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Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades

Departamento de Literatura

**Chance: the unpredictable in PAUL Auster's works**

Informe de Seminario para optar al Grado de Licenciada en Lengua y  
Literatura Inglesas

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**Santiago, 2005**

*“Agradezco a mi familia, Mauricio,  
amigos y camaradas por todo el apoyo que me han brindado durante mis  
años de estudio”*

**GRACIAS**

# Introduction

Chance is a key figure in our daily lives, since we are uncertain about events in our future that may affect our health, economic stability, or personal interactions. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that chance affects a human life deeply -- as deep as a person's convictions, beliefs, and other matters central to someone's life-plan. If she had not missed her train, she would never have met her spouse. Had she lived in other times, she may have been a black slave in Georgia instead of an American citizen with equal rights.

Major turning points in our lives seem to be governed by chance events and random encounters.

“Chance is part of our reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives” \_\_ Paul Auster<sup>1</sup>

By stating this Auster tackles the mysterious aspects that shape our current lives such as the unpredictable, the twists and turns of fate, chance and coincidence. All these themes are found in Paul Auster's works which aim at emphasizing the randomness of our life and the speculative restless centre in which life turns.

Auster's prose is put to the service of stories filled with strange and mysterious events, oblique connections, bizarre coincidences, and apparently chance acts that reveal fateful patterns.

In this work, I shall explore chance as crucial concept in Paul Auster's stories, to what extent he makes use of this theme as a resource to dig on the nature of existence and the world within the scope of philosophical and metaphysical territories.

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<sup>1</sup> See Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory". *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon P, 1992. 269

To begin with I am going to refer to the background information about the concept of chance from the Greeks to the theory of chaos which serve to support his idea of a chaotic world ruled by chance. Then, some of his commentaries about the nature of chance will be registered from his own personal perspective.

In studying chance in Auster's works, I will record the instances of this subject in his narrative. Among the nonfiction works are his memoirs, *The invention of Solitude* as well as interviews, collected in *The Art of Hunger* and others. The main fictional works examined include *The Music of Chance* and *Leviathan* among others which are briefly mentioned.

# 1. Faces of Chance

## 1.1 Etymology of chance

*O fortune, fortune! All men call thee fickle*

*William Shakespeare --- Romeo and Juliet (Act 3, scene 5)*

The vocabularies of many European languages have the ability to express the accidental occurrence of certain events, having either a positive or negative influence on those who are subject to it. In English these are *chance*, *coincidence*, *randomness*, *luck*, and *fortune*, with activities corresponding to them, such as *gambling*, and *lotteries*. We shall look into the etymology of some of these concepts for a hint of a proper application.

Both chance and coincidence both have their etymological roots in the Latin verb *cadere*, to fall, and its conjunction, *cadens*, falling. It reflects the idea that chance is something that falls down from the heavens onto the people. Chance has often been considered to be authored by God (s) in heaven and thus came to be connected with fate.<sup>2</sup>

In Greek tradition, chance or the fall is associated with concept of *clinamen*, which introduces the notion of unpredictability of randomness. The principle of randomness embodied in *climanen* is at the basis of contemporary chaos theory.<sup>3</sup>

In English the word *luck* expresses a fortuitous happening of an event favourable or unfavourable to the interest of a person. It has been derived from the fifteenth century

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst-Jan C. Wit, [The Ethics of chance: A Thesis in Philosophy](#). The Pennsylvania State University. 1997. 11. See [http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/~ernst/ethics\\_of\\_chance.htm](http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/~ernst/ethics_of_chance.htm)

<sup>3</sup> In their depiction of physical world and of the behaviour atoms, Epicurus and Lucretius maintained that in the course of the fall, atoms are driven by a supplementary deviation. This deviation from verticality occurs at an indeterminate moment and in indeterminate places, thus introducing a random element into the inflexible laws of nature. Taken from: Shiloh, Ilana. [Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: Essays](#). 2002. Peter Lang Edit., New York. 107

Middle High German *gelücke*. *Gelücke* or its modern German counterpart, *Glück*, means both happiness and luck.<sup>4</sup> The English word 'luck' has two meanings: good things that happen to by chance, not because of your own efforts or abilities. It also has the meaning of chance as the force that causes good or bad things to happen to people: to have good/bad luck.

Gambling is an old practice. It goes back at least as far as ancient Egypt where people used four-sided *astragali* made from animal heel-bones. The first known tract on gambling was written by the Roman emperor Claudius (10 BC-54 AD). Gambling, from ancient French *gamen* (to play), has always and everywhere been pervasive among all social classes. Interestingly, the word *wedding* finds its origins in gambling. The verb 'to wed' is related to the Middle High German word for betting. In Dutch *wedden* still means *to bet*. In Medieval Europe a wedding used to be a contract between two persons that were gambling. The contract specified that the one player promised to give away his daughter if he lost the gamble.

In an attempt to produce some income in the early sixteenth century Florence organized a lottery, which it called *La Lotto*. Although not the first lottery, it became a model for all subsequent lotteries. In a lottery the prizes are specified in advance and the random activity lies in the distribution of these prizes.<sup>5</sup>

## **1.2 The riddles of Chance (Trapped by fortune)**

The analogy of human life and games of chance is an old one, dating back to the Ancients. In the Roman era the prime ruler of both life and gambling was the same goddess, Fortuna. She controlled the unpredictable occurrences in a human life, Fortuna governed the fates of the human kind. The 'wheel of fortune' still contains both of these connotations.

