



## Writing One's Self: *Oracle Night* by Paul Auster

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**Abstract:** Auster's *Oracle Night* is a complex and absorbing novel. Like his earlier novels, *Oracle Night* is replete with author's omnipresent themes of existential quest for meaning, an unexpected getaway from mundane life, a significant position of chance and random events, fluidity of identities, storytelling and the act of writing. Besides, *Oracle Night* includes a very distinct narrative technique, a metafictional narrative engaging in story-within-a-story, use of paratext and an undeniable intertextual homage to Auster's favourite writers which makes it a multi-layered and post-modern novel. In the midst of chaos and conflicts of postmodern American life, Auster's characters undertake an existential plunge into chasm of nothingness and fragmentariness. He employs the postmodern devices to make the question of identity and existence comprehensively and coherently readable. The recurrent employment of characters as writer in Auster's novels finds a more elaborate treatment in *Oracle Night*. Here, writing becomes a momentous affair in comprehending the intriguing question of existence. It gains potential with the act of storytelling that involves leading many lives at once cumulatively progressing towards reworking of the self. In *Oracle Night*, recovery after the threat of death grants a renewed sense of the self, more at peace with their ruptured identity.

**KEYWORDS:** *replete, omnipresent, metafictional, intriguing*

Writing from the vantage point of twenty years ahead, Sidney Orr, a former high school teacher and a writer by profession, recounts nine days of his life beginning from the morning during which he witnesses the strange and disturbing behaviour of his wife, Grace. On September 18, the narrator undertakes a therapeutic walk to a stationary store, Paper Palace, run by M.R. Chang to purchase a mysterious Portuguese blue notebook. He resumes writing after his accident and tries to reframe Flitcraft episode from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* as suggested to him by Trause, a famous writer. He also gets an assignment of writing a screenplay but none of his projects reaches to its end. Trause gives him an unpublished story to make a screenplay out of it, but Orr loses it on the way.

He senses an evil and oracular influence of the blue notebook. Many strange events and mishappenings engulf his life and he tears up the pages of the blue notebook on September 27, 1982, the day of Trause's death, thus presenting his journey of self exploration. Orr's memoir also details the reflection on the lives of some other characters. In writing about these characters, Orr dwells into their lives to tell their stories. In the process of writing and storytelling, the possibility of reconstruction of self is achieved that becomes a recurrent theme in Auster's fiction.

The characters in *Oracle Night* are predominantly driven by emotions as the same play a conspicuous part in their lives. From the fictional account of Sidney Orr towards the resolution of the chronology of events in those nine days throws ample light on heart rendering emotional crisis through which Grace passes. He conjectures and, therefore, believes that Grace was emotionally attached to Trause since her childhood so much so that the love affair between them bordering on physical proximity is not ruled out. She feels a strong impulsion towards Sidney Orr following his repeated proposals of marriage. Subsequent to Orr's supposedly irrecoverable ailment and prolonged stay in the hospital, Grace falls back on Trause for emotional support. Orr writes, who else can she turn to at such a moment but Trause? John has a bottle of Scotch in his apartment, and she begins drinking the moment she sits down. She drinks too much, and within half an hour she's crying uncontrollably. Trause reaches out to comfort her, wrapping his arms around her and stroking her head, and before she knows what she's doing, her mouth is pressing against his. They haven't touched each other in over two years, and the kiss brings it all back to them. Their bodies remember the past, and once they begin to relive what they used to be together, they can't stop themselves. The past conquers the present, and for the time being the future no longer exists. Grace lets herself go, and Trause doesn't have the strength not to go with her. The next turn in Grace's emotions occur with the discovery of her pregnancy and unwillingness to continue with it in the light of her uncertainty regarding the father of her child. It is here when she finds herself tormented between Orr and Trause. She suddenly disappears from Orr's life for one day.

In *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr and Grace endure the hardships of their existence and understand the significance of being alive. In the beginning of the novel, Orr is seen as recovering from a fatal accident. The narratives which he weaves become a channel of not only physical recuperation but also the reinstatement of the self. His recovery, though painful, results in refashioning of his subjectivity. The retrieval from the jaws of death when he mysteriously failed to die and Grace's strange behaviour allows him to ponder over perpetual anxiety and fragmentariness that becomes the reason for the generation of Bowen's tale. In Bowen's adventure, Orr finds an alternate mode of his existence and discovers a complex course of self-invention. Bowen's fate, in the end, is actually Orr's own sense of being trapped in the fictional cosmos. Thus, he moves ahead of the losses and disappointments with a renewed sense of self that demands certain negotiations and collusions and the novel ends with Orr's salutation of his existence.

