Axolotl Study Guide

Axolotl by Julio Cortázar

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Julio Cortazar's short story "Axolotl," from his collection *Final del juego (End of the Game, and Other Stories)*, has disturbed, perplexed, and delighted a growing number of devoted readers and critics since its publication in 1956. One of Cortazar's most famous stories, it is told by a man who has been transformed into an axolotl, a species of salamander, after spending many hours watching axolotls in an aquarium. As an axolotl, the man still sees the human he used to be and hopes the human will write a story about a man who becomes an axolotl. Many critics find the axolotl's final comment to be the pervading theme of Cortazar's short fiction - that through art one can become another and communicate on behalf of all creatures, so that none may feel the terror of isolation and imprisonment.

Cortazar's fiction unites fantastic and often bizarre plots with everyday events and characters. This method urges readers to look beyond the commonly held conviction of Western thought that life is guided by fact. Instead, Cortazar wants readers to understand that reality is in the eye of the beholder. Cortazar is one of the seminal figures of magic realism, an movement hi Latin American literature that began in the 1950s. Cortazar's contemporaries, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes, also combine fantastic and ordinary situations and characters in an attempt to create new ways in which literature can represent life.

Author Biography

Cortazar was born to an Argentinian family living in Brussels, Belgium, in 1914. In 1918 he moved with his parents to their native Argentina. After earning a teaching degree, he taught high school from 1937 to 1944. During this time Cortazar began writing short stories, and in 1938, under the pseudonym Julio Denis, he published Presencia, a book of sonnets exhibiting the influence of French Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme. In 1944 and 1945 Cortazar taught French literature at the University of Cuyo in Mendoza, but he resigned from his post after being arrested for participating in demonstrations against Argentine president Juan Peron. He then moved to Buenos Aires, where he began working for a publishing company. In that same year he published his first short story, "Casa tomada" ("House Taken Over"), in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires,* an influential literary magazine edited by fellow Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. Between 1946 and 1948 Cortazar studied law and languages to earn a degree as a public translator. Cortazar has stated that the arduous task of completing this three-year course in less than a year produced temporary neuroses that are reflected in his fiction. One of his phobias, a fear of eating insects hidden in his food, inspired the short story "Circe," a tale about a woman who feeds her suitors cockroaches in the guise of candies.

In 1951 Cortazar published *Bestiario*, his first collection of short stories and also received a scholarship to study in Paris, where he became a translator for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Paris remained his base until his death. In 1953, collaborating with his wife, Aurora, Cortazar completed translations into Spanish of Edgar Allan Poe's prose works, which were a major influence on his work. Like the characters in his stories and novels, Cortazar was constantly crossing national as well as philosophic boundaries. Throughout his life the author traveled extensively - primarily between France, Argentina, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the United States - often lecturing for social reform in Latin America. He believed that art and writing could bridge gaps between different ways of seeing the world and experiencing reality By challenging readers to question their individual conceptions of reality and to think beyond them, Cortazar encouraged a better understanding of all people as the only hope for resolving the world's conflicts. A number of Cortazar's works explicitly reflect his strong concern for political and human rights causes For example, the novel *Libro de Manuel (1973; A Manual for Manuel)* is in part an expose of the torture of political prisoners in Latin America. Both in his fiction and in his essays, he was an advocate of socialism and a vocal supporter of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. Cortazar was a poet, amateur jazz musician, and movie buff. His story "Blow-Up," from the collection *Las armas secretas* was the basis for Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film of the same name. Cortazar died of the combined effects of leukemia and a heart attack in Paris in 1984.

Plot Summary

"Axolotl" opens with a blunt summary of its own plot: "There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl." An axolotl, the narrator later explains, is the larval stage of a type of salamander.

The rest of the story recounts how this fantastic transformation took place. The narrator, a man living in Paris, has grown bored with the lions and panthers he usually observes at the zoo, the Jardin des Plantes. He decides to explore the aquarium and unexpectedly "hits it off with the axolotls." A sign above the tank tells him they are Mexican, but he already knows this because their pink faces remind him of Aztecs. He begins to visit the axolotls several times a day. He peers through the glass for hours, studying them closely. He becomes particularly fascinated by their golden eyes, which suggest to him "the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing."

As time goes on he feels a growing sense of relationship with the axolotls. One day, as he is pressing his face against the glass, he suddenly realizes that he is no longer looking at the face of an axolotl inside the tank but at his own face, staring into the tank from outside At that instant he realizes that it is impossible for the man to understand the world of the axolotl: "He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world." He is initially horrified at the idea of being "buried alive" in the midst of "unconscious creatures," but his feeling of horror ends as he realizes that although the axolotls cannot communicate, they all share his knowledge.

