

THE WRITING TECHNIQUE OF AN UNNAMED PROTAGONIST: *THE RUINED MAP* AND *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

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Abstract: Kobo Abe's The Ruined Map is not a formal detective story. The novel's focal themes include the loss of identity, the relationships between cities and human beings, and the arbitrariness of names. This study scrutinizes and deciphers the novel's technique, which accords the unnamed protagonist a prominent existence. Further, the novel is compared to Paul Auster's City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room, the New York Trilogy of novels.

I. The Avant-gardist, Kobo Abe

Kobo Abe (1924-1993) is a Japanese novelist, playwright, and director raised in Manchuria in northeastern China (a Japanese territory). Before engaging in a career as a writer, he graduated from the School of Medicine after World War II on the condition that he would not become a doctor. He won the Akutagawa Prize in 1951 and subsequently authored numerous avant-garde plays and novels. In particular, his masterpiece *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962) has been translated into many languages. It is read in more than 20 countries across the world. He pioneered avant-garde and surreal methods in novels such as *Inter Ice Age 4* (1958), *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962), *The Face of Another* (1964), and *The Ruined Map* (1967), adopting techniques initially utilized in his plays and short films. According to Donald Keane, *The Ruined Map* thus became “the first novel to break traditional writing style, such as plots and the natural development of people” (Keane, 2012, 506). This paper examines the effects of “characters without names” originating from diverging between people’s perceptions of reality and the external world. The paper also scrutinizes the writing techniques of Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, which appears to have been influenced by Abe.

II. The Story and the Showa Era’s Realistic Portrayal in *The Ruined Map*

The novel’s unnamed protagonist is a professional private detective. A client asks him to find her husband, who disappeared six months earlier. However, her repeated testimony is inoperative and ambiguous. The client’s younger brother also appears at the detective’s investigative site, pretending to be interested in solving the case. The detective gradually begins to suspect that the search is a mockery orchestrated by the wife and brother of the disappeared man. His client’s brother, Yakuza, is a member of an anti-social organization. Yakuza promises to show the detective the missing man’s diary but is killed in a bloody conflict. The detective then meets Tashiro, a subordinate at the company that was the missing man’s erstwhile employer. Tashiro testifies about the disappeared, but his

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statement turns out to be a complete lie. Subsequently, Tashiro commits suicide by hanging. The detective resigns from his agency. The unnamed protagonist, who is no longer a professional detective, understands that he has lost his identity. Nevertheless, he decides to continue the investigation independently, recognizing that his desire to connect with his client is his sole motive for identifying himself. He suffers a psychological episode of memory loss when he goes to his client's house and finds himself on a road that he once knew. He enters a café and discovers a woman who looks familiar. After leaving the café, he calls the phone number on the map he finds in his pocket and sees the woman he saw at the café coming toward him. However, he hides in the telephone box. As she gives up her search for him and leaves, he walks away in the opposite direction from her.

As outlined above, *The Ruined Map* attracts attention because it is structured like a typical detective story, even though its intention is different. Initially, the central character scrambles to attain information from his client, the missing man's wife. The protagonist is loyal to his duties as a detective and prioritizes his client's privacy. However, the testimony of the wife is contradictory. This mysterious perspective lures readers into the world of this strange detective story. Next, the detective heads to a nearby café with his client's matchbox given to him. He seeks clues from an elderly manager in the parking lot next to the café based on the establishment's engagement as an illegal employment agency. This scene transmits a sense of urgency that is unique to detective stories. The novel also showcases the hardships the detective faces through his conversation with Tashiro, a former employee of the company where the missing man worked. Feelings of guilt and curiosity about his superior's disappearance cause Tashiro to cooperate with the detective. However, his testimony ultimately turns out to be a lie. The characters inhabiting the murderous city are attractive, always straightforward, and somehow baffling and lifeless, a fact that creates a sense of reality and enriches the world of this narrative.

Overall, Kobo Abe's work depicts ordinary scenery with detailed brushstrokes. Toyama is a mediocre man with a family. He used to be a taxi driver and bought a car from the missing person. Nevertheless, Toyama confuses the detective that taxi drivers lose sight of themselves in the city. The detective warns a high school girl in the library, using a razor to cut out a photograph from a library book. At his client's brother's funeral, the detective meets a male prostitute who says to him provocatively, narrowing his eyes suspiciously, "Well then. Want me to slap you around? Want to drink my piss? What about licking the soles of my shoes?" In this manner, the author appealingly illustrates even people who appear in the narrative only for a moment. Through Abe's texts, contemporary readers can sense Showa Era Japan after World War II (the 1950s to the 1970s) when Japan achieved economic growth.

