

BUILDING A CULTURE OF HOPE: REFERENCE TO AUSTER'S *HAND TO MOUTH*

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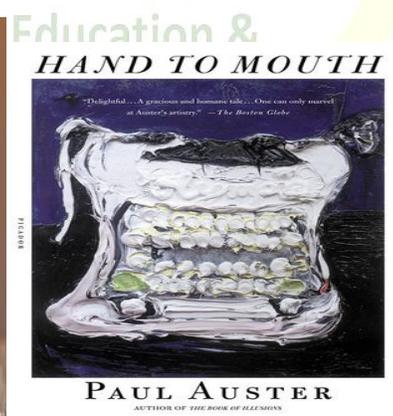
Abstract

Paul Auster's literary works create a "Culture of Hope" and "Optimism" as they are infused with purpose and a sense of belonging despite all the challenges of the present chaotic world. They motivate the readers to keep trying when things get hard and help them believe they can make a better future. This study aims at investigating Paul Auster's idea of hope and despair in *Hand to Mouth* with respect to the events and circumstances of his life. The researchers try to assess Auster's quest for identity and the way he problematizes binary concepts of "Self" and "Other" in his literary work. This study makes use of descriptive method in order to analyze the selected work. To conclude, Paul Auster demonstrates that "Culture of Hope" can be constructed through self-confidence, communication, tolerance, and togetherness. Such a culture bestows us with a notion of hope rather than despair towards life.

Keywords: Culture, Hope, Contemporary World, American Literature



PAUL AUSTER



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Introduction:

Paul Auster's literary works create a "Culture of Hope" and "Optimism" as they are infused with purpose and a sense of belonging despite all the challenges of the present chaotic world. As a first step, we can try to offer a very general definition of 'Optimism':

Optimism is a form of positive thinking that includes the belief that you are responsible for your own happiness, and that more good things than bad will continue to happen to you. Optimists believe that bad or negative events are rare occurrences and that it is not their fault when something bad happens but is due to something external. (1)

Modernism brings the idea of optimism in mind as it advocates the idea of humans' progress and improvement using logic and rationality. While accepting fragmentation, modernism tries to make sense of it. Postmodernism, however, is far more pessimistic than modernism. Considering the lack of absolute truth, postmodernists assume there can be no progress towards it.

Optimists and pessimists differ in their stance towards adversity and people. Optimists show more confidence while solving the problems, whereas pessimists tend to be doubtful and conservative. Postmodernists such as Paul Auster stand head and shoulders above modernists as their worldview is far more tolerant and respectful of other worldviews.

Hand to Mouth (1997), is Paul Auster's fascinating memoir about his early years as a writer. During those days, he was struggling to publish his literary works and to make enough money to survive. Auster avoided convention and the double life of steady office employment while writing. These themes have been investigated by different researchers and we will refer to some of the most important articles, theses and books in the next part of this study.

Review of Literature:

There have been few number of cultural criticisms made on Auster's works. So, this article proves to be innovative and encouraging on this domain. In his Ph.D dissertation entitled as "**The Sources of Political Hope: Will, World and Democracy**" (2010), Loren Goldman concerns the nature of hope for political progress in the contemporary world. He concludes that democratic hope is neither idle nor impotent. It is a working hope in the service of an ideal of social life, the motivational and orienting importance of which is made no less real by its ideality.

In *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere (2002)*, Ilana Shiloh examines Auster's writing in a multi-layered context of literary and philosophical paradigms relevant to his practice, such as the American tradition of the open road, the generic conventions of detective fiction, postmodernist concepts of the subject, Sartre's and Camus's existentialist theories, and Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic models, all of which offer enriching and insightful perspectives on Auster's poetics.

In her M.A thesis titled as "**The Problem of Identity in Writing by Paul Auster**" (2009), Hana Lyčková deals with various aspects of identity as they are depicted in three works written by a contemporary American author, Paul Auster. Lyčková concludes that Auster's characters try to find the way out of the impasse by pretending to be someone else. Within their solitudes and alternating identities, they try to find the way to their selves and they often devote themselves to writing as an act of insight.

