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Female dramatic presence in Paul Auster's fiction

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*A mis padres y hermanos que me alentaron a seguir
y me apoyaron hasta el final.*

*A Alex porque siempre creyó en mi,
brindándome su apoyo, consejos y sobre todo
por nuestro amor más allá de este mundo.*

A Isis y Carolina después de tantos años, finalmente...

A los que ya no están y que desearon ver mi logro

GRACIAS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to study Paul Auster's feminine characters in terms of their dramatic contribution and relevance as women. They will show us their strength and firm attitudes to face life's adversities, which are conditioned by the author's recurrent themes of chance, solitude, urban nothingness and desolation.

First of all I will briefly discuss the techniques of characterization that Auster seems to develop spontaneously in his novels.

Once I manage to do so, I shall develop a view of the technical construction of his feminine characters, so as to assess how representative they are among American women in literature. It is necessary to mention some women that come from novels and short stories of this nation.

This report will center around Anna Blume mainly, the protagonist of *In The Country of Lasts Things*. As for the other female characters in other works I will only mention them within the context of their relevance in the stories discussed. This will help me in supporting my original thesis, that is, that female characters stand for their strength and independent attitudes towards life. The main theme that I will discuss throughout this paper will be the way Anna Blume survives total decadence and eventual destruction.

1. A brief account of characterization

There are two ways to define characterization:

The first one proposed by Foster¹, refers to three fundamental approaches:

1. The explicit presentation by the author of the character through direct exposition, either in an introductory block or illustrated by actions carried out by the character, by means of narrative exposition.
2. The presentation of the character in action, with little or no comment by the author, in the expectation that the reader can deduce the attributes of the character from the actions in the story, like, for example, through dialogues.
3. The presentation from within the character, without comment by the author, of the impact of action and emotions on the character's inner self.

In *In The Country of Last Things* Auster presents, Anna Blume, one of his main characters, in action through the horrid experience of living in a country where decadence and chaos are the norm of life. She is the narrator and through a diary she keeps of the entire episodes of the story, she tells us in first person singular, which contributes to making her narrative more immediate and credible. In addition to it, she holds the responsibility of being the protagonist of the story.

The second approach to characterization, as proposed by Boas and Smith², is the following:

- a) Revealing a persona by description, which is a word picture relating to its appearance. In order to reveal the character, the description must do more than tell us what people look like, it must also suggest the qualities which go with outward presence;
- b) Revealing the character through psychological analysis which tells us what people are thinking in terms of the story as it develops, sometimes with much detail;

¹ Foster E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. London, England. Harcourt Brace and Company.

² Boas R. & Smith E. 1938. *Enjoyment of Literature*. New York, U.S.A. Harcourt Company.

c) Revealing the character through conversation as a way to show what they mean to say as what they hide or what they disguise behind the words, also, through the intonation of their speech, and;

d) Revealing the character, particularly, through action in critical or normal circumstances.

These approaches to characterization allow Auster to build his characters from a physical, psychological and socio-economic viewpoint and make them plausible. From the stylistic point of view, prose narrative, description and dialogue contribute to his creation of when: there is an establishment of the facts and events through prose; there is a revelation of characters through dialogue, producing an approach to the character's background, convictions, points of view and passions; and finally, the description of the setting and characters as well, where they develop their actions and their physical features and gestures of his characters.

It would not be superfluous to define three types of characters to round off the idea of characterization. First, the Round character who is more human, he represents the experience, therefore, he has maturity and wisdom in spite of the fact that he could make mistakes of which he is conscious and ready to rectify, that is, he is capable of being perfected. This character is aware of his reality and others. Modesty, harmony and balance are typical features of his personality. He is creative and has a tendency to enjoy ideas, music, people for the sake of art. He can be called a searcher who is a nonconformist regarding society, although he is not a fatalistic.

Second, the Flat character, on the contrary, has as steady ideas as answers, also he is strongly opinionated has answers for everything; he is a know-all man. He searches for popularity and takes advantage of other people whenever he can, he lacks genuine aspirations, a decision capacity, and he believes in what is always structured, for he is unable to create new structures, for he does not trust human perfectibility; he is a dogmatic creature.

