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**Postmodern Melancholia:  
An Analysis of *In the Country of Last  
Things***

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of melancholia as a psychic and philosophical manifestation in the individual consciousness of the protagonist and collective mindset of the characters in the 1987 novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, written by Paul Auster. The book is a work of postmodern literature and, as such, this is the lens that has been applied to this investigation of melancholia.

Several theories regarding postmodernity – particularly those that touch upon political, historical and aesthetic movements – are used as the analytical framework for this investigation. These, in turn, have been grouped together to comprise a body of thought that elucidates social models and arrangements imposed by the so-called liquid-modern society.

A conclusion is reached that melancholia is manifested in this novel in several ways – in the narrative, through its protagonist, who, as a result of the intense losses she experiences, infuses the work with a melancholic tone, and also through the entire setting of the book, which is one of unceasing bloodshed and misery.

**Key words:**

**Corresponding Author:**

## Introduction

American novelist Paul Auster has explored highly controversial post-modern themes. In his book, *In The Country of Last Things*, Auster creates a post-apocalyptic world propelled by social chaos and human misery, in which survival is, paradoxically, the only way of life.

In a dystopian environment, relentlessly permeated by hopelessness, Auster constructs a plot rich in allegories that lend themselves to various interpretations, which range across the suffering and losses experienced by the main character to the totality of the environment in which all the characters in the novel exist. Through his epistolary novel, Auster depicts the melancholic state of his narrator-protagonist, as well as that of the world all around her.

This melancholic tone is noticeable even in the title of the novel. However, beyond the personal experience of melancholy, Auster extends this feeling, infusing it into every aspect of the world his characters inhabit. He suggests the possibility of a subliminal connection between the structure of this chaotic world and the conditions readers would recognize as components of a modern, consumerist society. For example, among the *Last Things* in the book are the several ways by which one can secure one's own demise, with the various manners of death being labeled and commodified as products to be sold; as if death itself could be transformed to suit the marketing dictates of mass consumption.

This paper presents an analysis of the post-modern melancholia in Auster's novel, which is made manifest in the metaphysics, aesthetics, historical and social values the reader experiences in his story. Modernity, by its very nature, tends to stifle opportunities for the expression of melancholy in daily life. However, in this work of art, by putting it on primary display, it can be looked at in almost microscopically exaggerated detail.

Accordingly, in section two of this paper, I begin with an explanation of the undercurrents of postmodernist thought and correlate them to the postmodern themes of the book. To accomplish this, I have relied upon the theoretical works of the French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; Canadian Linda Hutcheon, a literary theorist and critic who serves as the University Professor in the Department of English and of the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto; and Andreas Hyussen, the current Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. I have also drawn upon concepts developed by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to reflect upon the phenomenon of postmodernism and its implications regarding the expression of melancholy.

In the following section, I offer a brief explanation of melancholia as seen by Sigmund Freud and the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Thereafter, I focus on the conceptual difference between grief and melancholy, analyzing them through a postmodern perspective. For this, I reference, once again, Bauman and Freud.

In section four, I unify the concepts of melancholia and apply these to Auster's novel, analyzing it on three levels – psychological-individual,

psychological-collective, philosophical and aesthetic. Here I refer to the concepts of Freud, Bauman, Nietzsche, Huyssen and Hucheton.

I conclude that *In the Country of Last Things* could represent a criticism about the veiled nature of melancholy, whose expression is all but absent in today's society. In the book, the author communicates his story through a letter that his principal character is writing to a never revealed recipient; almost suggesting that the missive's intended destination is the reader whose unfamiliarity with the subjective melancholic state is one that both needs to be expressed and felt. Auster chooses to do this by conjuring a petty and cruel world, one characterized by an extreme expression of melancholy in fiction.

This extreme form can be seen as a method of jolting readers into focusing their attentions on their own subjective realities. I also note that the protagonist's libidinal investments are totally lacking in permanent attachments. This also suggests a critique of the liquid-modern society that is based upon the impermanence of affective bonds, thus leading to the melancholic condition. I add that this work can be seen as rendering the aesthetic value of a new sensibility in art, i.e. illustrating the Dionysian spirit that drives modern society.

### **Postmodern Melancholia**

When they employed the term *rhizome* to describe the multiplicity of phenomena they encountered in the modernity of the 1970s and early 1980s, the theorist/research team of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari was offering an innovative explanation. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995) The idea of using this term in an attempt to account for the diversity of emergent events in modernity can be associated with the conversation that manifests itself today when trying to comprehend or define postmodernity.