The man visits the tank less and less frequently, and the axolotl-consciousness eventually realizes that the connection between them is broken. In the "final solitude" to which the man "'no longer comes." the axolotl offers himself the consolation that the man may write a story that will tell "all this about axolotls."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The narrator of this short story was once a man studying the axolotls in the aquarium of a Parisian zoo. Somehow, though, he has become an axolotl. The first time he visited them, the narrator found the axolotls by accident, but he found them so interesting that he stayed to watch them for an hour. He knew, after the first minute, that he shared some connection with them.

Afterward, he went to the library to research axolotls. He learned that they are the larval stage of a species of salamander. He also learned that they could survive on dry land in a drought as well as under water. The narrator began to go every morning to visit them at the aquarium. Some days, he visited them both morning and evening. Though there were nine axolotls behind the glass, the narrator chose just one to focus on, so that he could better study it. He chose the one that was a little apart from the rest.

The axolotl looks like a six-inch long lizard, with a fin on its back and a fish's tail. The narrator was obsessed with the tiny human-like nails on its feet, but he was literally captivated by its lifeless golden eyes. The whole story is only 6 ½ pages long, but the narrator spends 3 ½ pages discussing the creature's eyes. He feels he could enter in through those eyes, and by the end of the story, he does. The fish in other aquariums have handsomer eyes, but the axolotl's eyes suggest an entirely different way of seeing and a different life. This is what draws the narrator back to visit every day.

The narrator has a slight relationship with the guard that takes his ticket each day. He realizes the guard is perplexed by the daily visits, but he does not respond to the guard's looks and jokes. He does not try, yet, to explain to another person what he is experiencing.

In watching, he thinks at first that the axolotl is incapable of motion, but later he learns they simply prefer not to move in their crowded, narrow aquarium. They are capable of motion, but not of expression. Each day, his empathy for the stifled life of the axolotl grows, until the day that he is no longer looking into the empty gold eyes. Instead, he is looking out from those eyes, watching what used to be his face on the other side of the glass.

When the change first happens, he thinks of himself as a human mind, buried alive among the axolotls. He thinks he is alone in having consciousness, until he looks into the eyes of the axolotl next to him. That one also has consciousness, but it is equally incapable of expression.

The man he once was continues to come visit the aquarium, but less frequently now. The axolotl he has become thinks that the bridge of communication has been broken.

He thinks that now, perhaps, this man who no longer cares to know the axolotls will go home and write a story about them.

Analysis

In "Axolotl," the author uses a surreal, or dream-like, technique of shifting viewpoint to explore his themes of consciousness, alienation and communion. The narrator lets the reader know right away that he used to be a man, but that he has become an axolotl. In a sense, he tells the end of the story before it begins, which intensifies its surreal quality.

The story can be viewed as a metaphor for the relationship of a writer to his world, and specifically to mystery. Seeing the axolotls and feeling a sense of connection to them, awakened the narrator's desire to know them. At first, he tried to accomplish this by learning about them at the library. He learned a few interesting facts, but it was not satisfying to know about them. He wants to know them directly, so he keeps returning to the aquarium to study them face-to-face.

When he chooses one to study individually, he chooses the one that is a little apart from the rest. This would seem to indicate that the axolotl's separateness from the others mirrors his own separateness from other people. It is notable that while he pursues a deepening relationship to the axolotl, he does not have any interest in knowing the guard that is clearly curious about him. At the moment, he has much more in common with the captive axolotl than he does with the guard. The writer's life is often like this; he writes for people, but sometimes must set them aside to get closer to his subject, so that he can bring his subject closer to the reader.

How is it that the narrator empathizes so deeply with the axolotl? What exactly is it that he feels captive to? It would seem that language is what traps him, just like the axolotl eventually traps him by seeming to promise a new way of seeing. The axolotl is a larval form, and the narrator says that larva means disguised or phantom. It sounds like he feels tricked by the promise of communion, when the result of his unity with the axolotl turns out to be more isolation. The narrator achieved a different life and a different way of seeing, certainly, but lost the sense of unity with the object of his study.

For the writer, language can be a similar trickster. Language is the only tool he has to try to express what he knows and experiences of a thing, especially of mystery and consciousness. However, once he writes about something, it becomes an object in a story, rather than a relationship. He loses it, just as the man loses interest and walks away from the axolotl, leaving a piece of his mind behind, thinking of himself as a separate being. Ironically, the writer no longer feels like an axolotl, but now the reader knows what it is to be one, because the writer has allowed the reader to experience a different way of seeing.