Finally, the character in Relief makes its appearance. One should presume that he has been flat character for a long time, until he comes to a point of self realization and sudden awareness that will make him change all his views in life and experience. This phenomenon can be termed Epiphany.

I find it of special importance to discuss the distinctive features of female characters, specifically in the novels that I have already mentioned: Ann Blume, whom I believe, possesses a very relevant personality, the protagonist of *In the Country of Last Things* will be fully analysed and described on the basis of these theoretical viewpoints. Also, other women; as secondary characters will be discussed: Mrs. Witherspoon, Mother Sue³; Kitty Wu⁴; Fanny, Lillian and Maria⁵ and; Victoria (*In the Country of Last Things*) to assess their contribution to the gender and to the male characters' life and convictions.

³ Auster, Paul. 1994. *Mr. Vertigo*. New York, U.S.A. Penguin Books Ltd.

⁴ Auster, Paul. 1990. *Moon Palace*. New York, U.S.A. Penguin Books Ltd

⁵ Auster, Paul. 1993. *Leviathan*. New York, U.S.A. Penguin Books Ltd

2. Influential female characters in the history of American literature: Ann Blume's relevance in this respect

They stand by themselves within the historical development of the American society and represent different moments of their stand as heroines of great novels and short stories.

In "*The Scarlet Letter*", Hester Prynne, a married woman who has been punished by the Puritan community of Boston because she has committed adultery. She has to wear a finely embroidered piece of red cloth in the shape of a capital "A" meaning adultery over her chest. She challenges moral hypocrisy and shows an exemplary dignity in front of the citizens. This badge of humiliation becomes her own identity, as a mother, a lover and an honest woman. To her, running away or removing the scarlet letter would be an acknowledgement of society's power over her. Denying it would annul her own self: strength and determination.

Another example is that of heroine is *Sister Carrie*; the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's novel. She travels to Chicago to stay with her sister and her brother-in-law. The cosmopolitan world of this city enchants her and she constantly wants to buy things. At the beginning, she works in a factory, but she loses her job, becoming her boss's mistress. Then she becomes infatuated with Hurstwood. They married and moved to New York City where Carrie abandons him because he fails to provide her with the lavish life she wants. In this city she becomes a famous, high-paid actress. The theme of this novel goes from extreme poverty to upper-middle class comfort. The characters identities are constantly subjected to change, reflecting the modern American experience that had been ushered in by the development of capitalist economy. In the process of this development, thousands of rural Americans rushed to the cities to find jobs and to build themselves new lives and identities. From this character we can see that she lives according to the times, her aspirations and wishes are more important than love, self-achievements as being a famous actress. There is no pure feeling just for love

but limited by money. However, she gets what she wants showing in that way her determinism and strength.

Another case of a female character in literature is Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* where a twelve-year-old girl is bored with her life until she hears about her older brother's wedding. Bolstered by lively conversations with the family's servant and her six-year-old cousin, and of course, her own unbridled imagination. Frankie takes an overly active role in the wedding, with the desire of going to the honeymoon, a deep desire of being member of something larger, more than herself. McCullers exposes by means of Frankie the freshness and gentleness of a sensitive child and her inner desire.

Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha*⁶, became a landmark of literary modernism, the author focused on emotional process almost to the exclusion of action and other conventional plot structures; she chose black character in her story at a time when other white writers would not do so. Furthermore, the central character in this story is Melanctha who was sexually liberated and assertive at a time when Victorian values still dominated women's lives. Melanctha is an intelligent, emotionally complex mulatto woman who wanders through life, always in search of something like some knowledge, some experience that she could never wholly acquire. At a time when women were expected to choose conventional and safe paths, for instance, marriage, children, middle-class life if it possible, Melanctha is a kind of rebel because her indefinable questing suggests a woman's desire for more (that the author never says). The central relationship of the story, Melanctha's love affair with the young doctor, Jefferson Campbell, also wanders aimlessly, despite Jeff's solidly middle-class aspirations. The narrator highlights Melanctha's efforts to know and communicate, rather than the progress of her relationship toward some socially-sanctioned goal.⁷

By examining these characters in general terms, we can see that all these features and attitudes they possess are fundamental for understand and strengthening background about women in American literature. This will help us to define and to some extent draw

⁶ Stein, Gertrude. 1933. *Three Lives: Melanctha*. U.S.A. Vay-Ballou Press.