III. External and Internal Worlds

The Ruined Map progresses through detailed settings, fascinating characters, and thrilling detective activities. The intricate plot illuminates the principal theme the author seeks to explore. As noted above, Abe depicts the gap between each character's perception of reality and the external world. The internal and external worlds accord distinctive metaphors: the map denotes the former, and the city

represents the latter. Abe's essay titled *Furuchizu no Shūri*, [*The Fixing of an Old Map*] defines the concept of the map and is overviewed below.

The essay begins with an exposition of a documentary film depicting experiments with lysergic acid diethylamide, a drug commonly called LSD. This psychotropic and "madness-making" drug causes users to hallucinate and experience abnormal realities. It is suffering from temporary schizophrenia. The story is fascinating yet boring for those uninterested in LSD. Each individual negotiates daily living through an inner world (the map) and inhabits an external environment (the city). This inside-outside world is not dichotomous in normal circumstances and is recognized as the same space. However, the individual image of reality is merely a practicably abbreviated map rather than reality as it exists.

It is challenging to alter a completed map. The differences between the inside (the map) and the outside (the city) are gradually realized when the real-world changes. Often, people suffer from hysteria or mental breakdown if the disparities between their internal and external realities become too divergent. This situation is prevalent in the present, continually changing world. A complete rupture between the inside map and the external reality because of a person's inability to correct the internal world causes schizophrenia. LSD is a medicine that artificially produces such a distorted map.

According to Abe, people do not have to adhere to their unused old maps. Instead, they should understand that their maps are not the only ones tracing the trajectories of drug-takers dreams (Abe, 1998, 413).

Given the above context, the detective gradually loses the map of his inner world until, ultimately, he does not even know his identity. Toyama, the man who bought a car from the detective's client, criticizes the detective's actions:

(after a moment's thought) Why does the world take it for granted that there's a right to pursue people? Someone who hasn't committed any crime. I can't understand how you can assume, as if it were a matter of course, that there is some right that lets you seize a man who has gone off of his own free will" (Abe, 2021, 161).

Also, the detective's estranged wife exclaims, "I've got it! You left home! You ran away!", "From life, from the endless competing and dickering, the tightrope walking, the scramble for a life buoy. It's true, isn't it? In the final analysis, I was merely an excuse" (Abe, 2021, 172). She insists that he quits his previous job and becomes a detective because he wants to run away from the city. Further, Tashiro, who continues his vague testimony, asserts:

It's a question of being qualified. We've decided that people have established residences and that we should put a chain or something around runaways' necks and bring them home. But just how valid is such a concept? Who has the right to interfere with another's living and against his wishes? (Abe, 2021, 244).

In the absence of clues to the disappeared man, the detective asks himself during his conversations with the abovementioned people whether he has lost his identity and whether all human beings, including himself, are willing to lose their own internal worlds (maps) and flee from reality (the city).

The Woman in the Dunes illustrates a related theme. In *The Ruined Map*, the detective fears losing himself and entering the city's maze; the protagonist of *The Woman in the Dunes* is described as a squawking figure fallen into the dunes. In other words, the world of *The Ruined Map* focuses on the process of entering the city maze. Conversely, the main character in *The Woman in the Dunes* becomes focused after he enters the labyrinth named the dunes. Thus, the labyrinth is a city in the former narrative and sand in the latter.

The dunes form the core metaphor of *The Woman in the Dunes*: they represent the outside world, which symbolizes a sense of alienation from the main character's inner world (map). The feelings of loneliness and despair when the hero sees the sand are much stronger than the emotions evoked by the city of *The Ruined Map*. Abe amplifies the effects by carefully explaining the fluidity and the material attributes of sand. In *The Ruined Map*, Abe depicts inorganically paved city concrete and dirty bar interiors using precise brushstrokes, making the outside world of the city a monochromatic, tasteless, and dry space.

A paradox about the city is presented in the epigraph of *The Ruined Map*. The cruel world produced by the metaphor of the city is showcased to the reader in the narrative; simultaneously, the epigraph implies to the reader that the city is a maze-like world without an exit.

THE CITY—a bounded infinity. A labyrinth where you are never lost.
Your private map where every block bears exactly the same number.
Even if you lose your way, you cannot go wrong (Abe, 2021, 2).

The epigraph also claims that the novel follows detective stories about searching for missing people but describes an entirely different world to readers. *The Ruined Map* encompasses the theme of lost identity and the lacunae of individual human perceptions of maps and cities or the internal and external worlds. The author also suggests the significance of pursuing those who have disappeared. Perhaps, Tashiro and Toyama tell the detective, “Your private map where every block bears the same number,” which becomes the core theme of this novel.

