pre-ontological comprehension of knowing and of requirements concerning truth. This comprehension and these requirements, which give all its meaning to doubt, engage the totality of human reality and its being in the world" (156). Thus, Auster for the foundation of the man refers to the man's difficulties and its doubts about the truth of being by referring to the stone and wall which can be comprehend as the gravestone and the cemetery as the symbol of death and non-being. Moreover, our understandings and comprehension of truth can lead us to the doubts.

3. Conclusion

Since the appearance of existentialism, many studies have been done in literary contexts like fiction and poetry. Auster's works, such as his collection of poems by the title of *Collected Poems*, include many existentialist elements. Auster's "Disappearances" highlights the existential element in itself. Thus, this study focused on the mentioned poem to analyze it through Sartrean being and non-being. In the analysis of the poem, it was obvious that Auster's writing format shows the isolation of being from its being and leads to non-being. And man, for defining the lost being, needs to find in the non-being mode. Additional studies can be done by using absurdity and supernatural subjects to better realize Auster's mentioned poem.



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