⁷ Notes from internet

the silhouette of Ann Blume as a protagonist, a postmodernist heroine in a chaotic world.

3. Anna Blume and the collapse of the world

According to Auster, creation itself is chaotic, in his fiction the main characters are mutable, changing with the environment⁸. Characters are impermanent, evolving through states, losing and recovering their identity, until, perhaps he or she reaches a vanishing point. In other words, the individual identity fades out and the city is often a catalyst in this process. It is in this setting that we find Anna, a nineteen-year-old woman “in the country of last things”, where she goes on a wilderness journey, which is full uncertainty, in search of her missing brother, a journalist. This a chronicle told in an epistolary way, that is, the whole story narrated in this novel, becomes Anna’s own registry of events in the form of a personal journal: or letter that she eventually fails to mail.

“These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time. It is all happening too fast now, and I cannot keep up.”⁹

Thus, Anna relates her experience in this nightmarish place: she is in the midst of an apocalyptic situation where this world has collapsed in time and space.

Since the very beginning the reader is introduced into Anna’s description of the incidents and adversities in that world. In doing so, through her actions and attitudes, she is depicting her own character and the way she faces such horrid reality from which she expects to emerge untouched.

Also, this subconscious self-depiction, shows Anna’s values and passions, regarding their presence and effect on those who surround her.

⁸ www.spikemagazine.com/1102paulauster3.php. Cruel Universe: Creation is chaotic.

⁹ Auster, Paul. 1988. In the Country of Last Things. p, 1

3.1. The Setting: an Apocalyptic Future?

“The city is crumbling, its building and streets near collapse. The military government no longer even tries to keep the civil peace.”¹⁰

According to Lefebvre¹¹ who explores how the space is produced and reproduced in fiction, the above mentioned quote represents the site and outcome of social, political, and economic reality of this world that does not offer any future nor hope of survival.

This city, a nameless place that could very well be any American city, stands rather a similar extension of the dystopia, which is contrary to utopia, and becomes a horrible journey through Hell. The opening pages of *In the Country of Last Things* confirm that “Last Things” denotes the end of the world:

“Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn’t waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is, the end of it.”¹²

The human prevailing law in this collapsing city is cannibalism, both literal and figurative; in fact, creation and projection birth has ended and life perseveres by devouring the past and recycling it into even more inferior forms. The little food available can be obtained only through violence or an exchange system based on scavenging. Existence is so miserable that the will to live practically disappears and systematic ways of dying and corpse disposability become a speculative business. The city is in a state of perpetual contingency, ephemerality, and transience says Anna Blume, and “slowly and steadily, it seems to be consuming itself, even as it still remains”¹³

The city is just such a place and no place at all, in it people are completely indifferent to reality, they only have an instinct to survive.

¹⁰ Auster, Paul. 1988. *In the Country of Last Things*. p. 85

¹¹ Bloom, Harold. 2004. *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Paul Auster* . p. 137

¹² Auster, Paul. Ob.,. Cit. p. 2

¹³ Auster, Paul. Ob.,. Cit. p. 21,22.

“For nothing is really itself anymore. There are pieces of this and pieces of that...At a certain point, things disintegrate into muck, or dust, or craps, and what you have is something new, some particle (...) that cannot be identified(...) As an object hunter, you must rescue things before they reach this state of absolute decay...”¹⁴

Its survivors desperately try to survive in the middle of nothingness; through desperate solutions, they only think in ways of reaching death: the leapers and their Last Leap, that is, jumping from high places and dying in a flash to annihilate themselves in a brief and glorious moment; then the runners who hurl themselves down the filthy streets, running until their death by exhaustion; there also institutions for euthanasia and; assassination clubs, to which people pay for being unexpectedly murdered. This death wish is transformed into an aesthetic action, in which the grand spectacle dominates as ritualized forms of self-transcendence¹⁵.