The rhizome, in contrast to a tree – both of which having been used as metaphors for the world – does not have a point of departure or arrival. In other words, it is part of a relational system, whose parts are totally in opposition to the relationships seen in a binary system; the latter being the type upon which (and until rhizomic theory arose) our society was previously thought to be based.

Despite this, for the purposes of this analysis, I shall be referencing theorists who are closer to the construct of postmodernity that best serve to contextualize how melancholy is expressed in Paul Auster's novel, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987). These include Andreas Huyssen and Linda Hutcheon, as they are authors who see postmodernity as an aesthetic, political and historical.

In his essay, *Mapping the Postmodern* (Huyssen, apud Holland, 1991), Andreas Huyssen is fundamentally concerned with situating artistic and critical practices on an aesthetic and political foundation, relating them to cultural sensibilities that were a product of the 1960s, '70s and '80s. It is this type of sensibility, itself a product of the latter years of this time span (that portrays a

dystopian state whose highly melancholic tone could be interpreted as an exaggerated expression of the melancholy that modern society produces), which I apply to Auster's work.

This may well be a new sensibility being expressed in arts and literature, which is also shaping twenty-first century thought, as current political and aesthetic trends – arising from the processes of globalization, unabated consumerism, as well as the rise and ubiquity of high technology – continue to bear a deep and, at times, deeply sublimated melancholy. The world financial crisis of recent years may also be influencing cultural expression through representations of the torpor and profound sadness being experienced by countries that have been most intensely affected by it; in having to confront their loss of standing, power, and even hegemony.

On the other hand, Linda Huchteon's book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, (1988) supports the view that post-modernism exists within a historical and political context that is used as a paradoxical form of criticism that reframes the art of the past. To this end, the artist is working with an ironic and parodic lexicon. Paradox is evident in that the artist establishes a distance from the past as a means to offer a critique of it while simultaneously being contaminated by the very past upon which commentary is being passed.

Thus, following this line of reasoning, I argue that Auster is intentionally making allusions to foundational knowledge of the past as a means of offering ironic criticisms of present-day society. With a heavy dose of black humor, itself an ironic form, the author uses this landscape to expose the ease with which modern society can treat even death as one more disposable commodity. Through such a dismissal of the subject, society is, metaphorically, leading itself to its own decease. Beyond any individual conceptualization of melancholia (which will be addressed in the next section), it is useful to clarify how the cultural mechanics of modern society magnify melancholy.

It can be reasoned that the current historic moment is unique in that, in more and increasingly diverse locations, it is seeing a tolerance of, if not entirely an openness to, a wide variety of living arrangements, which nevertheless seek to be grounded in particular values, behaviors and relationships. Through several of his books, most notably including *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *Liquid Life* (2005), sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has been reflecting on the mechanisms by which society is today configured.

In those works, he uses a metonymy that takes a physical property, liquefaction – focusing on the passage from a gaseous state to a liquid one – to put forward a proposition that stands in opposition to socio-cultural events. It is through this comparison that Bauman would develop theories about modernity. He suggests that one can dispense with space-time considerations if one considers the nature of fluids, whose shapes are likely to change at any moment. In *Liquid Life*, Bauman coins the term *liquid modern* to give a name to a society in which space-time transformations occur at high speed. According to Bauman:



“Liquid modern’ is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines.” (Bauman, 2005, *ibid.*, p.7).

These changes may bring about incalculable consequences to the human condition. One of these may be the significant diminishment of an ability to mourn – a condition which Freud (1917) considered to be a normal reaction to the loss of a loved object. As anything can change, at any time, in almost the blink of an eye, the decent interval necessary to properly pause and consider such losses is not of sufficient length to appropriately value such passages. One can see how the space that is reserved for melancholia in the modern era is ever dwindling. At the opposite end, it might only be experienced within the realm of the excluded.

### **Freud’s View of Melancholia**

Dig back into the recesses of time and one will find descriptions of melancholia within many disciplines. It is delineated, described, and detailed in medicine, philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature and the arts. And since the mid-twentieth century, it has also inspired sociological reflection. However, regardless from which perspective it is approached, it always arises from loss, whether it be physical, psychological or metaphysical. Loss is at the core of this analysis, which considers modernity as being particularly troubling to the human condition.

Melancholia gained more scientific traction in the twentieth century. Freud’s 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, described a true etiology of this disorder, distinguishing between mourning and melancholy. As indicated earlier, Freud saw mourning and melancholy as a psychic response “...to the loss of a loved one, [or] the loss of some abstraction, which has taken the place of a loved one, such as a one’s country, liberty or an ideal.” [Freud, 1917/1969, p.275]. He enumerated the conditions under which a subject might experience loss as melancholia, which included disinterest and (as regards the meaning of life) a sensation of emptiness.

