

Chelsea Miles
ENG 336
October 12, 2011
Short Essay #2

Losing Language

On the surface, Paul Auster's short story "City of Glass" may seem like just a detective story. Underneath the plot and characterization, Auster presents many postmodernist beliefs; in particular, he discusses the demise of language through the character of Peter Stillman, Sr. Stillman's opinions about society's language reflects the postmodernist belief of relativity, specifically that "language can lead us astray" and "'reality' can never be wholly or convincingly mastered" (Butler 35).

Stillman's idea that language has slowly been destroyed coincides with the postmodernist belief of relative language. As Stillman talks to Quinn about language, he says that language and words "no longer correspond to the world" (Auster 80). He is arguing that as time changes, language needs to change as well and it cannot be absolute. Postmodernists believe this as well. They believe that there can be no universal truth and that everything is relative. Language, to a postmodernist, is not a universal truth. It changes and shifts and words begin to have different meanings than they had before. Such is the case with Stillman's example of an umbrella. With the postmodernist beliefs in mind, it makes sense that Stillman believes when what makes an umbrella an umbrella is missing, it can no longer be called an umbrella. Just as the object itself changed, the word should change as well.

Stillman's argument that understanding this change is essential to understanding language is similar to the postmodernists suggesting the questioning the absolute. After giving Quinn the example of the umbrella, Stillman points out the importance for people to understand the need for change in language, that "unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost" (Auster 80). This loss is people's ignorance of language's relativity and of the flaws and limits within language. This goes back to the postmodernists' belief that reality, or what people presume to be reality, "can never be wholly or convincingly mastered" (35). No matter how hard people may try, language can never be absolute and will continue to always be changing.

Stillman's pride in his own made up language, however, goes completely against this postmodernist belief. He completely disregards the postmodernist thinking because his perfect language he attempts to make is a "function of [his] genius" (81). But this disregard leads to Stillman's own demise, as soon after this conversation with Quinn, Stillman commits suicide. Stillman's death is a loss of that pride and is that even his "genius" cannot overcome the postmodernist belief of relativity. His death is a testament to the truthfulness of relativity.

Language can be powerful, but postmodernists argue that it is not universal and is completely relative. The reality in which language occurs is not fixed, but is constantly changing. Auster reflects this idea through Stillman's characterization. Stillman's beliefs, pride, and sequential death point to this postmodernist idea that language, like all universal truths, are "impossible, and relativism is our fate" (21).