“Death is not longer an abstraction, but a real possibility that haunts each moment of life...those marked for assassination become more alert, more vigorous in their movements, more filled with a sense of life”¹⁶

There is no memory of how see this cataclysm has happened. History is slowly erased as a consequence of the erasure of the material existence of objects. An active memory is considered an insurrection, and it is a political tool imposed by the government of this city, a person advises Blume about the availability of airplanes to escape from this place “you could get into trouble for spreading that kind of nonsense. The government doesn’t like it when people make up stories”¹⁷

So, imagination is also dying or Auster is careful in telling us that his:

“book has nothing to do with science fiction. It’s quite fantastical at times [...] anchored in historical realities. It’s a novel about the present and the

¹⁴ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 35,36.

¹⁵ Bloom, Harold. 2004. Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Paul Auster . p. 153

¹⁶ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 15.

¹⁷ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 87.

past, not about the future: Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century.”¹⁸

As far as he is concerned the setting may be thought of as some historical events of the twentieth century: the Warsaw ghetto, the siege of Leningrad, but also events taking place in the Third World today and New York which is turning into a Third World City. He has used these and other examples of such strategic situations that have taken place around the world, so that his tone has become truly prophetic, in its associations: the theme of the dead who in this city of lost things have been stripped naked by scavengers, if they have died in the street, also known as Transformational Centres, which is a daily practice. The government deals with the task of corpses in an overpopulated city. And, this was a similar situation in the Warsaw ghetto. However, the worst problem, shared by both examples is hunger. Food was rationed in the ghetto, allowing people a mere 184 calories’ worth of food a day, a situation that led to smuggling and malnutrition: “people are so thin(...) they are sometime blown away”¹⁹

When Leningrad was surrounded by the Germans in World War II when 500,000 people lost their lives. A human slaughtering is an illustrative episode where Anna is lured into a butcher’s shop, because people have dreadfully become a commodity reduced to pieces of meat to be sold in the black market.

“In that instant I understood that I had been deceived, that my visit to this place has nothing to do with shoes(...)into the other room(...)what I saw in there: three or four human bodies hanging naked from meathooks(...)there had been rumors circulating (...) that human slaughtering houses now existed.”²⁰

The garbage collection system as depicted “in this city of last things” is based on the real system used in Cairo, it also resembles some streets of New York today. Finally, what Auster depicts in this city is the remains of an affluent society, embedded in consumerism and its excesses that converts into starvation; an excess of want, of need.

¹⁸ Auster, Paul. 1997. *The Art of Hunger*. p.

¹⁹ Auster, Paul. *Ob., Cit.* p. 3.

²⁰ Auster, Paul. *Ob., Cit.* p. 125

There is a moral collapse, no values, no ideologies, only pollution of the environment; competence and greediness are the only beliefs.

“I feel that it’s very much a book about our own moment, our own era, and many of the incidents are things that have actually happened...Admittedly, the book takes on these things from somewhat oblique angle, and the country of Anna goes to might not be immediately recognizable, but I feel that this is where we live. It could be that we’ve become so accustomed to it that we no longer see it.”²¹

3.2. Anna a Well-Rounded Character: her Enterprise Lengthens in Time

She represents the will to live. She seems distant and arrogant when she comes to city searching her brother, but she gradually adapts to the harsh conditions of the city and survives. By means of her blue book where she writes and narrates the events, she becomes the voice of this world and as a character, transcends in time and space. Anna’s journal-letter becomes not only a document of this desolation, but also it is a means of survival, a way of maintaining her humanity amidst the corruption of every value she grew up with.