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst-Jan C. Wit, *The Ethics of chance: A Thesis in Philosophy*. The Pennsylvania State University. Online. 1997. 11. See [http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/~ernst/ethics\\_of\\_chance.htm](http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/~ernst/ethics_of_chance.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

“For Fortuna accordingly became a goddess with her own cult and numerous temples. Early in the third century B.C., a colossal bronze statue of the goddess Tyche (Fortuna) as civic deictic [...] Fortuna was deemed to be the firstborn daughter of Jupiter and a prime personage among the gods.[...] Yet another sector of the Roman iconography of luck relates to the wheel of fortune (*rota fortunae*), which became one of the most popular and widely diffused secular icons of the Middle Ages. It was depicted as a great wheel, ridden by people, some on the way up, others on the way down, some ‘on the top of the world’, others ‘hitting bottom’.<sup>6</sup>

If one could get the favour of Fortuna, then one had ‘luck at one's side.’ If one had angered the goddess, then it was no good to count on anything. Luck became interpreted as a matter of desert and effort. If one was unlucky, then one had failed to pay Lady Luck the *proper* attention. That held true for a gambling game, as well as for events in life (Fate). It is not surprising that often Fortuna and Fate were thought to act together.

In Greek Tragedy, Fortune and Fate are said to be interrelated and this lead us to wonder to what extent our lives are dependent on chance.

A deeper sense of exposure to fortune is expressed elsewhere in Greek Literature, above all in tragedy. There the repeated references to the insecurity of happiness get their force from the fact that the characters are displayed as having responsibilities, or pride, or obsessions, or needs, on a scale which lays them open to disaster in corresponding measure, and that they encounter those disasters in full consciousness [...]<sup>7</sup>

According to Rescher, our lives are at the mercy of the randomness, the unpredictable, chance and the powers of contingency, far beyond the power of reason. By trying to understand this chain of chance events that may serve to mould someone's life, we immerse ourselves into philosophical and ontological quests.

“Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, chance has been defined as an accidental concurrence of independent eventuations, which,

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<sup>6</sup> Rescher, Nicolas. Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1995. 9-11

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. The fragility of goddness : Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy. London; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999. 50

as such, are inherently unpredictable and exempt from any mode of lawful regularity”<sup>8</sup>

This philosophical overlay, this reflection about the nature of chance and the whims of fate tend to be mentioned first when discussing Auster's work.

Fate as well as chance are a major concern in Auster's fiction. Characters unknowingly meet long-lost fathers, chance encounters lead to life changes. Everything enters an unpredictable world which at times seems to be governed by some mysterious force that as the goddess Fortune for the Greeks rules the world at her whim.

### 1.3 Chance and its Contingents

“It was an extra-ordinary bitter day, I remember, zero by the thermometer. But considering it was Christmas Eve there was nothing extra-ordinary about that ... Seasonable weather for once day, in a way ...

It was glorious bright day, I remember, fifty by the heliometer, but already the sun was sinking down in the down among the dead ...

It was a howling wild day, I remember, a hundred by the anemometer. The wind was tearing up the dead pines and sweeping them away ...

It was an exceedingly dry day, I remember, zero by the hygrometer. Ideal weather, for my lumbago.”

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

As Rescher points out in his reflections about chance, “the fact that the world is unpredictable develops from the existence of chance and its contingents (**accident (coincidence), chaos, choice and ignorance**).

#### 1.3.1. Accident (Coincidence)

Coincidence is derived from the Latin stem: *con incidere*, to fall together. The contemporary use of coincidence has preserved that meaning. A circumstance is called a coincidence when two, unrelated rather than unlikely, events fall together, i.e., happen at the same time, coincide.

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<sup>8</sup> Rescher, Nicolas. Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1995. 225

“Unforeseen crossing of initially independent lines, as in meeting without premeditation a long-lost friend. Individual accidents exhibit no pattern, hence are unpredictable.”<sup>9</sup>

### **1.3.2. Theory of Chaos**

In the field of science and mathematics chaos, as Michael Orkin stands out, has to do with the unpredictable and therefore, it works in favour of chance.

“Chaotic processes are those which are sensitive to initial conditions. For instance, the impact of this characteristics in predicting the weather is sometimes called the butterfly effect: A butterfly flapping its wings in Paris today could affect the weather in San Francisco next month. In other words, small changes in the conditions of given processes can affect them and their environment very much.”<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, this also works in human relationships, if a process is sensitive to initial conditions, then it is sensitive to all conditions, since every condition is an initial condition for the process starting at that point. Simple changes in our actions and reactions can modify the whole picture.

“If, in some general sense, life is a chaotic process, then seemingly insignificant events, minor changes to your daily routine, little things that you cannot control can dramatically alter the course of your future. In a world driven by chaotic forces, even if you completely understand the physics of these forces, some important aspects of your life may be as unpredictable as if nature tossed a coin to decide your fate.”<sup>11</sup>

### **1.3.3. Ignorance and Choice**

Taking into account the other two factors, ignorance and choice, they also play an important role for the presence of chance. Regarding ignorance; chance or randomness prevail as long as knowledge and reason fail to provide us with a proper guidance. And

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<sup>9</sup> Runes, Dagobert D. Dictionary of philosophy. New York : Philosophical Library, 1960. 92

<sup>10</sup> Orkin, Michael. What are the odds?: chance in everyday life. New York: W.H Freeman. 1999. 41

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 47

thus, the fact that human virtues are limited such as our knowledge serve to demonstrate that some uncertainties are unavoidable.