IV. The Significance of Being Unnamed

The arbitrariness of the symbol forms a foundational principle of structuralism. There is no inevitable relationship between the word and the thing described by the word. For instance, a vehicle's performance does not change whether it is named “la macchina” instead of “car.” The proper noun (person's name) occupies an interesting position in the case of the concerned narrative. The naming of a character may be asserted as a deliberate ritual for an author writing a satirical novel, comedy, or even lessons. On the other hand, overly prominent names to name “mediocre” characters, are dangerous and could destroy a novel's structure. To this point, “Tashiro” and “Toyama” are common Japanese surnames. However, as an obviously intentional authorial technique, the protagonist's name is never revealed in *The Ruined Map*.

Tashiro shows the detective a newspaper article claiming that 80,000 people disappear every year. This article hints at the darkness of daily life in the city. Many of the missing individuals are never found and are forgotten sooner or later.

Here, the detective is late for his meeting with Tashiro because the map drawn by the latter is very difficult to understand.

This comically depicted episode of the illegible map forms a rare easy-to-understand hint in Kobo Abe's works: it symbolizes Tashiro's suicide because he loses sight of himself and the detective's subsequent disappearance.

The Woman in the Dunes explores the theme of escape, introduced at the beginning of the novel. The narrator states that while huge numbers of people disappear every year, only a minuscule percentage of them are found, concluding materialistically that the missing often merely escape.

The main character (a school teacher and an amateur entomologist) is unexpectedly trapped in the dunes. A woman is also captured and forced to suffer a traumatic experience. Eventually, he abandons his associations with society. He decides to remain in the sand even when he is accorded the accidental opportunity to flee from the dune, saying he should rethink his escape plan. The novel ends with the family court report of his disappearance. The reader is first introduced to the protagonist's name, Niki Junpei, at this final juncture.

Further, *The Ruined Map* only accurately and fully mentions the names of the missing man Nemuro Hiroshi and his wife, Nemuro Haru. These names are recorded in the application for investigation described at the novel's beginning. However, they do not appear in the rest of the narrative. In effect, thus, humanity is diluted by eliminating the impact of names as much as possible. The ambiguous nomenclature also underscores the imagery of monochromatic impressions left by the characters. Names merely possess formal significations in Abe's works and exist only in the documentation. Any nameless person can disappear in cities where many people go missing every year. The namelessness of Abe's protagonists (detective or teacher) indicates that they are qualified to be trapped into the maze of the city.

V. *The New York Trilogy*

Kobo Abe's works influence Paul Auster (1947-). The series of three novels titled *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1986) is labeled the *New York Trilogy* and bears numerous similarities to *The Ruined Map*.

1. The protagonist is a detective or amateur detective.
2. The depiction of the main character is ambiguous, but the city is clearly described.
3. Both protagonists lose sight of the person they are tracking and eventually lose their own identity.
4. They have no names or do not adhere to their names.

Daniel Quinn, the main character of *City of Glass*, is a writer. One day, a woman called Virginia Stillman calls and asks him to protect her and her husband, saying, "If you're a detective Paul Auster, protect my husband and me, and my husband is at risk of being killed by his father (Peter Stillman)." Quinn takes on this request even though he is not Paul Auster and examines Peter Stillman, following him as he wanders around New York City, which the author describes in detail. Fed up with the aimless tailing, Quinn assumes the risk of speaking to Stillman. Quinn cannot obtain any information from Stillman's story, then Stillman is gone;

he can also not contact Virginia. Soon, Quinn resembles a tramp living alone in the city.

First, Quin tries hard not to lose himself to an assumed identity.

This first was to tell himself that he was no longer Daniel Quinn. He was Paul Auster now, and with each step he took he tried to fit more comfortably into the strictures of that transformation. Auster was no more than a name to him, a husk without content. To be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own inner life had been made inaccessible, then there was no place for him to retreat to (Auster, 2008, 74).

In the end, Daniel Quinn forgets himself, as is symbolized by his frequent change of name. His pen name is William Wilson (like Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *William Wilson*, whose name is also a pseudonym in the novel). The initials of Daniel Quinn are the same as Don Quixote, a fact that puzzles Quinn. He introduces himself to Stillman as Henry Dark, and in the second conversation, his name becomes Peter Stillman. In addition, the paper Stillman writes iterates that the meaninglessness of the symbol (name) results from the original sin of Adam and Eve. Stillman deconstructs Quin's name upon meeting him. Throughout the story, the author emphasizes that the name is meaningless and is not the key to any solution.

Ghost's hero is a private detective named Blue. One day, White, a disguised client, visits Blue and asks him to keep an eye on a man named Black. Blue can finally see Black after a futile investigation that runs over a year. He realizes then that he is Black. It is ultimately indicated that Blue will go to a distant country, perhaps China.