Her self-dignity makes her challenges the city laws. Her concern at the very beginning is to find her brother, but she realizes that it will not be possible. This could be an excuse to the author to construct her. She buys herself a supermarket trolley (a considerable acquisition in this impoverished society) and sets herself up as an object-hunter, a glorified bag lady who searches the streets for anything that might be sold to one of the city's resurrection agents - vendors and repairers of reclaimed rubbish. Through this, she meets with a woman called Isabel. She comes to move in with this woman and her insufferable husband Ferdinand, an unpleasant and frustrated sign-painter who now feasts on the mice that inhabit their flat and obsessively builds a fleet of ever more diminutive ships in bottles. Before living at Isabel’s home Anna lives on streets, then she has to learn many things, one of them, based on Isabel’s advice, is that the city is something that has to be carefully negotiated because, otherwise it will invade her own being:

²¹ Auster, Paul. 1997. *The Art of Hunger*. p. 275.

“Never think about anything, (...) Just melt into the street and pretend that your body doesn’t exist. No musings; no sadness or happiness; no anything but the street, all empty inside, concentrating only on the step you are about to take.”²²

Constantly acting for her self-preservation, Anna is forced to change her appearance, in order to protect herself, and comes to eliminate herself, to pretend otherness and masculinity:

“To make feminine things about me less apparent (...) It looked so ugly that I didn’t recognize myself anymore. It was as though I had been turned into someone else.”²³

3.3 Love and Passion

Part of what makes Anna a remarkable heroine is her continuing need to love, in a city where it is an achievement to retain even the determination to live. Whether it is sexual love for man or woman. She is a passionate woman, and humanity is part of her character; may be this kindness enables her to become pregnant under those circumstances. She falls in love with Sam, a journalist who comes to the city after her brother William in order to report all about this city. He lives in the library and accepts to share his room with her, and she helps to write his book that records the events and incidents of the place.

“I discovered that I was pregnant...Sam was happy about it... Sam was enthusiastic...The child meant that we had been spared, he said. We has overturned the odds, and from now on everything would be different. By creating a child together, we had made it possible for new world to begin. I had never heard Sam talk like this before. Such brave, idealistic sentiment...”²⁴

She gives hope to Sam, a guy that speaks so nervously that one gets the impression that he is about to collapse. But, Anna is lured to a slaughtering house where she escapes crashing through the window and loses her baby. She is rescued by someone from Woburn House.

²² Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 57

²³ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 60

²⁴ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 117

“I groaned when they lifted, they said, but afterward I remained inert...Along time passed. They never told me how long, but I gather it was more than a day, perhaps as three or four. When I finally opened my eyes, they said, it was less a recovery than a resurrection, an absolute rising up out of nothingness.”²⁵

The Woburn House is the only place that gives shelter to people for a couple of days. It is a two-storey mansion, a combination of hospital and shelter.

Anna and Victoria become a sort of couple. Being with Victoria gives Anna pleasure, but it also gives her the courage to enjoy the present again. Anna does not hate her life anymore, and now she is able to look forward and to love this woman. At the same time Anna gives love and attention to lonely Victoria who only seems to be strong, or so much so that the House may be an excuse to survive. Is there a real solidarity and altruism for everyone, for common people?

“It was Victoria who took the greatest interest in me, however. I have mentioned how important my recovery was to her, but I think it was more to it that that. She was hungry for someone to talk to, and as my strength gradually returned, she began coming upstairs to see me more often.”²⁶

Anna also refers to lesbianism as away to survive, to face solitude:

“We each became a refuge for the other, the place where each of us could go to find comfort in her solitude...the sex was the less important part of it...and little by little this seemed to repair some of the innumerable hurts that I carried around inside me. I was not made whole again, but I least I did not hate my life anymore. A woman had fallen in love with me, and then I was able to love her.”²⁷

They begin to have things in common in their experiences of life, this is a link that helps to form their friendship. The people they loved had gone, their husband and their children; relatives like Victoria’s father and Anna’s brother had vanished or died. Anna recovers and Victoria invites her to stay at Woburn House, which means she will have

²⁵ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 126

²⁶ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 134,135.