Concerning the fact that people have the power to make their own decisions on their own free will also works on behalf of chance. On a large scale, it is likely to predict other people's choices whereas individually, the possibilities to predict them are reduced, since choices can contrast the expectations.

Similarly, leaving the results of our actions to the uncertain decisions of others will possibly increase the factor of chance.

## 2. Paul Auster on chance

In *The Invention of Solitude*, the author included some comments on the nature of chance and coincidence as part of his books of memories. He defines coincidence as “to fall on with; to occupy the same place in time or space”(162). In one passage, he gives an example of this notion.

During the war, M.'s father had hidden out from the Nazis for several months in a Paris *chambre de bonne*. Eventually, he managed to escape, made his way to America, and began a new life. Years passed, more than twenty years. M. Had been born, had grown up, and was now going off to study in Paris. Once there, when he was about to give up in despair, he found a small room. Immediately upon moving in, he wrote a letter to his father to tell him the good news. A week or so later he received a reply. Your address, wrote M.'s father, that is the same building I hid out in during the war. He then went on to describe the details of the room. It turned out to be the same room his son had rented. (80)

As Auster remarks “Things like that happen to me all the time”.<sup>12</sup>

To some extent, Auster sees these uncertain situations such as coincidences as deprived of a reasonable explanation. As he experiences it, there is not just one way to look at it but rather a series of approaches seem to account for such events, whether in terms of chance, destiny, theory of chaos or the unpredictable. In what they all agree is that our lives sometimes cannot be explained within the scope of logic or reason but on the contrary they show quite an inconsistency and disconnection.

For him, the world is somehow meaningless, that is the only thing we can be certain of.

At his bravest moment, he embraces meaningless as the first principle, and then he understand that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to what he sees. He is in his room on Varick Street. His life has no meaning. The book he is writing has no meaning. There is the world, and the things one encounters in the world, and to speak of them is to be in the world.(*The Invention of Solitude*, p.148-149)

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<sup>12</sup> See Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory". *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon P, 1992. 270

Chance and coincidences are an aspect of the meaningless randomness of our existence, however, he also sees the world as something that carries within a “mystery.” A coincidence is a brief flash of the mystery showing its ordinarily hidden face: Reality [is] a Chinese box, and infinite series of containers within containers”(*The Invention of Solitude*, p.117).

In *The Art of Hunger*, he claims that: “the world is filled with strange events. Reality is great deal more mysterious than we ever give it credit for”<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, Auster feels a moral responsibility to reflect this insight into the nature and function of coincidence in the plot structure of his novels.

As a writer of novels, I feel morally obliged to incorporate such events into my books, to write about the world as I experience it –not as someone else tells me it is supposed to be. The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all the mysterious goings-on in the world.<sup>14</sup>

In Auster’s fiction, the author is no longer forced to tie chance purposely to an specific event so as to explain a dislocated and godless universe. But rather he sees it as a reflection of the unpredictable presented through human experience.

When I talk about coincidence, I’m not referring to a desire to manipulate. There’s good deal of that in bad eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction: mechanical plot devices, the urge to tie everything up, the happy endings in which everyone turns out to be related to everyone else. No, what I am talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, the powers of contingency. Our lives do not really belong to us, they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 260

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 273

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 270

In interviews, memoirs, and fiction, Paul Auster exhibits an ongoing concern with the phenomenon of chance. The purpose that he bears in mind is to take advantage of this theme by leaving behind a quest about the nature of our existence. Most of his works tackle the big existential themes, the nature of being, of happiness, of fate aiming at emphasizing the role of human beings within this world. To what extent, human beings as imperfect creatures with a limited understanding capacity, try to make sense of this uncertain world. Today, more often than not, we are exposed to a series of situations which as first sight seem to be nothing more than the result of chance, the random or a whimsical fate.

Following this point, Auster digs into the self of human beings in order to give an account of how we are able to handle these events in our lives.

For this reason, I would like to give an account of these events in Paul Auster's novels in order to demonstrate his perception about chance. I will include the way he deals with chance within his fiction and to what extent he uses the theories that I mentioned in section 1 in order to enhance this recurrent theme found in his stories.

## 3. Chance in Paul Auster's fiction

### 3.1. A Synopsis

The task in Paul Auster's works is to represent the chaos and the disjointed world today. As Beckett states in one interview:

“What I am saying here does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else [...] To find a new form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.”<sup>16</sup>

Auster's works attempt to incorporate the chaos of the world beyond understanding into his fiction. It is where allusive destiny and the belief that human life is utterly contingent blends with narrative velocity. This is why for Auster disasters always contain opportunities, deaths give up life and how the solitary site of invention generates unlikely fictions.

Auster as a writer of fragments, which exist alone 'with no before or after',<sup>17</sup> he writes about the discontinuity of a fragmented world.

“He disrupts the linear progression of the story and relies on chance to move the plot forward. Thus, complexity opposes earlier linear ordering of cause and effect. Chance is an unpredictable and whimsical goddess, misused in 'bad' literature as a device that allows the writer freedom for endless possibilities and combinations. However, in Auster's fiction chance is a way of shattering the power of reason and logic”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 298

<sup>17</sup> Nikolic, Dragana. Paul Auster's Postmodernist Fiction: Deconstructing Aristotle's "Poetics". University of London.[ Online]. 4. See <  
<http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/articles/aristotle.html>>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

As Auster declares, “the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in our lives. As the improbable exists in reality, the task of the realist writer, is to use it as a source of imagination and present it in his fiction.”<sup>19</sup>

Chance as reflecting lived experience functions for the purpose of narrative verisimilitude. It operates in order to serve as a mirror of Auster’s past experience.

