Degree Project
Level: Bachelor

Recalling Trauma

The Freudian Levels of Consciousness in *The New York Trilogy*

Author: Sara Torres Löndahl
Supervisor: David Gray
Examiner: Billy Gray
Subject/main field of study: English (Literature)
Course code: EN2028
Credits: 15 ECTS
Date of examination: 2018-01-08

At Dalarna University it is possible to publish the student thesis in full text in DiVA. The publishing is open access, which means the work will be freely accessible to read and download on the internet. This will significantly increase the dissemination and visibility of the student thesis.

Open access is becoming the standard route for spreading scientific and academic information on the internet. Dalarna University recommends that both researchers as well as students publish their work open access.

I give my/we give our consent for full text publishing (freely accessible on the internet, open access):

Yes ☒  No ☐
Introduction

Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity (Auster 313).

Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy consists of the complex and seemingly unconnected novels City of Glass and Ghosts, which are only loosely tied together as the third and last novel The Locked Room unfolds. In the novels, Auster plays with features of detective fiction, creating a temptation to research details in the novels to try to find a pattern, and discover some hidden message to make sense of the work. It is easy to fall into this pattern due to the prevailing convention that “a detective story should, in principle, at least, be capable of being solved by a careful and observant reader” (Dove 5; Scaggs 36).

The first part of this trilogy, City of Glass, follows the surreal story of the main character Daniel Quinn, who embarks on the mission to solve a mystery after receiving what seems to be an erroneous phone call, requesting the detective who, like the author of the trilogy, is named Paul Auster. Quinn lives a quiet monotonous life, writing detective novels under a pseudonym, his wife and son are dead, and he has no friends left; to escape this dull life he decides to impersonate Paul Auster. Over the course of the story, he suffers a drastic psychological deterioration, as he is repeatedly reminded of the loss of his family by the characters he meets during his time as a makeshift detective.

The second part of the trilogy, Ghosts, tells the story of a detective named Blue, who is assigned a case by the mysterious White, who asks him to follow Black and report on his movements. However, Blue later discovers that Black himself is the secretive White who ordered Blue to follow him, and is ironically also following
Blue. This story is rather more of an existential struggle of losing the sense of a fixed identity.

Lastly, The Locked Room ties together the three novels into one, at the same time as it deconstructs all connections and notions that the reader might have come up with throughout the novels. When the nameless narrator is contacted by Sophie, the wife of his childhood friend Fanshawe, he learns that his friend, whom he had lost touch with, has mysteriously disappeared. He is initially asked to review and organize his friend’s written work for publishing, but soon becomes romantically involved with Sophie. The narrator’s life drastically improves until the day he receives a strange and unsigned letter that appears to come from Fanshawe himself. In this letter, the narrator is told that under no circumstances is he to look for the sender; if he does the sender will have to kill him. However, he starts a detective-like journey to write a biography on Fanshawe’s life, and learns about his shattered family and the responsibilities that he had to carry from an early age. Soon, he becomes obsessed and increasingly filled with hatred and scorn for his friend, leading to a frantic search for Fanshawe and the desire to kill him.

Nevertheless, it is not until the last pages of The Locked Room, that the reader is presented with the plot twist that not only deconstructs the whole trilogy, but at the same time ties it together into a unity. At this point the narrator declares that the novels are but different “stages of awareness” of an issue unknown to the reader, and proceeds to explain that “[he has] been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it’s in the struggle” (294). This suggests that the importance of the novels is not within the stories that are being told and consequently torn apart, but rather the psychological struggle caused by trauma of someone exterior to the novels. This
‘entity’ will be referred to as the *ultimate narrator* to avoid confusion with the nameless narrator of *The Locked Room*.

What specifically stands out in all three novels, which is intimately tied to this psychological struggle, is the uncanny resemblance between most of the characters. These characters seem to have a connection to one another, they are portrayed as seemingly evanescent, sharing personal attributes and names both within and outside of the trilogy —from the authors life and in relation to intertextuality. Moreover, secondary characters give the impression of being fragments or doubles of the main characters of each novel, triggering reactions in the main characters as they are forced to face their alter-egos. The existence of these fragmented characters can be related to a “victim[s inability] to process [a traumatic] experience in a normal way” (Pederson 335).