Characters

The unnamed narrator of "Axolotl" is a lonely man who becomes so obsessed with axolotls (Mexican salamanders) that he becomes one—or at least, believes that he does. Cortazar provides few details about the narrator, but the details he does provide are revealing. It is a spring morning, and Paris is "spreading its peacock tail after a wintry Lent," when the narrator visits the Jardin des Plantes. He remarks that he is (or "was") a friend of the lions and panthers and had never before entered the "dark and humid" aquarium. This suggests that the narrator is attracted to all that is beautiful and assertive in nature: the morning, spring days, lions, and panthers. In fact, it is only when he finds that the lions are "ugly and sad" and that the panthers are sleeping—in other words, when they do not measure up to his image of them—that he decides to go into the aquarium. In choosing the beautiful and assertive he has avoided another side of nature, that represented by the dark aquarium. The narrator desperately wants to get inside the mind of the axolotls. He believes their golden eyes speak to him "of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing." Some critics think that the narrator represents the modern individual in search of self-realization and spirituality.

Themes

Change and Transformation

On one level, the narrator has been transformed into an axolotl. On another, deeper, level he has become a more enlightened being. The literal transformation of man into animal can be understood as a metaphor (a word, thing, or action applied to a distinctly different kind of word, thing or action, without asserting a direct comparison) for a kind of spiritual transformation. In other words, the narrator was unable to think beyond his rational conception of himself until he entered the mind of the axolotl and realized that there were other ways of experiencing existence. The transformation, however, is not complete, since the physical man still exists outside the tank and eventually stops visiting it and his axolotl-self. The existence of the story, however, seems to confirm that some permanent change in the man outside the tank has taken place, since he has presumably retained enough of his insights to write the story.

Consciousness

The man's consciousness struggles against his unconscious. Contemporary studies of human behavior suggest that all people have in the unconscious mind a primitive and instinctual side that they repress more and more deeply as they grow from infancy into adulthood. In contrast, animals never bury these forces. Many psychologists believe that accessing the unconscious can provide a person with a more complete way of living and perceiving the world. This is why psychologists sometimes use hypnosis to help their patients solve problems. For the narrator, the axolotl comes to represent the unconscious portion of his mind. The narrator recalls that before his transformation he "had found in no animal such a profound relation with myself." He was particularly fascinated with the creatures' eyes, which suggested to him the existence of" another way of seeing." "I knew that we were linked," he recalls, "that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together." After his transformation, he overcomes his initial horror at feeling "burned alive" in an unconscious creature as he realizes that the axolotls share an awareness that does not need to express itself. By becoming an axolotl, he bridges the conscious part of his mind with the unconscious. A lasting union of the two aspects of consciousness is, however, impossible. The man still exists "outside the tank," while the part of his consciousness that has made this leap in perception is inside the tank: "I was an axolotl and in my world." As time goes by, the man outside the tank separates himself from his moment of perception: "the bridges were broken between him and me, because what was his obsession is now an axolotl, alien to his human life." Nonetheless, the story ends on a note of hope that the man will carry with him some memory of his perception and will express it in a story.

Passivity

Although the axolotls are capable of moving, they rarely do. The narrator notes that as a rule the only parts of their bodies to move are three small gills on each side of the head. Occasionally a foot moves, but just barely. By observing the axolotls in their transparency and quietness, the narrator becomes aware of what he calls "their secret will, to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility." The narrator-axolotl comments that this immobility allows the axolotls to avoid "difficulties ... fights, tiredness." The immobility of the axolotls contrasts with the mobility of the man outside the tank, who rides a bicycle, who comes and goes, and who eventually distances himself from the axolotls and his thoughts about them.

Time

The concept of a realm of consciousness that exists outside of time is reinforced by the continual shifts in the sense of time in the story. The story begins in the past ("There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls"). The narrator then recounts, in the past tense, the events and thoughts leading up to his transformation, occasionally breaking into the present tense to comment from his perspective after the transformation. After the transformation the story ends in the present as the narrator-axolotl reflects on what has happened. Finally, he imagines that the man will, in the future, write a story about axolotls—presumably the story the reader has just read. The constant shifting of temporal planes serves to undermine the reliability of rational thought as opposed to spiritual existence.

The Rational vs. The Spiritual

For Cortazar, the spiritual refers to a person's deepest self, instincts, unconscious, and soul Humans pass most of their conscious existence grounded in a rational mode of thinking whereby they accept reason as the only authority in determining their opinions and actions. The axolotls in the story are described in a way that makes them a metaphorical expression of a different, non-rational experience. Immobile and inexpressive, they suggest to the narrator, before his transformation, "the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing." The man cannot understand the axolotls; his thinking is "a thinking outside the tank." Nonetheless, the axolotl's comment at the end of the story, "he's going to write all this about axolotls," suggests that the man will not entirely lose touch with the world he sensed but could not understand. Through writing, the man will be able to revisit the axolotl's mind, or, in other words, the unconscious and spiritual side of his nature.