“Auster frequently employs sequences from his life experiences. It is something that entails plausibility and sincerity. When he writes about such events he draws upon a certain conviction and in this way he transcends the borderline between fiction and reality. This is the area that he seems intent to animate”<sup>20</sup>

In the *City of Glass* Quinn states that ‘nothing is real except chance’. In an unpredictable universe, as Marco Fogg remarks in *Moon Palace*, “causality is no longer hidden demiurge that ruled the world, [...] the change is the only constant”.<sup>21</sup>

A series of events moved by chance overwhelm Jim Nashe’s life, the protagonist of *The Music of Chance*. Shortly after he inherits a huge amount of money, he meets with “Jackpot” Pozzi, defining the encounter as “one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air” (1). Later, his affair with Fiona Wells is defined as following the current flow of chance encounters: “like most of the things that happened to him that year, it came about purely by chance” (14). These seemingly random events unchained a set of unfortunate events in Nashe and Pozzi’s lives:

“He and Pozzi are consigned to building an enormous wall in a meadow, an utterly senseless assignment whose origins lie in the impenetrable concatenation of a series of chance events.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory. *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon P, 1992. 270

<sup>20</sup> Gargett, Adrian. The Cruel universe of Paul Auster. [Online]. See <http://spikemagazine.com/1102paulauster.php>

<sup>21</sup> Paul Auster. Moon Palace. New York: Penguin, 1989. 69

Chance is indeed a constant element of Auster's work. His characters are at the mercy of life's goodwill, "Our lives carry us along in ways we cannot control,...'(reflects the narrator of *The Locked Room*", p.1 ).

Throughout all of Auster's works, one will find phrases like: "Something happens, and from the moment it begins to happen, nothing can ever be the same again."<sup>23</sup>

These statements can be measured as an attempt to incorporate the chaos of the world 'beyond understanding' into his fiction. Auster tries to shatter the power of reason, and by this means, he leaves the reader with the feeling that nothing is sure and nothing adds up. In *City of Glass* he declares that "the question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell." (3) So it comes down to a kind of 'pure presentation' in Auster's work, which is supposed to activate the reader/viewer and to stimulate an emotional response.

So maybe that is why there is no conclusion to the interplay. Auster's novels avoid the end, the closure. The end has the power to finally determine the meaning, and that is not what he has in mind.

"Auster's texts centre around the idea of chance. By doing this, the purpose of Auster is to trigger on the reader a kind of reasoning about whether or not there is a real pattern ruling the uncanny events on his work. But he does not want to impose an answer to this quest, on the contrary Auster's works do not offer a possible solution or knowledge. In *The Music of chance*, we keep expecting that Nashe could find the truth, but we are denied that possibility. The breaking up of this snug unity of all knowing subjects is achieved through the presentation of something

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<sup>22</sup> Steven E. Alford. "Chance and Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster." From Bloom's Modern Critical views: *Paul Auster*. Ed Harold Bloom. Published by Chelsea House. 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Auster, Paul. Ground Work .Selected Poems and Essays 1970- 1979. 1990. Faber and Faber.1990. 81

beyond our control, something that destroys the neat ordering of cause and effect: chance.”<sup>24</sup>

## 3.2. Accounts of Chance in Paul Auster’s Fiction

### 3.2.1. The Music of Chance

#### 3.2.1.1. Games of Chance as Metaphors for Life’s Uncertainties

From the early cave dwellers to the thousands of modern-day bettors who flock to casinos around the world, humans have always been attracted to games of chance, which as a matter of fact provide metaphors for life’s uncertainties. Playing a slot machine, buying a lottery ticket or even a card game is a symbolic way of handing our destinies to the fates.

A remarkable account of this can be observed in *The Music of Chance*. Every character in this novel submits their fate to a game of chance, thus, getting into the world of the unpredictable.

In this story, there are two pair of gamblers. The first pair is constituted by Flower (Laurel) and Stone (Hardy), who are friends and frequent gamblers. These two friends seek patiently the best strategy in order to win the lottery, following a kind of ritual behaviour by playing every Friday for ten years. Lastly, they are fortunate because overnight they become millionaires after they won the lottery.

“The game was always at seven, and week in week out we always spent those ours in precisely the same way. First, we’d swing around to the corner newsstand and buy a lottery ticket, [...]. We did that for a long time, didn’t we, Willie? Nine or ten years, I would say.” (71)

As mentioned above, Laurel and Hardy have luck on their side, they are quite fortunate considering the scarce possibilities to win the jackpot. The chances of hitting the jackpot are millions to one.

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<sup>24</sup> Nikolic, Dragana. Paul Auster's Postmodernist Fiction: Deconstructing Aristotle's "Poetics". University of London. [Online]. See <<http://bluecricket.com/auster/articles/aristotle.html>>

“The odds are always the same, after all, no matter how many times you play. Millions and millions to one, the longest of long shots.” (72)

Comparing the case of the millionaires, the situation of Nashe and Pozzi is absolutely the opposite. These two characters met each other by chance: Jim Nashe, who sets out on travels on the road in order to define himself, falls in with Pozzi, a young professional poker player who is down on his luck.

As soon as Nashe agrees to lend Pozzi all his money in order to play a poker game against Bill Flower and Willie Stone, the couple of fabulously wealthy lottery winners, supposed to be easy marks, they are fated to a sinister ending. For them, relying on chance and gambling acts as a passage to unfortunate results.