The notion of trauma is defined as, an “emotional shock following a stressful event […], which may lead to long-term neurosis”, and is introduced in the works of the French psychologist Pierre Janet and the Austrian founder of Psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud in the early 20th century (“trauma”). According to Cathy Caruth, a traumatic experience may initially not be obvious, as it could be lodged beyond the state of consciousness. However, it can manifest repeatedly later in life (91-92). Moreover, Caruth argues that “what follows [the] trauma is […] fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (58), but also points out that “the repetition of the traumatic experience in [for example a] flashback can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (63). The complex web of strange characters and incidents can therefore be interpreted as the result of the repressed traumatic experience of the *ultimate narrator*. The main theme of the trilogy then becomes the
journey of the *ultimate narrator*, to acknowledge and come to terms with a repressed trauma. The Freudian key ideas regarding the conscious in relation to repression are therefore fundamental to this study and will be briefly explained below.

According to the Freudian Psychoanalytic theories, the human psyche can be divided into the *unconscious, preconscious* and *conscious*.

Two kinds of unconscious [can be defined beyond the consciousness] — one which is easily, under frequently occurring circumstances, transformed into something conscious, and another with which this transformation is difficult and takes place only subject to a considerable expenditure of effort or possibly never at all. […] We call the unconscious which is only latent, and thus easily becomes conscious, the 'preconscious', and retain the term 'unconscious' for the other (Freud “New Introductory Lines” 71).

The term *repression*, is related to the levels of consciousness as “unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events” that are pushed out of consciousness (Barry 92-3). This is a defence mechanism to avoid “a large amount of unpleasure. But the repressed […] continues to exist in the unconscious, [and may seep into consciousness as a] disguised and unrecognizable substitute for what ha[s] been repressed” (Freud “Five Lectures” 27). *Repression* can consequently lead to the psychological process of *projection*, which is when a person attributes the often negative aspects of themselves onto someone else. Additionally, repressed memories can also surface through *dream works*, which refers to events and desires appearing in dreams, which can manifest in the form of *displacement* where a “person or event is represented by another […] linked or associated with it” (Barry 94).
Scholars have studied the texts in the trilogy through the lens of various psychoanalytical approaches, and with the phenomenon of the fragmented characters as a common focal point. This has offered a variety of interpretations on the underlying reasons of their existence. However, no study has been found that deals with the trilogy as a psychological transition of the repressed trauma of one external individual. Pouriah Torkamaneh identifies the existence of the shattered selves in the novel *Ghosts* within the scope of postmodernist ideas and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the *hyperreal*, which refers to the “lack of distinction between what is real and what is simulated” (Barry 86). Torkamaneh attributes the existence of fragmented characters to a “lack of effective and meaningful communication [leading to the creation of] a Baudrillardian hyperreal world where fractured individuals can have access only to illusory forms of meaning and interaction” (Torkamaneh 307). This means that the main character lacks self-assurance regarding his own existence, due to the scarce interaction between people. This leads him to rely on shattered reflections of himself to reassure him of his own reality. Similarly, Catherine Roger studies several of Auster’s works including the trilogy, from a lacanian perspective, and argues that “the ego constructs an image of unity, permanence, and substantiality, but which is marked by the misrecognition and alienation inherent in the reflected specular image” (72); and “the self of American psychology” (72), which considers the reflected image to be one that the self identifies with (74). Roger argues that the main character first identifies the alter-ego as ‘the other’ and later embraces it as reflection of the self (72), and explains that “Auster questions the self [and that], when the self seems to have matured and strengthened in his fiction, he starts deriding it’” (74).
Lastly, Roberta Rubenstein looks at the psychodynamic processes and images” in the trilogy, in relation to the Freudian concept of “the uncanny: repetition and doubling” (246). Freud, defines the uncanny as "nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (qtd. in Rubenstein, 256). According to Rubenstein “[each] central character seeks, discovers, swaps places with, disappears into, or struggles physically with an antagonist who is in fact his double” (246). Eventually the main character does realize that the secondary character is not only a double but also his “other self”, since it is merely a repressed side of himself, but as they get too close they cancel each other out and vanish (Rubenstein 254, 260).