Style

Point of View

The story's narration blurs the line between reality and fantasy. The story is narrated by a first-person narrator, some part of whose consciousness or physical being is transformed into an axolotl. This creates considerable ambiguity, because the "I" and "me" of the narrator may at any point refer to the man before the transformation or to his axolotl-self who is telling the story. The musings of the first are juxtaposed with the insights of the second. While the ambiguous "I" emphasizes the connection between the man and the axolotl, the two contrasting points of view that it represents also serves to highlight the division between the man who remains outside the tank and that part of his consciousness that migrates into the tank. The reader's need to follow the continual shifts between the two viewpoints may also be said to mirror the protagonist's own shift from a limited human perspective to his widened understanding after his transformation. The constant interchange of perspectives undermines the reliability of rational thought and underscores the multiplicity of reality.

Structure

The structure of "Axolotl" is different from that of most short stones because it is circular rather than linear. The major events of the story take place over a period of a few days during which the narrator focuses on the most important phases of his transformation. The opening paragraph is in itself a closed circle which functions as the center of the larger circle of the story: "There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl."

Four distinct parts can be found in this cyclical structure. The first involves the narrator's gradual approach to the fascinating but foreign world of the axolotls. He observes and describes them from outside the aquarium glass: "I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass." The second deals with the metamorphosis process: "No transition, no surprise," says the narrator, "I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass." At this point, the man believes himself to have metamorphosed into an axolotl with his human mind intact - "buried alive," as he puts it - "condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures." In the third division, the feeling of horror stops as he becomes so immersed in his new world that he is able to sense what he could not perceive on the other side: "a foot grazed my face, when I moved just a little to one side and saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me." A fourth part to the story is found in its last paragraph, which functions as an epilogue. Here there is a definite separation between two worlds. Although the narrator had achieved a kind of unity in his knowledge of both the man's perspective and an axolotl's, he cannot communicate that understanding to the man

who still remains outside the glass. There is a division between the man who became an axolotl and the man whose visits to the aquarium have ceased. Nonetheless, the axolotl believes "that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he." The axolotl's hope that the man will write "all this about axolotls" completes the circle, since the story the man will write is apparently the story readers have just read.

Symbols

Cortazar is known for employing many symbols in his fiction. A symbol is a word or phrase that suggests or stands for something else without losing its original identity. In literature, symbols combine their literal meaning with the suggestion of an abstract concept. In the story "Axolotl," the axolotl may be interpreted as a symbol of the narrator's unconscious mind. His transformation - or the transformation of a part of his consciousness - into an axolotl functions on a symbolic level. This means that Cortazar is trying to do more than simply tell a story about a man who turns into a salamander. The axolotl further symbolizes basic drives and appetites, which include the urge for self-fulfillment. Like the snake, the axolotl is a symbol of the instinctual self. Struggling for understanding, the narrator mentions "the mystery," "nonexistent consciousness," "mysterious humanity," "secret will,"and "diaphanous interior mystery," which were all claiming him. These references underscore the need for symbols to communicate something that cannot be fully expressed in rational terms

Other prominent images in the story that can be interpreted symbolically include the glass wall of the aquarium, which functions at various times as a mirror, as a barrier, and as a gateway; the golden eyes of the axolotls, which appear to the man as both blank and expressive; and the enclosed and watery world of the aquarium itself.

Magic Realism

Cortazar is one of the seminal figures of magic realism. Magic realism (sometimes called magical realism) is a term applied to the prose fiction of Julio Cortazar, Jorge Luis Borges (Cortazar's mentor), Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Juan Rulfo, Mario Vargas Llosa, and many other writers who combine the fantastic with ordinary situations in an attempt to create new ways in which literature can represent life. Their work violates, in a variety of ways, standard novelistic expectations by its drastic experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, by fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and the nightmarish, and by writings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.

Historical Context

Existentialism's Influence on Cortazar

"Axolotl" was first published in 1956. At that time, Cortazar no longer lived in his native Argentina, but in Paris, France. The story is set in Paris and appears to take place in the time it was written. Critic Terry J. Peavler says that the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, an important philosophical movement of the day, influenced Cortzar's "Axolotl." In fact, existentialism, which began in France, inspired many authors of the 1950s, including Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, and French authors Albert Camus and Jean Genet. Peavler draws a comparison between "Axolotl" and Sartre's book Being and Nothingness, which was published the same year. Sartre felt that individuals create their own identities through their choices and actions. While people should not think of themselves as comprised of a fixed set of characteristics or categories, neither should they go to the other extreme and conceive of themselves as pure nothingness. At the conclusion of Cortazar's story, the axolotl hopes the narrator will "write all this about axolotls" as a means of finding the existential balance between being (the rational mind idealized in most Western philosophies) and nothingness (the unconscious mind, symbolized by the axolotl's primitive nature). The story suggests that to reach this balance, one must experience both extremes, as the narrator has done, before this kind of self-awareness becomes possible.