Thus, gambling and life both reflect uncertainty in that when a player rolls the dice or choose either a lottery number or a card, he cannot be certain whether he is going to win or not, leaving the result to the whims of chance. As ancients conceived it, life and gambling were compared to the ‘wheels of fortune’, sometimes some people are at the top while some others hit the bottom. In relation to this fact, in everyday life, we are not certain about our future, economic stability, health etc. Randomness and chance will be always present in our lives, no matter how hard we try to eliminate it. Sometimes we get lucky; some other times our fate shows us that we are not as powerful as we think.

### **3.2.1.2. Chance as Ruling the Fate of a Character**

In *The Music of Chance* the main force at work in the character's life is precisely that of chance. The lexical field of chance, with (random / accidental / out of thin air / doubtful / sequence of events / out of the blue, and the nickname Jackpot -the second character whom Nashe meets by chance and with who he "jumps"-) show its importance in Nashe's present and future.

At the beginning of the novel, Nashe starts a recount about all the random events he has gone through his life. He mentions the fact that all these situations come as a sequence of chance events that eventually shape his fate. The first event that triggers his immersion on the unpredictable starts when he receives an inheritance, followed by the departure of his wife and the eventual meeting with Pozzi, from this point onwards he subjects his fate to the powers of contingency.

“For the whole year he did nothing but drive, travelling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out. He hadn’t expected 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. Three days into the thirteen month, he met up with the kid who called himself jackpot. It was one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air” (1)

As for his past life, the omnipresence of expressions such as “if it hadn’t been for this or the other I would have ...”, constitutes a terrible list of missed opportunities and sketches the outline of a totally different life that might have been, if only the money had been there a few months earlier. So subsequently he could have been able to rearrange his life.

“If it had not taken the lawyer six months to find him (to give him the inheritance), 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 would have happened. [...] if there had been any money, they wouldn’t have been renting the bottom half of a dismal two-family house in Somerville, and Thérèse might never have run off in the first place.” (2)

All these “might have beens” stand for the uncertainties of life. The role of the character attempts to make sense of a seemingly disordered world in which the expression of the existence, at every moment of life, of several possibilities or options, triggers a whole distinct collection of events.

Consequently, the character adopts a definite anti-hero dimension: he is trapped by life, a victim of circumstances who has absolutely no control on what happens to him and whose total lack of fortune is made even more obvious and cruel by his perfect awareness of how little was needed for him to have an entirely different fate.

In other words, the circumstances that lead him to these unfortunate situations, are closely tied to previous events that occur in his life; for example, the fact that his wife left him or the fact that he had to leave his daughter with his sister while being unable to run his own family due to economic problems. It could have been quite different if he had received the inheritance before this event happened.

All these situations trigger on the character a kind of explicit subjection to the whims of chance. While driving on the road without any definite purpose he meets with Pozzi .

“Had it occurred at any other moment, it is doubtful that Nashe would have opened his mouth. But because he had already given up, he figured there was nothing to lose anymore, he saw the stranger as a reprieve, as a last chance to do something for himself before it was too late. And just like that, he went ahead and did it. Without the slightest tremor of fear, Nashe closed his eyes and jumped.”(1)

The results of this meeting are far beyond the expectations: Nashe is lost and confused, he does not know how to handle his own life and he is looking for an answer. That is why he keeps driving along the road; although he is looking for an answer, he does not seem to be prepared to take the right decision and he leaves his fate to the encounter with Pozzi. This encounter functions as the last chance to revert his unfortunate fate.

However, what he ignores is that by living your choices to others together with a lack of self-knowledge and logic in your actions, a kind of behaviour featured by “going with the flow and lacking a purpose in life”, seem to trigger the presence of chance and its unknown consequences. Choice, ignorance, accident and chaos are the contingents of chance, as long as these elements take place in your life the possibilities of randomness increase.

After his meeting with Pozzi, Nashe gets involved in a hazardous scenery by following Pozzi’s ideas about the poker game. Unfortunately, he does not measure the consequences of his decision.

The poker game between Pozzi, Flower (Laurel) and Stone (Hardy) is the pivotal event in the story. Pozzi’s loss in this game results in his assault and possible death, and Nashe’s unexplained, but surely injurious fate following the night in the car coming back from the bar, with which the books ends.

“Had Pozzi won, he and Nashe would have left Flower and Stone’s estate wealthy; having lost, they subjected themselves to months of backbreaking work, physical unjury, and possible death.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Alford, Steven E.. “Chance and Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster.” From Bloom’s *Modern Critical views: Paul Auster.* Ed Harold Bloom. Published by Chelsea House. 1998.

### 3.2.1.3. Games, Poker and Luck as Reflections on Chance

*The Music of Chance* can be seen as the aftermath of Nashe and Pozzi's lost poker game and they examine the reasons behind their failure. Pozzi as a professional poker player believes in chance, and is convinced that on occasion, somewhere/sometime, he will be the chosen recipient of good fortune. He expresses the belief that the world is based on a delicate harmony which must be maintained in order to keep a state of balance. He accuses Nashe of disrupting that balance, "tampering with the universe" (138).

"He broke the rhythm of their game by leaving the room at an inappropriate moment. The consequences for the destiny of the two protagonists of *The Music of Chance* are catastrophic."<sup>26</sup>

As a result of this, they lose the game and are sentenced to build a wall as a kind back payment imposed by the millionaires. However, they have quite different reactions to this punishment.