The reader (including me) might be surprisingly baffled at the novel's beginning because the characters all bear color names.

First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes, and when Brown grew old, Blue took over. That is how it begins. The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change. Blue goes to his office every day and sits at his desk, waiting for something to happen. For a long time nothing does, and then a man named White walks through the door, and that is how it begins (Auster, 2008, 161).

The author emphasizes the arbitrariness of the name by using such generic and artificial terms as names. On the other hand, the other depictions are extremely real and detailed, from the cityscape to the sofas in the living room. The reader is also surprised by the sightseeing guide to New York.

Orange Street perhaps. Walt Whitman handset the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on this street in 1855, and it was here that Henry Ward Beecher railed against slavery from the pulpit of his red-brick church. So much for local colour (Auster, 2008, 162-3).

Just as Vladimir and Estragon wait forever for Godot, Blue looks for Black for more than a year. However, when Blue actually meets Black, he thinks of Black as someone who reflects Blue himself. After all, Black has spent a year finding nothing. Blue goes to a distant country at the end. Losing his identity, he becomes the one buried in the city.

The first-person narrator-protagonist in *The Locked Room* is an up-and-coming critic. This nameless narrator remains “I” until the end. One day, Sophie, his former best friend Fanshawe’s wife, requests “I” to publish manuscripts written by Fanshawe, who is missing. The books sell well. “I” marries Sophie and begins writing Fanshawe’s autobiography. He also attempts to decipher Fanshawe’s whereabouts from a letter in which the missing man had carefully delineated his itinerary. “I” comes to losing his sense of identity as he searches for Fanshawe and, in the process, almost becomes Fanshawe. Finally, “I” meets Fanshawe again, without the erstwhile friends actually meeting face-to-face.

Fanshawe, “I’s” former best friend, does not appear in the novel. However, his history and travels worldwide since his youth are described in detail, and the reader even yearns for his lifestyle. In contrast, the protagonist “I” seems dissatisfied with earning royalties from best-selling books and marrying Fanshawe’s beautiful wife. In fact, the main character is as thin as air, worthy precisely of being the unnamed “I.” In comparing himself to his former best friend Fanshawe, “I” realizes that he is anybody, tries to expose Fanshawe’s identity, and even tries to kill him to ensure being inundated in the investigation. The unnamed “I” is characterized by his experience as a temporary census-taker in Harlem eight years earlier, inventing names one after another to constitute the census book.

Most of all, there was the pleasure of making up names. At times I had to curb my impulse towards the outlandish – the fiercely comical, the pun, the dirty word – but for the most part I was content to stay within the bounds of realism. When my imagination flagged, there were certain mechanical devices to fall back on: the colours ---, the Presidents---, fictional characters. I liked names associated with the sky---, with silent humour, with long homeruns---, and with music---. Occasionally, I would dredge up the names of distant relatives or old school friends, and once I even used an anagram of my own (Auster, 2008, 293).

“I’s” ridiculous part-time job resembles the playwright’s routine creation of names for characters and symbolizes society’s arbitrariness in bestowing names to people. It appears as if the protagonist voluntarily desires to wander the city’s maze. The author induces this desire to make the reader aware that the unnamed stray through the labyrinthine city.

VI. The Role of Unnamed Characters.

The Burning Map and Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* novels are detective stories. However, they do not apply typical detective novel patterns like Hercule Poirot’s brilliant reasoning to hunt culprits. The relationship between the detective on the tracking side and the person on the chasing side is too unclear in the texts

examined in this paper. Their protagonists track someone but lose themselves before they find the missing person and wander the city's labyrinths in despair. Only "I" in *The Locked Room* is connected to his wife, Sophie. Even though "I" has a home to which he can return, his lonely attempts at detection end in despair and escape. All four works discussed in this paper clearly describe the city: lucid depictions of New York town-buildings and the café are percipient. The dirty bar in Japan evokes the disparate atmosphere of the old Showa Era. However, all the texts portray their detectives as obscure figures. *The Ruined Map* takes the guise of detective fiction to evince the absurd relationship between a person (detective) who does not have a map and the outside world (the city). Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* presents heroes who chase obscure subjects and finally drift into the stylish New York cityscape.

The protagonists of these novels remain unnamed or change their names. The obscurity of these lonely figures without names is emphasized in contrast to the clear townscape. However, from the reader's point of view, the main character is a nobody and thus becomes the figure that attracts attention.

The unnamed protagonist makes the reader imagine that he will not find a place because he has no name even if he enters the city maze and is buried in it: the unnamed character is thus accentuated. This narrative technique utilizes the arbitrary nature of names, and these novels suggest another potential for detective stories.

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