World War II and the Absurd

The horror of World War H (1939-45) left Western culture in a state of moral confusion. In a world gone mad, most artists found earlier norms and traditions to be insufficient models of expression. All manner of experimentation took hold in art, theater, philosophy, literature, and film. This violent new world manifested itself in works of an absurdist nature. Eugene Ionesco, a leading writer of the drama of the absurd, states in an essay on Franz Kafka: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." Peavler believes Ionesco's comment could just as well be applied to the characters in Cortazar's stones of the 1950s. Absurdism is an aspect of magic realism, or the "boom," an innovative movement in Latin and South American literature that began in the 1950s and continues into the late twentieth century, of which Cortazar is one of the seminal figures. However, magic realists do not often use the term "absurdist" to describe their writing; instead, they prefer the term "fantastic." Both terms denote a shift in literature after World War II toward a new definition of reality that rejected rational, convenient, and limiting interpretations of the everyday world. Cortazar uses the word "fantastic" in defining his fiction and his own special way of understanding reality. By "fantastic" he means the alternative to what he calls "false realism" or the view that "everything can be described and explained in line with the philosophic and scientific optimism of the eighteenth century, that is, within a world governed by a system of laws, of principles, of causal relations, of well-defined psychologies, of well-mapped geographies." Cortazar, through

his use of fantastic elements, aims to defy the man-made formulae and simplistic explanations of reality that give rise both to the repression of the unconscious, and, in a political sense, to totalitarianism (the oppression of peoples). When a group or nation is forced to think a certain way by those in power, bloodshed is usually the outcome. In 1956, Soviet troops crushed uprisings in Poland and Hungary because these "satellite nations" chose to reinterpret well-defined laws of Soviet communism. During the 1950, many artists, Cortazar included, used absurdist or fantastic elements in their work to open up the mind, liberate repressed thoughts and feelings, and combat restrictive thinking, in an effort to heighten self-awareness and generate a greater tolerance of differing viewpoints.

President Juan Peron of Argentina

Juan Domingo Peron (1895-1974) was president (Cortazar referred to him as a dictator) of Argentina from 1946 to 1955 and from 1973 to 1974. He was one of the most important twentieth-century political figures in South America. When the civilian government was overthrown in 1943, Peron, a career military officer and leader of a politically active military club, became head of the labor department. Supported primarily by the working class and various labor unions, Peron was elected president in 1946 and again in 1951. The Peronist program of economic nationalism and social justice eventually gave way to monetary inflation and political violence, and Peron was ousted by a military coup in 1955. Peron, in exile, continued to be a powerful force in Argentine politics, and he was re-elected in 1973 by a clear majority. Cortazar, a writer with outspoken political beliefs, was defiantly anti-Peronist. In 1945 he was arrested and as a result was forced to relinquish his academic career in Argentina. He became a translator, and in 1951, disgusted with Argentina's tyrannical government, he moved to Paris. "Axolotl" was written in Paris around the same time Peron was ousted by a military coup. Some critics see Cortazar's short story as a symbol of rebirth, not of the spiritual self, but of a new Argentine generation replacing a corrupt, fascist one.

Critical Overview

Cortazar is generally acknowledged as one of the most important authors of the mid-century literary "boom" in Latin and Central America. A handful of writers, among them Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Jose Donoso (Chile), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), brought Latin American literature to international prominence in a span of less than thirty years in a literary flowering that has not been matched in Spanish literature since the "Siglo de Oro" (the golden century - the seventeenth).

The history of the critical reception of "Axolotl" is similar to that of Cortazar's other stories and novels: an immediate popular success, followed by a delay of some years by critical success. Enrique Anderson Imbert, a fellow Argentinian writer and critic, thought Cortazar's early stories, such as "Axolotl," which is now considered to be one of his best, were unsuccessful and disappointing. When "Axolotl" was translated and published in English in 1967, American readers enjoyed its idiosyncratic style and bizarre elements, but again critics were not initially impressed In the 1980s and 1990s, however, critical interest grew.

Like most of the other members of the "boom," Cortazar was deeply involved in politics. In many instances, politics has been as important as aesthetics in determining an author's reception in Latin America, and Cortazar's case is as complex as any. In the early 1960s, Cortazar, like many Latin American intellectuals, became a strong supporter of Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution and of other nations that were experiencing Marxist or leftist revolutions. Readers in these countries, however, attacked his work for being too concerned with fantasy and not providing "revolutionary" content. In rebuttal, Cortazar argued that so long as an artist's ideological position has been established and is well known (everyone was well aware of Cortazar's avowal of socialism), no directives and no critical dogma should be allowed to curb his creative freedom. He particularly stressed the need to create lasting works of art: "The most serious error we could commit as revolutionaries would be to want to adjust literature or art to suit immediate needs." Furthermore, he insisted, any truly creative act is revolutionary, for it advances the present state of art and works toward the future.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a Ph.D. in English and is a freelance writer. In the following essay, she considers Cortazar's use of foreign-language words as a way of understanding how his experience as an expatriate may have shaped the story's style and its themes.