"Nashe's attitude to his fate is fatalistic, he accepts that his freedom is taken from him and the building of the wall becomes a kind of atonement. He mocks Pozzi's belief in a hidden purpose that explains how things work in the world – luck/God/harmony. Once released from the world of infinite chance with indefinite possibilities, Nashe stoically tolerates his new position. *The Music of Chance* contrasts these two disparate worlds – the improbable world of chance and the determinate world of law"<sup>27</sup>.

Nashe's life is subjected to the powers of contingency on the road. By listening to the music of chance on his car while driving along the highway he enters a realm of freedom and movement.

"Nashe becomes the only fixed point in a whirl of changes." (11) Pozzy's life, similarly, is governed by chance, he relies on his luck which is, in turn, subjected to the throwing of a dice in a poker game. The building of this wall stands for this other world, the one defined by a lawful nature. It is as if the determinate world of law and order needs the wall in order to protect itself from the improbabilities of freedom and chance"<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 5

Life in general encompasses these two dimensions, a kind of ineffable force in which we do not have the ability to impose our will, resembling a poker game, in that you can lose or win, but, on the other hand, this determinate world of law stands for the rational and logical part of the world through which almost everything can be explained.

### **3.2.2. Leviathan**

#### **3.2.2.1. The role of Chance in the Shaping of the Story**

Leviathan is a story ruled by chance events. The story of Benjamin Sachs's circles around a number of bizarre circumstances which seem to be the sheer result of chance. In the first place, the development of the whole story starts by the discovery of the mangled remains of an anonymous body found by the side of the road; the victim has apparently blown himself up. Tracking a telephone number found in the man's wallet, the FBI reaches Sachs's friend, Peter Aaron, who thus learns about Sachs's death.

This accidental explosion triggers the progress of the novel. After this incident, Sachs's story is told through the eyes of his friend Peter Aaron, as a way to reconstruct Sachs's life. Aaron's task is a search about the inner life of his friend, who unexpectedly disappeared and whose life ended up in a tragedy.

The unfolding of the story is moved by chance. Through a series of unusual events and coincidences Sachs killed a man, named Dimaggio; although he was never arrested, he tried to atone for his crime, and when he found out that the man was a terrorist, he decided to carry on his work. In a symbolic gesture, he began to blow up replicas of the Statue of Liberty in different towns, until one of his attacks went wrong resulting killed by one of his own bombs.

Aaron and Sachs's friendship is also triggered by chance. They are brought together when a snowstorm prevents each one from going to the place where they are supposed to give their lectures. Furthermore, Aaron inadvertently helps the FBI to identify the body of Benjamin Sachs by mentioning that someone had been impersonating him and signing his books. Also, a lost address book leads Sachs's friend, Maria Turner, to her old friend Lillian Stern, who turns out to be the murdered man's ex wife.

But all these situations are the outcome of a major incident in Sachs's life, an event that will function as a turning point for him and which also illustrates its chance occurrence: his fall from the fire escape, a fall into the unpredictable.

In Auster's fiction, coincidences and chance are used as much as a device to drive the plot home as a way to ask questions about free will and explore to what extent one can be said to have control over one's own life.

### 3.2.2.2. The Fall, a Metaphor for the Twists of Chance

Regarding the treatment of the unpredictable in Auster's novels, one of the recurrent issues devices he uses is the *fall*, novels like *Mr. Vertigo*, *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan* demonstrate it. This time I am going to illustrate the fall, only on the basis of *Leviathan*.

In Greek tradition, the fall is associated with the notion of unpredictability, it comes from the Latin *cadere* which means "fall", meaning 'accident' and certainly 'coincidence'.

At a particular point in the story, the turning point in the characters' lives is their fall. Most of Auster's characters face this issue which functions as a twist of chance, which completely changes their fate and lacks any reasonable and logical explanation.

The Greeks tackle the fall as something related to Fate and Fortune in which they were considered as interdependent due to its relation to God's will and its whimsical power. It is herewith illustrated in tragedies as a major theme.

"A **tragedy** may be defined loosely as any work of fiction in which the protagonist suffers a fall in his or her fortunes, and ends in a worse state than that in which they began. Works as diverse as *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet* may thus be classified as tragedies.

Thus, tragedy involves a conflict between a character and some higher power, such as the law, the gods, fate, or society, the unknown."<sup>29</sup>

Taking into account this definition, the incident in the character's life has a major role in his destiny and it can either be associated with the whimsical power of Gods or to a

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<sup>29</sup> Taken from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy>>

flighty unpredictable chance. In Auster's works, there is a relationship between both since the actions and behaviour of a character do have a correlation to his fate, but unpredictable events just happen, no matter what you do, therefore, they lack any sensible explanation.

The fall as a result of the unpredictable is the incident narrated in *Leviathan*. In this case, the main character called Sachs falls down from a fire escape, and thus, the fall becomes the central and turning point in his life.

From this moment onwards Sachs's life enters a tragic cycle. His fall can be found in the structure of literary tragedy, the fall of the hero from "the top of the wheel of fortune," which in *Leviathan* takes the form of a literal fall on July 4, 1986, the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty.

"The sudden plummet from a fire escape, the movement of dizziness, when the wheel of fortune begins its inevitable cyclical movement downward, occurs after Nashe's fall."<sup>30</sup>

The fall is seen as something that the character must go through as a necessary stage for his own development. With his accident, Sachs falls out of his social environment; by refusing to talk to his friends as he lies on a hospital bed, he becomes a stubborn recluse who wants to cut off his ties with the outside world. For Sachs, the fall functions as a warning to change his life, he even thinks that he was the own perpetrator of his fall by trying to seduce Maria Turner on the fire escape. But beyond that, he thinks that he risked his life on purpose in order to end up living, as a way to change his actual life.