Auster's characters yearn to be acquainted with the unknowable. This striving seems an essential ingredient of their being and to achieve this, they move towards the point of extinction. What they experience in this journey is the feeling of nothingness which gives them an inkling of their voided self. To make some sense of their existence, they try to reconstruct the snapped connection between the self and the world. Sidney Orr tries to re-evaluate his existence after four months of apathy and silence in the hospital where he survives a tragic fall. The accident prepares him to face meaninglessness and arbitrariness of life which is a precursor to the uncharted trajectory of life. Auster asserts the same about Sidney Orr, in his prose work, *The Invention of Solitude*. With this recognition comes the need to fill the void of the fragmented life. Orr's impulse to write is an attempt to fill that abyss which he initiates with a fictional story but, as becomes clear in the end, terminates with solving the puzzle related to the past events of his own life. The generation of fiction becomes a mode of self-generation for him. In Auster's world of fiction, many strange and random occurrences happen that affect the lives of characters to a great deal. Though *The Music of Chance* aptly reviews the power of contingency in characters' lives, *Oracle Night* presents the glimmer of coincidences, the comprehension of which, lead the characters towards self-understanding. Auster defines coincidence in *The Invention of Solitude* as —...to occupy the same place in time and space. Thus, coincidence is two similar events occurring simultaneously at two different places that bears testimony to the meaningless uncertainty of existence; it provides an opportunity to understand the nature of the universe. It also marks that the life is, in fact, indecipherable and any insight that can be gained about this existence is that it is ruled by random events, both real and imagined, that shape one's life.

Auster presents whole of the action within the framework of the nine days account and the story is presented from Orr's point of view. Apart from Orr's own story, there are many supplementary narrative strands, granting a metafictional attribute to the novel. In order to fully comprehend the story of Orr's life, one struggles agonisingly to analyse these subsidiary strands in connection with the overall theme of the novel. This gives an inkling of Derridean notion of deferred signification which implies that the ...final meaning of the story will always be just around the corner, but entirely out of reach at the same time. To keep the story going, one must accede to the fact that the narrative, the signifier, can have no stable signified to point to, and, in this way, the text thus becomes a representation of the same endless spiral of signification which it creates. The writing is, then, a symbol of an absence, in so far as it is a —play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable, as Derrida writes. Since absolute signification is not achievable, the process of narration becomes webbed and perpetual. Thus what happens on the morning in question becomes clear towards the end of the novel where all the narratives mingle with many of the threads left fragmented. Study of the Fragmented Structure in *Oracle Night* as a Metafiction comments, Paul Auster exploits fragmented narrative to deconstruct the traditional meaning and to overthrow the traditional literary mode. With no principle of central organization or authorial voice to give meaning to events, the narrative's logical sequence is disrupted. In the disjointed world of Paul Auster, each fragment exists as a separate unit. With no causal order to link them together, the fragments are ruled by laws of random nature and unpredictable chance. The narrative structure of novel-within-a-novel-within-a-novel makes it difficult to discern

the borders of reality and fiction. The network of stories not only complicates the structure of the novel but shows character's slipping away into various identities. Therefore, number of stories progress together with frequent fissures in their continuity that anticipates indeterminacy not only at the story level but in characters as well. It can be safely pronounced towards the end that *Oracle Night* ruminates on the possibility of culling the meaningful living and self-affirmation in a world that enmeshes human life in the conundrum of signifiers that are always at logger-heads and perpetually refuse to yield any graspable pattern.

In this novel, Auster becomes self-reflexive as a writer and in the process wrestles with the critical ability of writing as well as words to engage with the construction of human self, fictional characters and the meaning of life. He delves deep into the working nature of an abstract phenomenon called human mind so as to trace, as adroitly as possible, as to how it negotiates with the contrariness and emptiness of human condition. Towards the end of the novel, character-narrator-writer, in the very absence of any authentic source and method, creatively constructs his life and reaches a state of happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world.

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