I once took a class in Latin American fiction in which my professor described Cortazar's book as not the sort with which one wants to curl up in bed. There is something cold and distant about Cortazar's style. Plus, one needs to be quite alert to keep up with him "Axolotl" is a story that makes its readers think hard, and such hard thinking is also the story's major theme. "Axolotl" is, after all, a story about immobility, thus the protagonist's action entails almost nothing but the laborious processes of his/its/their consciousness. It is this set of qualities, I believe, that leads most readers to either love Cortazar's writing or to hate it. The story is named "Axolotl" and reading it, one has an experience not unlike that of the protagonist. Zoo visitor and readers alike encounter the cold, paralyzing, un-human world of the axolotls, the imaginary world of "Axolotl." For those who love it, "Axolotl" is an intellectual carnival ride, a mind game, a thrill of perspective. But other readers may feel frustrated with the initially distant protagonist who grows even less familiar and less accessible as the story proceeds - or circles, as the case may be. What's my way into the strange world of this story, they may wonder, and what's at stake in understanding it anyway7

Cortazar's revolutionary Latin American political allies also questioned what was at stake in his writing. They criticized it as too intellectual, too detached from social reality. On the other hand, scholars tend to adore Cortazar for this very same reason. Because Cortazar's writing is so abstract, it is easy to apply theories to it, as theories, too, are by nature abstract. In the few slender pages of prose that make up "Axolotl," Cortazar raises questions about myth and reality, God and man, mind and body, death and rebirth, time and timelessness, being and nothingness. My list is not exhaustive. It is impressive how scholars have managed to interpret "Axolotl" by applying many of the most important schools of philosophical thought of the twentieth century, and it is also a little overwhelming. Just what is Cortazar saying about all of these big philosophical questions9 Many readers may agree with Doris T. Wight's opening claims in her essay "Cortazar's 'Axolotl': Contradiction Is All One Can Cling to in the Short Tale," "deception is all one can count on," "'purposeful obfuscation is all one can grasp," and "confusion is all that appears trustworthy."

It is helpful, first, to acknowledge, as Wight has, the difficulty of getting a grasp on any one philosophical interpretation before its validity starts to melt away, given the enigmatic nature of the story. It is also helpful to step back from the heady philosophizing and to focus on the concrete, descriptive words on the page. Immediately, the story starts to seem simpler. It is really quite straightforward. While the transformation he describes is fantastical and mysterious, Cortazar goes out of his way to describe it in the most direct and specific way possible.

It is through Cortazar's exquisitely precise use of language that I can find a way into the real and magical world of "Axolotl." Within the context of Cortazar's relationship to the various languages he spoke and the various contexts in which he spoke them, I will explore the use of "foreign" language within the story - the non-Spanish words that appear within what was an originally Spanish text (Spanish being Cortazar's native language). 1 am particularly interested in how such use of different languages can shed light on the idea of foreignness - so extreme and abstractly symbolic in the narration of a nameless man's transformation into a larval salamander - as part of Cortazar's social reality, his cultural identity, and his life story.

Cortazar's relationship to his native land and native language was complicated from the start. Since he was born in French-speaking Brussels to Argentinean parents, where he lived until age four, Cortazar's first home was a place where he was, paradoxically, a foreigner. He returned with his family to Argentina, and later, as a young adult, became very active in Latin American politics, identifying strongly with continental, pan-Latino causes, particularly the struggles of the common and poor people. But all the while Cortazar was studying and teaching French, and he was very much engaged with the elite European literary and philosophical discourse associated with this language. In both his life and in his writing, Cortazar moved back and forth between the languages, traditions, and cultures of Europe and Latin America. His familiarity with both gave him a new perspective on each, an ability to translate the terms of one onto the other, such as (Latin) magic and (European) realism. But it also left him nowhere to feel fully at home.

In Spanish the word for foreigner, *extranjero*, is derived directly from the word for strange, extrano.

Cortazar wrote "Axolotl" as an expatriate, apolitical self-exile from his native country of Argentina. He was fired from his job as a professor of French Literature in Argentina because of his opposition to the rising politician Juan Peron, after which he undertook a rigorous, accelerated course of study to work as a public translator. The combination of stresses brought on a period of great emotional instability, precipitating a move to France, where he continued to study, write, and translate. Paris was a place where many cosmopolitan intellectuals gathered, and Cortazar stayed there until his death. But he wrote "Axolotl" in Paris shortly after his arrival, when it was probably most apparent to him that, despite his fluency in French, he was an *extranjero* - a foreigner and a "stranger." Interpreting the very strangeness of the story as an expression of Cortazar's status as an expatriate illuminates a complex cultural and psychological dimension. Approaching the story as in some way autobiographical is narrower than the philosophical interpretations, which have the admitted appeal of addressing big, timeless questions - but I think it warms the story up a bit.