"I wanted to end the life I've been living up to know. I want everything to change...My whole life has been a waste, a stupid little joke, a dismal string of petty failures. I'm going to be forty-one years old next week, and if I don't take hold of things now, I'm going to drown. I'm going to sink like stone to the bottom of the world."(137)

When Sachs recovers from this spell of intense introspection, he decides to trade words for actions: "The idea of writing disgust me. It doesn't mean a goddamned thing to me

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<sup>30</sup> Fleck, Linda L. "From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster's *Leviathan*." From Bloom's *Modern Critical views: Paul Auster*. Ed Harold Bloom. Published by Chelsea House. 1998. 210

anymore...I don't want to spend the rest of my life rolling pieces of blank paper into a typewriter. I want to stand up from my desk and do something"(122).

As the novel progresses, Sachs gives up writing for a while but then he turns into a new novel, which he calls 'Leviathan'. He is in the middle of it, when suddenly fate intervenes and forces him to step into the world of action.

Taking a break from the novel he is writing, Sachs goes for a walk in the woods and becomes lost. He is offered a lift by a young man, and they meet another car that blocks their way. Dimaggio, who is the driver of the other car, is parked on the road and the kid who has given Sachs a ride approaches him offering help; Dimaggio shoots at the kid; Sachs grabs a bat and cracks the stranger's skull. For Sachs, the entire sequence of events is totally depicted as unexpected.

The gathering of all these situations and his reluctance to keep writing trigger a different desire in Sachs, a desire for an intimate struggle with himself. Going through the dead man's possessions, he finds out that his name was Reed Dimaggio, and that he carried in the car large quantities of explosives and a big sum of money. By chance, this man happened to be married to Lillian Stern, who is in turn an old friend of Maria Turner's. Here, we can see the relationship between this random coincidence and Maria as considered to be the reigning spirit of chance, she is an artist who works with the randomness. The fact that Maria was present the moment Sachs falls down, and actually being the quasi-plotter of this incident makes us believe that she plays an important part on behalf of chance.

Returning to Sachs's story, during his stay with Lillian, he does not learn much about the man he killed until he decides to look into his room. There he finds Dimaggio's dissertation, a reappraisal of the life and works of anarchist activist Alexander Berkman. At this moment he learns that terrorism "has its way to fight against the establishment. If used correctly, it could be an effective tool for dramatizing the issues at stake, for enlightening the public about the nature of institutional power."(224)

He carries this out by exploding replicas of the Statue of Liberty as a quest about man's self definition and as the extent through which a citizen can come to terms with the environment and circumstances that shape his life. It is a kind of attack against this

environment, a way to liberate him from this constant struggle to denounce The American false tradition.

Sachs as an individual and as a writer, he questions his own nature and psychological make up, he tests himself and probes deeper to understand who he is and also the nature of humanity, fate and chance. He is willing to give up his wife, career and everything in his search.

At the end of the story, Sachs seems not to have found the answer and his search ends up in tragedy, an irrevocable and irremediable one. On the road, in trying to carry out one of his bombings, he accidentally blows himself up. As his friend Aaron puts it: "In those few seconds before he hit the ground, it was as if Sachs lost everything. His entire life flew apart in midair, and from that moment until his death four years later, he never put it back together again." (120)

### **3.2.2.3. Sachs's Search for a Meaning Beyond Coincidence**

As already mentioned, Sachs has a sceptical attitude, he is always looking for meanings in a world of uncertainty. The novel charts out Sachs's quest for personal redemption and his literary validity in America. Sachs's inner journey as suggested by the image of the internal space that he has covered during his disappearance is a quest for justice and meaning in a hostile world.

After he finds out the political cause behind Dimaggio's terrorism, he compares himself to Dimaggio and he comes to a conclusion.

"I'd sat around grumbling and complaining for the past fifteen years, but for all my-self-righteous opinions and embattled stances, I'd never put myself on the line. I was a hypocrite and Dimaggio wasn't, and when I thought about myself in comparison to him, I began to feel ashamed."(225)

Even at this late stage of awareness of his role in society, he is driven by the impulse to write about Dimaggio. But for reasons he is unable to understand, he cannot carry out his task. Taking refuge in a bookstore to avoid an encounter with an old acquaintance of him in the street, he buys a copy of his own book and in his customary way of establishing far-fetched connections, he relates the cover of 'The New Colossus' in which the Statue of Liberty appears, to the cause of Dimaggio and terrorism.

“I started to think about Dimaggio all the time, to compare myself to him, to question how we’d come together on the road in Vermont. I sensed a kind of cosmic attraction, the pull of some inexorable force...I knew he had been a soldier in Vietnam and that war had turned him inside-out, that he’d left the army with a new understanding of America, of politics, of his own life. It fascinated to me to think that I’d gone to prison because of this war-and that fighting in it had brought him around to more or less the same position as mine.” (252)

That is how Sachs justifies his decision to blow up replicas of the Statue of Liberty. The affinities that he finds between himself and his victim are in line with his inclination to establish correspondence and infer meanings from coincidence. Suddenly he becomes a revolutionary hero accompanying his explosions with messages that read “Wake up, America”, or “Democracy is not given. It must be fought for every day.” However, the unifying principle he claims he has discovered is just fiction. Sachs grasps on this arbitrary connection in an attempt to find an answer to his own dilemmas. It suddenly leads to a sense of personal recovery as a way to find real purpose in life.