Freud found that this state of emptiness lingered longer in some individuals than in others and decided to study this condition. His investigations led him to a watershed moment that allowed him to describe the differences between and distinguishing characteristics of mourning and melancholia. The former was the result of a loss, characterized by the condition of discouragement and lack of interest in life. Mourning was the normal reaction by an individual experiencing such loss though, over time, equilibrium would be re-established, as the beloved object is transferred, i.e. the individual or thing in which one had been libidinally invested is replaced by another. In contrast, melancholia is not processed in this way. The lost object is introjected into the ego and the individual, who identifies with that which was lost, remains in a state of constant guilt and pain. According to Freud:

“So we find the key to the clinical picture: We perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego.” (Freud, 1969, p. 280)

This melancholic state is, therefore, a pathology, which can only be undone through psychoanalysis, as the ego is stuck, identifying with the abandoned object, incapable of making new libidinal investments by itself. Thus, Freud incorporates scientific knowledge as a tool for the treatment of and recovery from melancholic states experienced by individuals. However, even within his own cultural context, Freud does not offer a theory to account for melancholia as a cultural imbroglio.

His 1915 essay, *On Transience*, addresses melancholia from an ontological perspective by recounting a walk through Austria’s Dolomite Mountains. During the trek, he observed his companion, a poet friend, Rainer Maria Rilke, embittered by the ephemeral beauty that was all around him, as he bemoaned, “It is impossible that all this loveliness of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside, will really fade away into nothing.” [Freud, 1915/1976, p. 3095].

There, Rilke displayed a melancholic reaction to the transience and impermanence of all beings and things; a sentiment that Freud refuted. To him, this melancholia, arising from the human condition’s transitory nature and nature’s cycles, suggests a tendency toward devaluing contemplation and an emotional life lived in the moment. To Freud, there is value in the scarcity of time in which one has an opportunity to ponder the beauty of things. He observes that the inability of some individuals to cope with impermanence and transience, results in a melancholic state, a priori, regarding the human condition and nature itself.

Following a different ontological line, Friedrich Nietzsche’s book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, analyzes Hellenistic culture in Greece and asks whether the pleasures and desires of beauty were closely related to the pain, misery and melancholy of the people. From his philosophical perspective, the world and the art created within it are representations, especially, of the aesthetic that humanity encounters to support its existence. Nietzsche [1891/2008] presents an exhaustively researched investigation into the origin of tragedy in Greece, concluding that it is composed of both the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits.

The former, relates to the god Apollo, with his chisled, idealized appearance, embodying the spirit of order, rationality and harmony. Dionysus, for his part, was the god of wine, embodying the spirit of drunkenness, with its lust for spontaneous and ecstatic living. Nietzsche (opict., 2008) asserted that these two spirits are complementary and endow humanity with an aesthetic that transcends human existence.

“Only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified to all eternity – although our consciousness of our own significance does

scarcely exceed the consciousness a painted soldier might have of the battle in which he takes part.” (Nietzsche, 2008, p.42)

### **A Brief Analysis of Melancholy in *In the Country of Last Things***

The 1987 novel by American writer, Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, is an epistolary work classified as post-apocalyptic and dystopian, as it depicts an environment in which destruction is apparent, although the origins of this ruination are never revealed to the reader. Its storyline is one in which social disorder prevails as a general rule.

Its first-person narrator is a character named Anna Blume, who tells her story by means of a letter that she hopes will reach a recipient whose name, location and relationship to us, the readers, are never revealed. The letter does reveal, however, that Anna is in search of her brother, William, a journalist who has come to her part of the world to write a story about that place and, since his arrival, has gone missing. The plot, then, is built around events described in Anna’s letter.

The analysis I am conducting of this novel is divided into three sections. First, I shall present a digest of the plot’s thematic thrust, with an emphasis on the protagonist in relation to the book’s other characters. To accomplish this, I apply theories developed by Freud [1916/1917], especially with regard to mourning and melancholy, and transience. I also analyze the aesthetic value of the work, in which I apply the cultural sensibilities suggested by (Huysen, apud Holland, 1991), as well as, complementarily, the Apollonian and Dionysian sensibilities addressed by Nietzsche (2008) in his investigations into the roots of Greek tragedy. Finally, I examine the societal relationships depicted in the plot, bridging those with that which exists in the real world, to reveal ironic critiques evident in the book. In this regard, I invoke concepts elaborated by Bauman [2006/2007] and Hutcheon (1991).