Early in "Axolotl" the issue of foreign language presents itself. The story is set in a real and specific place, the Jardin des Plantes in the city of Pans. In the story, French is the language of locations. Cortazar specifies that the protagonist "was heading down the boulevard Port-Royal," then "took Saint-Marcel and L'Hospital" on the day he first decides to go into the aquarium. The library - the only other setting of the story - is also specified as being "at Sainte-Genevieve." The Paris streets - the "real world" of the

protagonist in his human form - are, in this way, set apart from the rest of the fictional world of "Axolotl." This indicates that, as Cortazar writes in his native language, the Parisian environment he moves through and writes of remains foreign. Language creates a distance, a barrier, between the protagonist and the place where he lives.

A use of foreign language that is both more striking and more subtle, is, of course, the story's title and mam subject: axolotl. Whether one reads the original Spanish or an English translation, the world axolotl - a word Cortazar repeats frequently - stands out as strange and rare. It has a distinctly different sound from any other word in the story, and readers may be unsure how to pronounce it (AK-seh-LOT-l). The reason for this is that axolotl is a word from the Aztec language of Nahuatl. While French and Spanish are closely related as romance languages, both deriving from the ancient European language of Latin, Nahuatl is one of the many native languages of Latin America, predominant before its colonization in the sixteenth century. (Confusingly, Mexico, Central, and South America are designated Latin America, despite the fact that there is nothing "Latin" about them except for the fact that they were colonized by the Latinate Spaniards, French and Portuguese.) Cortazar is conscious of how he uses this single Nahuatl word. He offers an alternative, the Spanish *ajolate* - a word that would not have stood out as "foreign" in the original Spanish text - suggesting that, like the French location names, the world of the axolotl is set apart from familiar and spontaneous, "native" ways of thinking and perceiving. Both the real Paris setting and the magical caged amphibians are somehow strange. This quality of strangeness renders them paradoxically similar and opposite.

Cortazar also gives the Latin name for the salamander's genus, *Ambystoma*. Latin is a "dead" language, no longer spoken but used in science for purposes of categorization. Thus, it is associated with empirical facts. Latin is also the language that ties Cortazar, through his native Spanish, to the continent of Europe and the language of French. One might say that it stands for the Western/rational "real" of magic realism The Nahuatl *axolotl,* on the other hand, is mysterious and magical. For the protagonist knew, before seeking out the scientific facts, that the salamanders were Mexican - that is, native to his own native Latin America - simply by looking at their faces. The foreign, set-apart quality of the Nahuatl word is associated with the special kinds of perception accessible only through the salamanders' "little pink Aztec faces": "the eyes, two orifices wholly transparent gold, lacking any life but looking, letting themselves be penetrated by my look, which seemed to travel past the golden level and lose itself in a diaphanous interior mystery," and "the rosy stone of the head, vaguely triangular, but with curved and irregular sides which gave it a total likeness to a statue corroded by time." It is through such looking that the protagonist finds another sort of knowledge, not only about the animals but about himself. "After the first minute I knew that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together." Could it be, at least in part, Cortazar's bond with his homeland - the broader, pan-Latino homeland of Cortazar's politics - that is the "something" in the axolotl's eye that is paradoxically "infinitely lost and distant" and "pulling us together"? Cortazar never spoke Nahuatl. That, to him, is infinitely lost and inaccessible - nothing like the streets of Paris which he negotiates so "fluently." The axolotls represent the loss of an imagined home (or, more precisely perhaps, a feeling of being "at home") that he never had and never will have.

Despite being profoundly out of place, trapped and immobile in their tank, the axolotls are so alluring because they represent the only possible link to that imagined home, even through its absolute loss.

The glass at the Paris zoo that separates the Mexican salamanders from the protagonist literally reflects him, and reflects upon his cultural predicament. "I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass. No transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass." It is the very real, concrete barrier of the glass that makes the foreign world of Paris and the foreign world of the tank perform this strange translation, this contradictory melding and splitting that is, on the one hand, a magical feat of double perspective, and, on the other, a reflection of displacement, alienation, and loneliness.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "Foreign Worlds and Foreign Languages," for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Wight offers her view of the theme of contradiction in "Axolotl," focusing on Cortazar's narration.