#### **3.2.2.4. “Maria as the Reigning Spirit of Chance” (113).**

Maria as well as Sachs, is a challenger driven by a “passion for taking risks” (69). She is an artist and her projects rely on the forces of accident and chance, as much as the obsessions and rituals that she lives by. One of her practices has to do with studying the behavior of randomly chosen citizens, following them with her camera and using the stranger’s itinerary in order to compose his imaginary biography and thereby her own.

Maria is engaged in “an attempt to reconstitute the essence of something from only the barest fragments: a ticket stub, a torn stocking, a bloodstain on the collar of a shirt” (70)

Maria focuses her artistic concerns on “the shifting nature of the self” (86), she constructs, deconstructs and recreates inner lives with the help of her camera. She acknowledges as a fact that the world is unstable, so her projects are a search for existence in an ever changing world.

Maria believes that chance is the only constant in a chaotic world, thus shattering the power of reason. So, her works are a way to expose ontological questions by studying how human beings react to this random world, she is interested in human emotion, taking all possible interpretations and avoiding any definitive outcome.

In Sachs's fall Maria played an important role since he was tempted by her, and chose to fall rather than give in to that temptation. But if she was the cause of his accident, she was also the agent of his partial recovery. After that incident, they met regularly every Thursday as part of a loosely defined project she wants to carry out. During those meetings, Maria took pictures of him, recorded their conversations, or she would follow him around the street with her camera. According to Aaron, these sessions allowed him to reconstruct his own spirit, as a way to save him from his own thoughts and confusion.

“When Sachs came to visit her in October, he had withdrawn to far into his pain that he was not longer able to see himself. I mean that in a phenomenological sense, in the same way that one talks about self-awareness or the way one forms an image of oneself. Sachs had lost the power to step out from his thoughts and take stock of where he was. What Maria achieved over the course of those months was to lure him out of his own skin. Every time Sachs posed for a picture, he was forced to impersonate himself, to play the game pretending to be who he was...They say that a camera can rob a person of his soul. In this case, I believe it was just the opposite. With this camera, I believe that Sachs's soul was gradually given back to him.” (145)

### 3.2.2.5. The Road as Evoking the Powers of Contingency

The powers of contingency are symbolically evoked through the image of the road.

“The road, claims Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is the place where the paths of the most diverse people intersect, the locus of the meetings and departures; it is a tool especially appropriate for depicting events ruled by chance (92-8).”<sup>31</sup>

Regarding *Leviathan*, most of the crucial events in the development of the story take place on the road. One of these instances is illustrated when Sachs accidentally kills Dimaggio and later finds out that Dimaggio is a terrorist, which makes him take up his political cause as a quest for the wholeness of the human nature and justice. However, Sachs's death also occurs on the road when he accidentally explodes himself with one of his artifacts.

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<sup>31</sup> Shiloh, Ilana. “A complex dance of guilt and desire”: *Leviathan and Moon Palace*. From *Paul Auster Quest and Postmodern Quest. On the Road to Nowhere*. Published by Peter Lang., New York. 2002. 121

For Sachs the road implies the beginning of his search for the unifying principle of the human nature and integrity and by the same token, the end of his quest.

On the other side, *The Music of Chance* also includes the road as a tool to refer to powers of contingency. Shortly after Nashe inherits a huge amount of money, he indulges on a journey, on a story of being lost, of wanderings, of never knowing what is going to happen next, a search for truth.

“As Auster remarks “In some sense *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* are opposite books, mirror reflections of each other.” Toward the end of *Moon Palace* Fogg begins travelling out west in a red car. After I completed the book, I realized that I wanted to get back in the car. There was something I wanted to explore about this idea. And, logically enough, *The Music of Chance* begins with a man in a red car. It was red in both cases. Driving around the country with no definite purpose.”<sup>32</sup>

Since virtually all of the characters in Auster’s fiction –tramps, gamblers and exiles, failed writers and deliberate and undeliberate losers –are on a journey that is much spiritual as it is physical. These wanderings, rather than pitying Auster’s characters against a hostile world, it forces them to confront their inner lives.

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<sup>32</sup> Irwin, Mark. “Memory’s Escape: Inventing the Music of Chance: A conversation with Paul Auster”.[Online]. See <<http://www.paulauster.co.uk/denverquarterly.htm>>

# Conclusion

Throughout the course of this research, we have been able to understand the importance of chance as a crucial aspect in Auster's works. He is a writer who feels compelled to reflect reality as it is, being indispensable for him to illustrate chance and the unpredictability of our lives in his work.

For Auster, the world is totally chaotic, full of chance events and uncertainties that shape our destinies. As he says the only constant is chance, our lives are governed by the powers of contingency; no matter what we do to fight against it, chance always finds its way into our lives. He emphasizes the randomness of our existence by stating that it goes far beyond reason, it is something that can not be explained. Still in some instances he and his characters claim that a whimsical force leads our fate. But this is also something that can not be explained, so his characters seem to be subjected to its unpredictable nature as well, being unable to find any logical reason for these aleatory events.

Therefore, as soon as any of these events take place in the characters' lives it functions as a turning point which will trigger out a collection of incidents that change the course of their fate. From this point forward, their fate is submitted to the forces of chance.

As a result of this situation, the characters immerse themselves in a quest for the nature of their existence, how they can handle these bizarre circumstances. It becomes a search for their inner selves; in other words, a way to find themselves in an uncertain world.

In order to attain his purpose, Auster takes advantage of a range of metaphors which stand for such uncertainties of life as the road, gambling, the fall in Greek tragedy and a set of chance contingents (accident, chaos, ignorance and choice) which work on behalf of a tragic randomness.

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