In general, a melancholic subjectivity pervades the novel from start to finish, particularly so when it relates to the consequence of those losses and absences inflicted upon and experienced by the protagonist-narrator. It begins in the novel’s very first pages, as Anna Blume – whose world is defined by the bloody and terrible relationships of those all around her – is feeling anxious and suffering a peculiar sadness as a result of her not knowing the fate of her brother.

Anna attempts to fill this void by venturing into an environment ruled by disorder, which ultimately debases life itself. As a general matter of course, life and death are seen as common elements of daily life, and staying alive is a question of choice, given that there are a whole range of options available for ending one’s own existence. What grabs the reader’s attention is Anna’s need to detail all of her losses and relate the transformations she has undergone in the letter she is writing, as if it would serve as both a rant and self-replenishment.

Viewed through the lens of Freud's theory on mourning and melancholia, the letter would appear to serve as the new object in which the libido of the protagonist can be invested. The ostensible purpose of the letter aside (i.e. to reach the person to whom Anna is writing), the protagonist is using it as a means to fill the void left by the disappearance of a sibling and the break with her past from another world and a life she has left behind; a past that is not revealed to the reader. It is through this letter that Anna is staying alive, trying to maintain her ties with other characters.

Beyond this, in the example below, Auster subtly claims that the letter to an unknown recipient could imply it is intended for anyone, including ourselves, as readers, whom Auster emphasizes know nothing and are, indeed, out of the world in his book. In this way, the author is offering a criticism and denunciation of the causes of our own alienation; the vicissitudes of modern society's underlying conditions and animalistic tendencies that disrupt the social order. In other words, it is a criticism of the lack of understanding about the instinctive and rudimentary side of the human personality:

“Perhaps it comes down to this. I am writing to you because you know nothing. Because you are far away from me and know nothing.” (Auster, 1987, p.2)

Shortly after that passage from the letter, Anna alludes to another lack, that being the shortage of food. This lack signifies a coarsening of feelings and an inversion of values that one might otherwise associate with food. Those who fail to adapt to a spartan diet obsessively hunt for food in the streets. Food that had once served as sustenance for human beings is transformed into an executioner, as survivors risk their lives to find some little bit of food that they can't even digest because their stomachs have become weak and small from malnutrition. Food is thus transformed from being a life giver to an annihilator.

“They think they are eating to stay alive, but in the end they are the ones who are eaten. As it turns out, food is a complicated business, and unless you learn to accept what is given to you, you will never be at peace with yourself.” (ibid, 1987, p.3)

Through the unceasing losses of people and places suffered by Anna, the melancholic tone of *In the Country of Last Things* is set. And it's a storyline in which Auster creates no expectation whatsoever that his protagonist will ever secure any lasting relationships, as all of the substitute objects in which she places libidinal investments are only ever in place for brief intervals. Desperation pervades this environment the further the story progresses as each new emotional investment proves fruitless. The hopeless tone is highlighted at the novel's end when the protagonist offers these final words:

“Perhaps we will find William after we leave the city, but I try not to hope too much. The only thing I ask for now is the chance to live

one more day. This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world.” (ibid, 1987, p.195)

Melancholia is also expressed through the transience of existence, brought forth in a world in which survival is uncertain and life can be extinguished at any moment. This ever-changing landscape somewhat tracks with descriptions of cyclical climates where transformation is a constant with the arrival of each new season. An example in which Anna faces this transience takes place when, for several days she contemplates the beauty of the sky and the landscape, as if the moment she was in was something spectacular to behold; only to have her breathtaking shattered as she comes to grips with the melancholia of the daily life represented by a locale that is, itself, a threat to life.

A different interpretive perspective is the new sensibility suggested by Huyssen (1991) that this novel makes manifest in the manner by which it reveals the decrepit, chaotic and inchoate side of the human condition within a highly unique political and historical moment. Despite all the material opulence that consumerist societies in hegemonic countries can muster, melancholia will be its spiritual counterpoint. This is to say that the soul will hunger to be fed, nourished by all that it cannot obtain in *real* life.