²⁷ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 157

to work as a member of the staff “the idea of helping strangers, of sacrificing yourself to a cause. The principle was too abstract for me, too earnest, too altruists.”²⁸

Nevertheless, working at Woburn House helps Anna to cry less because of Sam’s loss, although, she has lost hope and belief as when she returned to library and knew that a fire had completely destroyed it. This pain weakened Anna’s convictions and passion, there was no love left, no motivation to live, which she realized very clearly; the only survival hope for her was to work

One day, Anna realizes that one of the House’s client was Sam who, all of a sudden appears. He is no longer the arrogant man she had met since he had gone through a very painful experience and had changed into a softer, more calm and peaceful man. He is admitted to Woburn House, as a man in need, and later on he begins to work there and goes on living with Anna.

Finally, all the staff of Woburn House decides to leave the city, to travel to the western, to the unknown zone, where maybe they would not survive. One day more. These are her last words which stay in time to us.

“Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing, almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed before...the only thing I ask for now is the chance to live one more day. This is Anna Blume, your friend from another world. Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise.”²⁹

3.4 Anna’s Double Contribution to the Novel

Her narrative becomes a means of survival. Anna Blume feels compelled to write everything down before it’s too late, she knows that the end of her narration will be the end of her life. She tells about the city and the actions she performs, an oblique self-characterization. As a result, she is a victim of circumstances.

²⁸ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 137

²⁹ Auster, Paul. Ob., Cit. p. 188

This passage contains several of the concerns of *In the Country of Lasts Things*: memory, place, the relation between body and mind and language as related to events and spaces.

“Memory as a place, as a building, as a sequence of columns, cornices, porticoes. The body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there, going from one place to the next, and the sound of our footsteps as we walk, moving from one place to the next.”³⁰

As a first conclusion, the above denotes her courage and strong personality; a determined and independent attitude. It would be appropriate to say that Anna walks towards freedom.

³⁰ Auster, Paul. *Ob., Cit.* p. 82

Conclusions

The original idea of this paper was to show the main features of feminine characters in Auster's novels, that is, their dramatic contribution to the stories as part of the creation of a singular writer. However, the purpose of introducing a pertinent analysis of Anna Blume, the protagonist becomes central among are the female characters appearing in other novels.

"*In The Country of Last Things*" Anna learns how to survive because of her strong, independent personality, a feature that differentiate from other characters of Auster's fiction; her determination to face life is particularly attractive to my discussion. Throughout the story there is a relationship between Blume and other characters that are clearly influential over other people. Therefore, Anna Blume's performance shows how women stand for Auster, the writer, in terms of their own power. This is not quite explicit in his narrative, but it is shown in some other novels like *Leviathan*, *Moon Palace* and *Mr. Vertigo*, for example.

Women as Fanny, Lillian and Maria (*Leviathan*); Kitty Wu (*Moon Palace*); Mother Sue and Mrs. Witherspoon (*Mr. Vertigo*) stand as moral strongholds for men to abide by or, at least to respect them for their worthiness, in hard times. What is more, these characters could be a relief or a kind of alternative exit for troubled men. Throughout, they perform as mother-like figures, lovers, mates, wives and commanders-in-chief (which is the case of Victoria *In the Country of Last Things*). The most remarkable fact is that they could be all these possibilities at the same time.

Finally, these women are quite self-confident, not shaped by fate - one of the recurrent themes of the author- they only take for granted the condition of living in different contexts. For instance, when the Ku Klux Klan lynches Mother Sue and Aesop, she does not cry, she stays quiet until she dies, because this was something that they knew was bound to happen, contrary to Walt's reaction to only think of revenge. Another example is the support and relief that women like Fanny, Maria and Lillian offer to Sachs, in *Leviathan*, although he does not appreciate it, he must follow his instincts which have been shaped by circumstances. This refusal of hope and freedom is also

viewed in *Moon Palace* where the protagonist Marco Fogg loses Kitty Wu because he does not dare to have any expectation or any direction in his life.

I would like to say that this report was written under the inspiration derived from the recognition and appreciation on the part of a great writer towards the fundamental role of all these women that have appeared as positive influence over the American society.

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