The aim of this study is to analyse The New York Trilogy from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, reading the three novels as a psychological journey through stages of consciousness of someone who has been exposed to trauma, as defined by Caruth. Drawing on the idea that the different characters are essentially shattered fragments of the same person, the focus will be on the encounters that the main characters have with the secondary characters, and what these encounters trigger. The thesis will be divided into three analytical chapters, of which the first chapter ‘Losing It’ will examine key examples of the repressed traumas, including dream works, that surface in the three novels. This will then lead to the second chapter ‘Ghosts of the past’, which will deal with the Freudian term of projection in relation to the repression of trauma that is manifested through the reflecting characters. These two chapters are crucial for the later analysis on the novel’s relation to the stages of consciousness of the ultimate narrator, which will be in the chapter ‘More than meets the I’.
Losing It

The three novels in *The New York Trilogy* have an underlying presence of repressed trauma that is reiterated. The trace of said trauma in the novels is imperative for this study and will be presented below. However, it is crucial to point out that the aim is not to define these as the factual trauma of the *ultimate narrator*, but rather to define its presence in the novels and possibly also in his life. The presence of trauma can then give way to further analysis on how the main characters and *ultimate narrator* are affected by the repression of trauma, and how, according to Carruth, the reiteration of trauma may lead to further damage (63).

The secondary characters that are related to the Stillman case in *City of Glass*, repeatedly trigger the memory of trauma to resurface in Quinn. Auster begins *City of Glass* with a brief introduction of the main character Daniel Quinn, that provides the reader with background information regarding his previous traumatic experience. “[H]e had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead” (3). The memory of Quinn’s family loss is then reiterated at several points of the story, showing that this is an event that has made a profound impact on his life. The first occasion when this happens is in relation to Quinn’s first encounter with Peter Stillman. After receiving a call looking for the detective Paul Auster, Quinn decides to play along and pretend to be the detective. He visits the enigmatic caller Peter Stillman, to learn about the case he is about to get involved in, and as he meets this shady character he “[thinks] of his own dead son. Then, just as suddenly as the thought appear[s], it vanishe[s]” (14). This shows that Quinn is barely aware of the thought appearing in his mind, hinting at a memory that is perhaps too painful to confront, and therefore immediately repressed when it surfaces. A more explicit memory concerning the death of Quinn’s son appears,
when he is asked to follow the father of Peter Stillman upon his release from psychiatric care. When studying the case, Quinn learns of the father, who was sentenced for isolating his son as a child without human contact, to learn the true and uncorrupted language of God. As Quinn ponders about the horrors that Stillman suffered as a child, and other tragic cases regarding children, it is clear that the mere subject of children is painful for him, [making him think] of the little coffin that held his son’s body and how he had seen it on the day of the funeral being lowered into the ground. That was isolation, he said to himself. That was silence. It did not help, perhaps, that his son’s name had also been Peter (35).

This memory does not only remind Quinn of his son, it specifically points at the trauma of loss itself. It also indicates that this event is intimately linked to the isolation and loneliness of Quinn. Additionally, Peter Stillman’s father, who Quinn is to follow, is also named Peter Stillman, meaning that there is a second character carrying the name of his son, who is also capable of invoking the memory of trauma. These passages inform of the existence of a previous traumatic experience in the main character’s life, that has perhaps not been processed properly and appears through repetition. In this case he is reminded of his dead son, not only because of the aspect and name of the other characters, but also because the case itself leads his thoughts back to an event as tragic as the burial of his own son.

