Craft Analysis: *The Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster

For my craft analysis I chose to read Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude*. This book is a work of creative nonfiction that details the aftermath of the death of Auster’s father. Auster describes visiting his father’s home directly after his death, his father’s funeral, and Auster’s subsequent journey to discover more about his father than he had been able to learn while his father was alive. What he discovers unfolds in a series of what Auster calls “Books of Memory,” in which Auster narrates different scenes from his father’s life as though he had personally seen them happen. *The Invention of Solitude*’s greatest strength lies in its sharp prose and its ability to dive deep into the heart of a reader. Auster’s writing has a very human element to it, one that makes it easy to relate to the feelings and events his characters experience. The details that he chooses to elaborate upon are carefully selected and serve to add to the piece’s realism. By carefully choosing what to divulge and what to withhold, Auster is able to create a story that is felt as much as it is read and visualized.

From the first page, Auster’s prose is very cutting. His very first paragraph is an examination of the suddenness of death and how it can come for you or someone you love without any warning. Our reactions to this are often volatile – there is rage, and confusion, and grief, and fear – which Auster describes excellently. “Death after long illness we can accept with resignation,” he writes. “But for a man to die of no apparent cause, for a man to die simply because he is a man, brings us so close to the invisible boundary between life and death that we no longer know which side we are on” (1). Sudden death, in Auster’s opinion, horrifies us because it is a painful reminder of our own mortality. It alerts us to the fact that things such as good health,
material wealth, and popularity do not safeguard us from the reality of death; it comes for everyone, and often does so unexpectedly.

He gets straight to the heart of the novel when he describes learning of his father’s death in the second paragraph. Readers are even given a timeline of when this occurred, as he explains that the news came to him three weeks before the time of his writing. Although this provision is brief, it adds to the realism of the situation by specifying it. The scene is imbued with rich, concrete details to help provide readers a strong mental image. “It was Sunday morning,” he remembers, “and I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for my small son Daniel. Upstairs my wife was still in bed, warm under the quilts, luxuriating in a few extra hours of sleep. Winter in the country: a world of silence, wood smoke, whiteness” (Auster 2). By giving us these images to establish his family’s normalcy, Auster sharpens the contrast that happens when said normalcy is shattered by the phone call informing him that his father has died.

Auster’s description of the shock and grief that seize him after that phone call are so realistic that they hurt to read. “I thought: my father is gone,” he writes. “If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him” (Auster 3). The relatability of these sentences was almost breathtaking. Last year my beloved uncle died unexpectedly in a car accident, and I had these exact same thoughts. I felt that I had to do something, and do something quickly, to immortalize him or else risk losing him forever. Like Auster, I chose to write about him in order to make his legacy live longer than he himself had.

The fact that Auster reacted by being spurred into action rather than waylaid by grief was also very realistic, as was the way he described that reaction. “I had always imagined that death would numb me, immobilize me with grief,” he recalls. “But now that it had happened, I did not
shed any tears, I did not feel as though the world had collapsed around me” (4). The subsequent 
facts that Auster offers – that his father had no dependents and few friends – highlight the fact 
that when death comes for someone, it does not affect the world at large. A few scattered people 
may grieve, but eventually even those people will move on, the dead’s absence just a slight 
aberration in their lives.

Auster’s writing style helps to strengthen the characterization of his father, and his 
descriptions of their relationship. His prose often has a somewhat vague, disconnected feeling to it, 
which reinforces the vague and disconnected relationship he had to his father. Auster recalls that 
when it came to his father’s view of him, “like everything else in his life, he saw me only through 
the mists of his solitude, as if at several removes from himself” (Auster 1). Because Auster chooses 
to offer few details about this distance and what it entailed, it makes the reader better understand 
the separation between himself and his father, because they feel it between themselves and the 
author. Shortly thereafter when Auster describes his younger sister – “uncommonly fragile, with 
great brown eyes that would collapse into tears at the slightest prompting…a tiny figure wandering 
through an imaginary land…a miniature Ophelia, already doomed” (3) – he delves into more 
detail. This is because the relationship between himself and his sister, as well as his father and his 
sister, was a much more intimate and personal one. As such, the detail involved is much more 
intimate and personal as well.

The Invention of Solitude’s final chapter, “Books of Memory,” takes Auster’s careful choice of 
detail and expands it. Auster narrates scenes from his father’s life – his boyhood, his early adult 
life, his travels in Paris and the relationships he developed there – as though he had personally 
witnessed them. This section is meant to fully flesh out Auster’s father as a character, and as such,
Auster allows the reader a more detailed glimpse of his life than they have seen thus far. Readers see his trips to a ballpark when he was young, his tiny apartment in Paris that was almost too small for even one person, his experiences with Judaism. Because Auster himself was able to better understand his father after learning of these experiences, so too are we as readers.

*The Invention of Solitude*'s greatest strength lies in its choosing of detail. It withholds information when said withholding helps the reader to better understand Auster’s distance, numbness, and frustration. For example, in the beginning of the novel when Auster describes his relationship with his father, he does not divulge much detail. He keeps the reader at arm’s length in the same way his father kept him. Correspondingly, Auster relays information when doing so would make the reader understand the significance of a certain experience or event. The entirety of the “Books of Memory” chapter are an example of this; he was allowed a stronger glimpse into his father’s life, and as such, his readers are allowed one too. Auster’s use of detail turns *The Invention of Solitude* into a painfully human piece that almost forces the reader to take a journey of discovery alongside Auster himself.