This can be seen in the book, especially when the author portrays how Anna describes literal decay and how little respect is paid in the streets as mortification gives way to corpses. Families deposit the bodies of their dead everywhere; in the streets, on the sidewalks, and totally naked. All are stripped of any possessions of value, including teeth, which can be sold. It seems that the indignity with which the body is treated in the novel is meant to lead the reader to flip such thoughts into their opposite, so as to make them intensely respectful of it in real life. Here’s how Auster develops this idea:

“Most of the bodies are naked. Scavengers roam the streets at all times, and it is never very long before a dead person is stripped of his belongings. First to go are the shoes, for these are in great demand and very hard to find. The pockets are next to attract attention, but usually it is just everything after that, the clothes and whatever they contain.” (ibid, 1987, p.32)

Moreover, the lack of order, a government to represent the will of the people, the shortage of housing, food, and affection can be seen as a fictional representation of this new aesthetic sensibility emerging in the arts as a reflection of real life values that are increasingly becoming weakened. From this perspective, the importance of Huyssen’s work is drawn in sharper relief, as his theories remind one that what frames this relationship is the current political-historical moment in which it exists.

On the other hand, melancholia can be interpreted here as the Dionysian spirit a la Nietzsche (ibid, 2008), who considered the manner by which a degraded humankind might endure existence and the aesthetic value of said; a question the novel addresses by coming down on the Dionysian side. The

tragedy in Auster's novel and Nietzsche's optics exist as art exercising its function in balancing opposing forces in life. The reality of the novel's world reflects the Apollonian spirit's ability to bear up against extensive assaults, encouraging the power of science to change the course of life and stimulating humanity toward the perfection of the body. On the other hand, the body of *Last Things* is one that is, for the most part, pommeled, punished and crushed. The dark, gloomy scenario, then, steers the work toward a Dionysian interpretation.

From a societal perspective, the book lends itself to two particular theoretical analyses; first, as irony, seen as critical to reframing the past as a way of establishing a new future, as advocated by Hutcheon (1991); second, as social criticism, which Bauman (2007) advocates, of social arrangements in liquid-modernity. In the novel, life plays itself out within a context in which it can be undone at any time. This proclivity toward abbreviated existence, as well as the relentless and rapid changes occurring within the landscape of the story, establishes a melancholic subjectivity, which itself becomes a societal factor.

Likewise, Auster's creativity offers dark, parodic elements (Hutcheon, 1991), such as his representation of a classification system for extermination, which inspires reflection on the futility of life and its imminent demise. There are the *Runners* (Auster, 1987, p.11) who are those individuals who run the streets until exhaustion overtakes them, dying from cardiac arrest. There are the *Leapers* (opicit., 1987, p.12) hurling themselves from building rooftops, meeting their ends as a splatter on the ground. The *Euthanasia Clinics* promise a painless death in no more than a few seconds (opicit., 1987, p.13). Yet, within these clinics, candidates may choose either the *Return Voyage*, where death occurs by lethal injection or the *Journey of Marvels*, in which it is achieved in two or three days. And still other categories of death exist.

The most important fact here is that Auster uses these as black humor, mocking this artifact of merchandising, which has reached its very limits in its packaging of death as a product, subject to negotiation and available in a range of designer options, at a price point to suit every budget. Its obvious, over-the-top snark is intended to cause the reader to consider how easily a mass marketing mindset run amok in world without societal limits can and will take humanity down to a place in which death itself is commodified, cheapened and demeaned to such a degree that even one's own passing is robbed of any dignity.

## **Results and Discussion**

Paul Auster's 1987 novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, offers a view of melancholic subjectivity as experienced in both individual and collective spheres. The work is a critique of modern society in its indifference and neglect of humanity's inherent melancholic condition. Auster uses a setting and an epistolary narrative style to establish the climate of a dystopian society.

Through his narrator-protagonist, he depicts a variety of losses that his central character experiences, the unrelenting totality of which sets a melancholic tone for the book from beginning to end.

In addition, the novel serves as marker of a new cultural sensibility that is attempting to cope with the social and political transformations of the twentieth century, and whose effects may be extending into and impacting the direction of the twenty-first. It is a dark, blood-soaked and horrifying sensibility played out against a landscape of extreme conditions in which the book's characters must exist and, frequently, die. Within its pages is an aesthetic appreciation of the Dionysian condition (which stands in opposition to the Apollonian), in which the arrangements of daily life are conditioned by liquid-modern society.

Death is not dignified. Rather, it is treated as a commodity, whose value is no more nor less than that which can be negotiated. This is characterized in a parodic manner, via a classification system that evolves from the natural sciences and is applied to the extremely metaphysical condition that is death.

In sum, this book suggests a melancholic tendency in the present, which could extend into the not-too-distant future; a future in which that which is considered moral is turned on its head, threatening humanity's very existence.

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