In accordance with Caruth’s theory, Quinn’s mental health is endangered by repeatedly being exposed to the memory of trauma. This can be perceived when the story becomes further entangled, and Quinn is desperate for help with the case, he searches for Paul Auster in the Yellow Pages, and finds the character who shares the name of the author of the trilogy itself. However, during their meeting, Paul Auster’s
wife and son come back home, and this is “too much for Quinn. He [feels] as though Auster were taunting him with the things he had lost, and he responded with envy and rage, a lacerating self-pity. Yes, he too would have liked to have this wife and this child” (101-102). It is soon after this meeting that Quinn begins to lose his mind. The reader is introduced to a new narrator, who explains that, “[he] cannot say for certain what happened to Quinn during [the period after meeting Paul Auster], for it is at this point in the story that he began to lose grip” (114), and is nowhere to be found. This episode shows that Quinn is highly affected by the loss of his family, and as he is forced to witness the happy family life of Auster, he is also forced to contemplate his own traumatic experience which has deprived him of this happiness. Moreover, this encounter becomes such a triggering point for Quinn that his psychological state deteriorates, and he is eventually lost, both physically and mentally, restating the existence of trauma in the text.

As explained previously, one of the ways in which a repressed experience may surface, is through dream work. This refers to the Freudian terminology for when the repressed is manifested through dreams and can manifest in the shape of displacement. Two cases of dream work are evident in City of Glass, and in both cases, they precede Quinn’s mental deterioration, which can also be perceived as a harmful repetition of trauma as defined by Caruth (63). The first one comes after he supposedly discovers the secret message traced through the streets of New York by the older Stillman. In this dream “he [finds] himself in the town dump of his childhood, sifting through a mountain of rubbish” (72). This can be interpreted as a symbol of repressed emotional luggage, because of the negative image of the town dump that is clustered together with that of his own childhood. Moreover, the action
that he is engaged in, ‘sifting’, alludes to the action of examining or questioning the symbolical image of a mountain of rubbish, of how he sees his own childhood.

Similarly, the emotional toll that the meeting with the Auster family has on Quinn is also expressed through *dream works*. Soon after their encounter he has another dream that he forgets, in which “he found himself walking down Broadway, holding Auster’s son by the hand” (106). Auster’s son becomes a figure of *displacement* in this dream, as meeting him triggers the memory of his own dead son. Additionally, the scene in this dream is contrasted by the town dump of Quinn’s childhood, as Broadway is one of Manhattans biggest streets known for its cultural life. This dream gives the impression of being something positive, as it represents something that Quinn cherishes, yet it is also tragic because he has lost his son. Therefore, the dream becomes something that has a negative impact on his psychological state.

The trauma that is present in the second novel, *Ghosts*, is also in relation to family loss, in this case it involves the two father figures in the novel, who have an emotional impact on the main character. Firstly, Blue remembers his deceased father as he is following Black across the Brooklyn Bridge, and this memory triggers the thought of becoming older than his father was when he died, “there was something awesome about it, Blue felt, something so odd and terrible about being older than your own father, that he actually had to fight back the tears” (153). This shows that Blue must have lost his father at an early age, an experience that is likely to have been traumatic for him and which has deprived him of paternal support. As he lacks a father figure, he later attributes this role to his former boss and companion Brown, who had taught him all there was to know regarding being a detective. When Blue’s desperation later rises, since Black does nothing unusual or suspicious, he decides
to contact Brown. He is very disappointed when a letter arrives that does not address
the issue that he is concerned with,

feel[ing] betrayed by the man who was once like a father to him […] empty, the stuffing all
knocked out of him. [He] is on his own, he thinks, there’s no one to turn to anymore. This
is followed by several hours of despondency and self-pity, with Blue thinking once or twice
that maybe he’d be better off dead (159).

Blue’s reaction when Brown fails to be supportive by giving advice about the case
is extreme, and it accentuates his need of a father figure to turn to. Brown had filled
this gap in Blue’s life, but when he does not help him, Blue is reminded about his
own loneliness and the void he feels after his father’s death. Thus, he is also
reminded of the trauma, as the feeling of losing a family member is reiterated.