Limitations of the study:

In this paper, the researcher has chosen only one work of Auster and the emphasis is mainly put on novel rather than the other literary genres. Besides, the investigation of all the aspects of "American Culture" as well as the psychological notions of "Hope" and "Optimism" requires interdisciplinary study which is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the selected text will be analyzed and scrutinized by making use of descriptive methodology.

Discussion:

A. Paul Auster: *Hand to Mouth* (1997)

Paul Benjamin Auster is a prolific writer whose works range from novels to screenplays, essays, poems, plays, and more. Born on February 3, 1947 in New Jersey, Auster is the postmodernist American writer who blends absurdism, existentialism and crime fiction in his fictional works. His parents, Queenie and Samuel, belonged to the Jewish middle-class of Polish descent. In *Hand to Mouth* (2003), Paul Auster explains how his parents used to hold different ideologies about American culture of consumerism. He writes:

My father was tight; my mother was extravagant. She spent; he didn't. The memory of poverty had not loosened its hold on his spirit, and even though his circumstances had changed, he could have never brought himself to believe it. She, on the other hand, took a great pleasure in those altered circumstances. She enjoyed the rituals of consumerism, and like so many Americans before her and since, she cultivated shopping as a means of self-expression, at times raising it to the level of an art form.(2)

Paul Auster graduated from Columbia University in 1970. Then he moved to Paris where he earned a living translating French literature. In 1974, he came back to his own country, America. It was the time when he married Lida Davis which doomed to be failure as they lacked mutual understanding. In *Winter Journal* (2012), presented in the second person point of view, reveals how he and his first wife were poles apart:

On October 6, 1974, about two months after you moved in, you and your girlfriend were married..., Given the frequent changes of heart that had afflicted the two of you from the beginning, the constant comings and goings, the affairs with other people, the breakups and makeups that followed one another as regularly as the changing of the seasons, the thought that either one of you should have considered marriage at this point now strikes you as an act of delusional folly..., you managed to keep it going for only four years, marrying in October 1974 and calling it quits in November 1978. (3)

Paul Auster's novels enjoy persistent popularity as they reflect postmodern American culture. Auster's 'sense of place' gives him a powerful wing to fly beyond the borders of America and lets him land in a multicultural milieu. In *American Multicultural Studies (2013)*, Pinder has brought together foundational works of scholars writing within the framework of American multicultural studies. In the introductory part of her book, she writes:

There is a constant struggle for nondominant groups to re-create themselves outside of the norms of the main stream culture, their cultures' understood meanings are continuously changing and continue to be challenged and disputed. What we have here is a form of cultural hybridity that makes the mainstream uncomfortable. Hence, cultural borders must be enacted so as to separate the dominant culture from the nondominant cultures. By taking into consideration how racialized otherness, as a site of constitutive impropriety and exclusion, is manifested within the United States to uphold Whiteness, our understanding of multicultural studies is sharpened, extended, and broadened. (4)

By virtue of cultural analysis of the selected work the framework of contemporary American literature will be delineated. In *American Culture: Myth and Reality of a Culture of Diversity (1998)*, Larry L. Naylor investigates the issues in the study of American culture. He shows how Americans compartmentalize various social groups on the basis of their own culture. He observes:

When Americans are asked about their culture or culture in general, they generally don't have very solid responses..., Most Americans in fact see culture as related to tradition, heritage, nationality, or a way of life. For still other Americans, it is what characterizes those "other" people "out there" somewhere else in the world..., They tend to respond rather negatively to any suggestion that they are part of a collective, or larger group, with whom they might share the ideas and practices they perceive as unique to themselves. (5)

Paul Auster grips with the complicated concept of culture which enables him to provide a prophetic portrait of America's cultural meltdown. In *Hand to Mouth (1997)*, Auster remembers his early youth difficulties in the following words:

IN MY LATE twenties and early thirties, I went through a period of several years when everything I

touched turned to failure. My marriage ended in divorce, my work as a write foundered, and I was overwhelmed by money problems. I'm not just talking about an occasional shortfall or some periodic belt tightening—but a constant, grinding, almost suffocating lack of money that poisoned my soul and kept me in a state of never-ending panic. (6)

However, he offers a surprising solution that spreads hope into the heart of his readers. Indeed, Auster propagates Forsterian ideology in the age of hyper-connectivity that technological advance is at the expense of authentic human connection. In the prologue to his novel, *Howards End (1910)*, E. M. Forster states:

Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.(7)

Like his predecessor, Paul Auster longs for people to communicate beyond the superficial barriers such as class or gender. *Hand to Mouth (1997)*, exposes the cultural forces that are at work in the postmodern era. Auster reveals his inner emotions in the American cultural environment as he states:

More often than not I was alone, at times excessively alone, alone to the point of hearing voices in my head. God knows what to make of that eighteen-year-old boy now. I see myself as a conundrum, the site of inexplicable turmoil, a weightless, wild-eyed sort of creature, slightly touched, perhaps, prone to desperate inner surges, sudden about-faces, swoons, soaring thoughts. If someone approached me in the right way, I could be open, charming, positively gregarious. Otherwise, I was walled off and taciturn, barely present. I believed in myself and yet had no confidence in myself. (8)

Auster's efforts for getting admission into Paris University led into failure. He demonstrates:

The program turned out to be a bitter disappointment. I went to Paris with all sorts of grandiose plans, assuming I would be able to attend any lectures and courses I wanted to but when I sat down to discuss these possibilities with the director of the program, he flat out told me to forget them. Out of the question, he said. You're required to study French language and grammar, to pass certain tests, to earn so many credits and half-credits, to put in so many class hours here and so many hours there. I found it absurd, a curriculum designed for babies. I'm past all that, I told him. I

already know how to speak French. Why go backward?
Because, he said, those are the rules, and that's the way
it is. (9)

However, Auster's failure did slacken his firm decision for achieving success. Auster refers to the hampers in his way of writing in the following manner:

In spite of the distractions and constant turmoil, I
managed to do a fair amount of writing, but
none of my efforts ever added up to them, wrote several plays
I didn't like, worked on poem after poem with largely
disappointing results... Still, I must not have been totally
discouraged. I kept on writing, after all, and when I
began publishing articles on books and films in the
Columbia Daily Spectator, I actually got to see my work
in print fairly often. You have to start somewhere, I suppose.
I might not have been moving as fast as I
wanted to, but at least I was moving. I was up
on my feet and walking forward, step by wobbly
step, but I still did not know how to run.(10)

Trapped in the well of despair, Auster resorts to his smart experiences and manages to publish his works. He explains:

Having gone that far with the business, I felt I
should make one last effort and see if I couldn't
conclude it once and for all. I didn't want to
walk away from the book until they'd had a chanceto turn
it down. I started looking for an agent again, and
this time I found the right one. She sent the novel to
an editor at Avon Books, and three days later it was
accepted. Just like that, in no time at all. They offered
an advance of two thousand dollars, and I
agreed to it. No haggling, no counteroffer, no tricky
negotiations. I felt vindicated, and I didn't care about the
details anymore. After splitting the advance with the
original publisher (as per contract), I was left with a
thousand dollars. Deductthe ten percent agent's commission,
and I woundup making a grand total of nine
hundred dollars.(11)

The leading idea behind all his literary works is the necessity of connection between individuals regardless of their cultural, racial, and national background. Auster summons them to unite the opposing cultural elements within them and beyond them.

Conclusion:

No researcher may claim to say the final word as the scope for further enquiries and new discoveries is wide and vast. However, a definitive consensus can be arrived at by

critical analyses. Paul Auster's work encompasses a duality in terms of thematic ambiguity as well as complications of formal construction. Paul Auster demonstrates that "Culture of Hope" can be constructed through self-confidence, communication, tolerance, and togetherness. Such a culture bestows us with a notion of hope rather than despair towards life.

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