The traumatic experience is much more detailed in The Locked Room, but in
this case, it concerns the secondary character Fanshawe. He is technically not the
main character of this novel, but the whole text concerns him and his disappearance;
and by looking at him as a reflection of the narrator he is a trivial character to study.
The narrator explains that Fanshawe had a difficult experience as a teenager, as his
father got cancer and he spent most of his time with him, and “though he seemed to
take it well, summoning up the bravery that is only possible in the very young, [the
narrator] sometimes wonder[s] if he ever managed to get over it” (221). The reader
is therefore not only presented with a well-defined traumatic experience, but also
the struggle that the young Fanshawe had to face, as he understood the outcome of
the disease would be the death of his father. Moreover, he faced this fact throughout
the length of the disease forcing himself not to show any weakness. Towards the
end of the father’s life, the narrator visits a graveyard with Fanshawe, and the latter
decides to lay at the bottom of a freshly dug grave as “he wanted to see what it was like at the bottom” (221). The narrator remembers him laying at the bottom,

pretending to be dead […] his eyes blinking furiously as the snow fell onto his face […]. Fanshawe was alone down there, thinking his thoughts, living through those moments by himself […]. I understood that this was Fanshawe’s way of imagining his father’s death (222).

Despite the illusion that Fanshawe gives, of handling the death of his father in a strong way, it appears that it has taken a bigger toll on him than what he is willing or able to show. This proves to be a major traumatic event in his life, that he tries to lock within himself.

The death of Fanshawe’s father is also the event that is responsible for the role that is forced upon Fanshawe, in order to maintain the stability of the family. This is a heavy load that he must carry all by himself, since his mother tries to keep up appearances and becomes eccentric. Moreover, she does not allow Fanshawe to grieve properly as he must be the force holding together the unstable family.

Relations between Fanshawe and his mother became tense. She clung to him for support, acting as though the family’s pain belonged only to her. Fanshawe had to become the solid one in the house; not only did he have to take care of himself, he had to assume responsibility for his [troubled and unstable little] sister. He became her father, her mother, her bastion of wisdom and comfort (220).

This experience does not only deprive Fanshawe of dealing with the trauma of losing a parent, but also affects his whole life, as the mental state of his sister and the relationship with his mother also play a role in his later life decisions. The traumatic
event in Fanshawe’s life is much more detailed in this third novel, and gives an insight not only on the event in itself, but also on how he handles it, and how he deals with the aftermath. The repression, and rather the hasty maturing that he is forced through instead of properly dealing with the trauma when it was fresh, is therefore a key to the behaviour of the adult Fanshawe.

**Ghosts of the Past**

Neglecting or pushing away the memory of traumatic events can, as previously mentioned, lead to a series of unexpected forms of expression through the unconscious, which according to Caruth may have a negative impact on the subject (58, 63). This is what Freud would refer to as the ‘return of the repressed’, meaning that when a person has difficulties facing something – “wish, fear, memory, or desire” (Barry 95), the issue is repressed and banned from the conscious mind, and “remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually” (Barry 95-6). The repressed can manifest through *projection*, which is when we attribute our own, often negative, features to someone else rather than recognize them in ourselves (Barry 93). This is intimately connected to the idea of the characters being shattered pieces or alter egos of each other, as the trauma is manifested “through [the] characters who mirror aspects of the [main characters’] own psychological predicament” (Rubenstein 246). Rubenstein argues that “[m]uch of Auster's trilogy concerns this figurative mirroring/doubling, representing not only self-estrangement but also the transformation of self into other” (250).

*Projection*, can be found to be present in all three novels, as the secondary characters mirror sides, memories or characteristics that the main characters do not
want to see or cannot accept in themselves. The father and son relationship between
the Stillmans in *City of Glass* resemble Quinn’s own way of dealing with trauma. The father locked the son in a room without communication, and similarly, Quinn has psychologically locked away his traumatic experience. Once he actively starts chasing these characters, they disappear without a trace, and what emerges instead is the Auster family. They are a vivid image of Quinn’s trauma, as they are the embodiment of a painful memory or an idealized image of how things could have been.

The character Blue, in *Ghosts*, even comes to the realization that Black is a reflection of himself. When Blue looks at Black he considers him “the saddest creature in the world. And then, the moment he says these words, he understands that he’s also talking about himself” (193). This also means that the way Blue perceives Black, is also how he perceives himself, and how empty and lonely he considers his own life to be. Black also insists that he is not out of his mind, “[i]f anything, [he is in his] mind, too much in [his] mind. It’s used [him] up, and now there’s nothing left” (195). This reveals that he has concerns within himself of which he is uncapable of letting go, and as a reflection of the main character it also indicates that Blue has the same issues.

In the case of *The Locked Room*, the narrator projects his own psychological deterioration onto Fanshawe. He remembers the young, thoughtful and beloved Fanshawe up until the death of his father and the toll it had on his family. The two drifted apart some time after this incident and the narrator’s is forced to follow Fanshawe’s next moves through other’s recollections of him and the impersonal letters he used to send back to his family. However, in the frantic search for Fanshawe, the narrator eventually realises that he was in his head all along (292-3).
This means that the whole time that the narrator has been studying Fanshawe’s moves, he has really been looking at his own life. In this sense, Fanshawe, being a person that is “cold on the inside […] dead in there, [and who never] loved anyone – not once, not ever in his life” (262), becomes the projection of what the narrator cannot accept in himself. Moreover, Fanshawe incites such an unreasonable hatred in the narrator that he yearns to kill him (268), indicating that he can no longer live with this self-image.

**More than Meets the I**

The previous chapters have discussed the presence and repetition of repressed trauma in the novels, and how the trauma surfaces through dream works and projection, urging for the trauma to be acknowledged. These features are important for the analysis that will follow in this chapter, due to the way in which trauma closes in on the main characters. When the secondary characters or alter-egos become too overpowering, the main characters can no longer escape the repressed, and with the aid of the written word they enter a new state of awareness. As this happens, each novel abruptly ends and gives rise to the next one, resembling the process of recalling a repressed trauma from the unconscious. Thus, the three novels are united into the story of the ultimate narrator who struggles with trauma as it can no longer be repressed in the unconscious, and “seek[s] to convey itself into the preconscious so as to be able then to force its way through into consciousness” (Freud et al. 610).

Several passages highlight this theme of unity within the trilogy, consolidating the interpretation of the texts as one entity that represents the mind of the ultimate narrator. The idea of oneness between the characters is alluded to in *City of Glass*, through the analogy of “the egg [that needs to be put] back together
again. For each of [the characters] […] is Humpty Dumpty. And to help him is to help [themselves]” (82). In other words, all the characters of the three novels are broken pieces of the same person, and they are all vital in the psychological journey of the ultimate narrator. Moreover, the existence of this entity becomes evident towards the end of The Locked Door when the importance of the three stories per se is disregarded.

The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside [him] now, [he] could not have started this book. The same comes for the two books that come before it, City of Glass and Ghosts. These three stories are finally the same story, but each represents a different stage of [his] awareness of what it is about (294).

It is this sudden switch of focus that turns the attention from the stories told in the novels onto something else, namely the resemblance of the texts with the Freudian levels of consciousness. This concept is fuelled when the narrator then declares that “[he] has been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it’s in the struggle” (294). Therefore, the importance has been found to lie in the parallel story of the ultimate narrator’s psychological journey, of the repressed trauma being moved from the unconscious into the conscious.

To begin with, City of Glass is the representation of the unconscious, as Quinn’s trauma roams freely, yet is not fully acknowledged. Quinn does not reflect upon the bizarre circumstances that he becomes involved in or the characters that he meets in this story. As previously discussed, the Stillmans only appear to leave vague reminders of trauma, and as these hints influence Quinn, the Stillmans disappear allowing the Austers to take over. The intensity with which these
secondary characters try to convey the memory of trauma gradually increases, consequently triggering Quinn to disappear into himself as he lies naked and unaware of time, and frantically writing in his notebook (127). This process of writing that Quinn takes up becomes crucial for the trauma to be recognized and become a part of the preconscious. Before Quinn vanishes, he manically writes in his red notebook that he purchased to take notes of the Stillman case. Eventually he disregards everything related to the Stillmans,

in fact [he] felt sorry that he had bothered to write about the Stillman case at all. For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, it’s meaning had been lost. Quinn no longer had any interest in himself (131).

This means that he has some sort of awareness of the trauma, and knows that the Stillman case was necessary for an awakening, but once this has occurred, his concern is of a different kind, which he scribbles down in the notebook. It is not clear what he writes, and the work seems to be left unfinished as the last sentence reads, “[w]hat will happen when there are no more pages in the notebook?” (132). This indicates the uncertainty regarding what will happen next once the trauma is released from its repressed state in the unconscious. Once Quinn runs out of space to write, he also disappears, since the purpose in this level of consciousness has been fulfilled. This novel then, represents the level of unconsciousness of the ultimate narrator, that can no longer hold the repressed trauma back and forces it into another level of his awareness.

In Ghosts, the memory of trauma is “latent, and thus easily becomes conscious” (Freud “New Introductory Lines” 71), designating its role as the
preconscious. Despite the tension that is built in the novel regarding Black’s identity, Blue simply acknowledges him as a reflection of himself and is more concerned with whether they can get along or not. He “wishes he had the courage to load his gun, take aim at Black, and fire a bullet through his head”, but then starts wondering if it “would not be possible for him to offer his hand in friendship” (193). The indifference Blue shows, regarding the self-realization proves that this knowledge was there all along and did not require much effort to reach his consciousness. Because Black is a reflection of Blue, their life stories must also mirror each other, including any trauma.

Black can also be regarded as a mediator of the preconscious as it is through his writing that the trauma becomes a part of the conscious. Throughout the novel he is writing a manuscript about the life of both himself and of Blue, therefore, any possible trauma will inevitably be present in it. The content of this manuscript is not revealed to the reader, and when Blue asks Black to reveal the story, he replies that, “[Blue] already knows it by heart” (196). Once Blue acquires the manuscript and reads it, he seems indifferent as if he, just as Black had said, was already familiar with the story, and simply walks away. The information is so to say, easily “transformed into something conscious” (Freud “New Introductory Lines” 71). Thus, Ghosts becomes the representation of the preconscious of the ultimate narrator, as repressed memories can be brought from the unconscious into the conscious level without a remarkable effort, and once the trauma has become evident, a new novel begins.

Lastly, the decision of the narrator in The Locked Room, to find and confront Fanshawe, mirrors the ultimate narrator’s determination to reach the root of the trauma, bringing it into the conscious part of the mind and facing it in order to go
on with his life. Moreover, Fanshawe, can even be compared to the trauma itself, as he threatens the narrator saying, "I am not going to be found, and to speak of it would only lead to more trouble than it’s worth […] I want you to understand that I haven’t lost my mind […] [and if] by some miracle you manage to track me down, I will kill you” (239). This is once again comparable to Caruth’s idea that the trauma can be harmful to confront (63). Fanshawe is hidden and locked away in a room just like the trauma is in the unconscious, but tracing and letting Fanshawe out of the room could be harmful to the narrator just like the trauma could be for the ultimate narrator.

The struggle of trying to deal with the trauma is represented through the narrator’s frantic search for Fanshawe and the increasing desire to kill him. Eventually, the narrator comes to the realization that “[Fanshawe] was exactly where [the narrator] was, and he had been there since the beginning”, and that Fanshawe was with him all along, locked in a room that “[he] now discovered was in [his] skull” (292-293). Upon this epiphany and possible re-traumatization, he turns to a self-abusive life style “fucking the brains out of [his] head, drinking [him]self into another world. But if the point was to obliterate Fanshawe, then [his] binge was a success. [Fanshawe] was gone, and [he] was gone along with him” (293-294). This episode ends as he provokes a stranger to beat him up, and at this point he is determined to sort things out in his life. This destructive behaviour of the narrator, when he cannot deny that he and Fanshawe are really the same, is a parallel reflection of the ultimate narrator. He is forced to take a close look at his own life, and shows awareness of the repressed, but is perhaps not yet ready to accept it and attempts to further suppress it, eventually realizing that he cannot continue living like that and that he can only move on if he takes care of the trauma.
The writing is also essential in *The Locked Room*, as it becomes a tool to process the trauma both for the narrator and the ultimate narrator. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator expresses that “there was no difference in [his] mind between giving the order to destroy Fanshawe’s work and killing him with [his] own hands” (224), and when the two are finally reunited, talking through a locked door, Fanshawe gives the narrator a notebook with what he considers his masterpiece. “[The narrator later tears out the pages from the notebook one by one], crumple[s] them in [his] hand and drop[s] them into the trash bin on the platform [and reaches] the last page just as the train was pulling out” (314), which according to his previous statement, is then a way of virtually killing his foe. Simultaneously then, the ultimate narrator’s level of consciousness is reached as the narrator reads Fanshawe’s scribbles. The ultimate narrator is able to look at his own life and trace the trauma that has been haunting him in his unconscious mind through the eyes of the narrator who studies Fanshawe. And as the pages of the notebook are torn out, the ultimate narrator processes his traumatic experience. This final state of the ultimate narrator also reflects Roger’s interpretation of the inherent strength of the main characters. They are first defined as having a “weak and frail self, [the] individual [that is first portrayed is later] armed with greater cohesion and sense of continuity, [and] can turn to the world” (75). The trilogy can then be summed up as the intense process within the ultimate narrator of both locating the trauma within himself and releasing it, learning to live with it and letting go, rather than repressing it.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to show that the three complex stories in the *New York Trilogy* can be interpreted as a unity, by tying them together into the Freudian model
of consciousness levels of an *ultimate narrator*. Caruth’s theory on trauma was used to pinpoint the existence of trauma that is present in all three novels, enabling the further analysis of how these traumas affect the main characters and simultaneously also how trauma affects the state of the *ultimate narrator*. By looking at the reaction of these main characters it is possible to determine that this theory is plausible and that there is in fact a resemblance between the novels and the Freudian levels of consciousness, and that they can be categorized accordingly.

Initially, it appears as if the secondary characters only seem to cause mental deterioration, since the flashback can be retraumatizing. Quinn loses his mind after a close confrontation with the Auster’s or rather by the image of how his life could have been. Blue simply vanishes after reading the story of his own life, and the narrator enters a self-destructive path when he studies every detail of Fanshaw’s, or rather his own life. However, when looking at the stories together, as the story of the *ultimate narrator*, it actually becomes the journey of learning to deal with past traumatic events. The characters in the novels exist because the *ultimate narrator* cannot see certain sides of himself, and therefore projects them onto the different alter-egos that reside in each level of consciousness. These alter-egos incite the memory of trauma to surface, and once this happens in one novel, a new one begins, resembling the journey of the trauma to reach consciousness.

Each of the novels are, as suggested in *The Locked Room*, merely distinct stages of consciousness. These distinct levels emerge as the trauma inevitably and repeatedly surfaces through the persistent encounters that the main characters have with their alter-egos. *City of Glass*, should therefore be considered the forced awakening of the *ultimate narrator*, in which the memory of trauma cannot be repressed in the unconscious anymore and is forced into a new level of
consciousness. In *Ghosts* on the other hand, the trauma reaches consciousness without any major effort as if it was there to recall at any given moment, like a memory in the preconscious. Black’s story is not only shared with Blue, it is also the life story of the ultimate narrator. Therefore, as Blue reads Black’s manuscript, it can also be regarded as the process of retrieving the information into the conscious of the ultimate narrator. The final struggle in *The Last Door* then becomes the process of acknowledgement and processing of a traumatic experience in a state of consciousness. As Fanshawe’s story is retold by the narrator, he also tells the story that Quinn is incapable of dealing with; the story of Black and Blue; but he is also telling his own story. Moreover, once the narrator pulls out the pages of Fanshawe’s notebook and throws them away, he virtually kills Fanshawe, which symbolically also releases the ultimate narrator from the repressed trauma.

**Works cited**