Contradiction is all one can cling to in the short tale "Axolotl," which takes place in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris one spring after a wintry Lent; deception is all one can count on in this story of a tiny animal that is not yet really even an animal; purposeful obfuscation of fact is all one can grasp in this artistic fabrication by Julio Cortazar; confusion is all that appears trustworthy.

Perhaps its very being is an impossibility - the existence of this impossible object, although some first-person narrator (Cortazar? highly unlikely) has called the creature an "axolotl" and has even described it. The reader sees, thrown before him by the magic lantern of precise, vivid description, the little rosy translucent body six inches long that looks rather like a lizard's and ends in a fish's tail of marvelous delicacy. Along the back, a transparent fin joins onto the tail. "Feet of the slenderest nicety" end in "tiny fingers with minutely human nails," and "eyes two orifices, like brooches, wholly of transparent gold, each ringed with a very slender black halo" are painted with the improbable clarity of a Salvador Dali work. The excruciatingly meticulous description goes on and on, its purpose that of persuading someone of the real existence of a tiny being. Yet, there is always something subtly wrong somewhere, everything is too exact and perfect, so determinedly exotic that some force within us makes us resist the slick-glistening words, and we grasp desperately to subterranean denial, we cling to contradiction, we insist on deception, we silently shout "purposeful obfuscation of fact!" and trust only to our sense of confusion that we might be spared the face of the narrator, whose madness we sense in horror from the start. For from the very beginning we know that the narrator is insane: how else could one interpret this opening paragraph?

Hubo un tempo en que yo pensaba mucho en los axolotl. Iba a verlos al acuano del Jardin des Plantes *y me quedaba* horas mirandolos, observando su inmovilidad, sus oscuros movimientos. Ahora soy un axolotl

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl.

Though axolotls think like humans, humans refuse to think like axolotls."

It is precisely because the narrative implies from the very beginning that it is the raving of a lunatic that we reject the explanation that this is but a madman's tale. Or perhaps one should put it this way: we never believe a liar more than when he tells us bluntly that he is lying. Similarly, when we are told that what we are encountering is nothing but nonsense, meaningless fancy, emptily delusionary dreams, then we become intensely, immediately convinced that before us, behind the facade, lies Truth. Thus Cortazar captures us from the start of his tale, and never looses his grip on our credulity and

helpless curiosity about the forbidden - for we cannot help interpreting claims to Untruth as glorious opportunities to find the dazzling light, the Secret1

Along with the narrator we become enchanted immediately with the mysterious axolotl and convinced of its importance to our own destinies. That little rosy stone-headed, golden-eyed creature in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes that huddles on the floor of moss and stone in the water tank with its eight fellows receiving visits morning after morning by the human visitor: what is it? The entranced visitor who observes it has learned in the library at Sainte-Genevieve, we are told, that:

los axolotl son formas larvales, provistas de branquias, de una especie de batracios del genero amblistoma

axolotl are the larval stage (provided with gills) of a species of salamander of the genus Abystoma.

The visitor had already learned by reading the placard at the top of the tank and "by looking at them and their pink Aztec faces" that axolotls are Mexican, that "specimens of them had been found in Africa capable of living on dry land during the periods of drought," etc.

Here might lie an almost inaccessible, perhaps truly inaccessible allegory: the Aztec, slave of his body in a world-culture that has left him behind historically, exists as an artifact in a museum or aquarium or library's encyclopedia for middle-class Europeans or Americans to visit and perhaps become infatuated by. For the "blind gaze, the diminutive gold disc without expression and nonetheless terribly shining" sends forth, the narration tells us, a message: "Save us, save us." Marxists might identify instantly the impossible object as a Third or Fourth World victim of capitalist exploitation...,

But no. Even yet the analysis is not ringing quite true to the text. The analysis, self-assured, does not match the contradictions of the text itself. After telling us in paragraph three, for instance, that he has learned that axolotls are animals, the narrator (the *narration*, to be more exact) denies that facile identification in paragraph six and explicitly states, "They *were* not *animals*," for axolotls are discovered to have existed much farther back in the evolutionary chain than animals - perhaps justifying their existence in the Garden of Plants. Again, in paragraph seven the larvae are identified as "witnesses of something, and at times like horrible judges," but of a "something" increasingly elusive. Then the word "larva" slips away from us too, for we are told, very pointedly, that "larva means disguise and also phantom." Meaning has slipped away, and now contradiction is all that we can cling to, an oxy-moronic confusion that describes the tiny Aztec faces as "without expression" but simultaneously "of an implacable cruelty." And how could we know of that cruelty except through expression on the closely observed Aztec faces, since axolotls cannot speak? The mystery grows and grows, leading to the question that the narrative asks at paragraph's end, "What semblance was awaiting its hour?"

Perhaps the answer to that frightening question comes shortly. At the conclusion of paragraph nine, the classical "discovery" of narratives seems to occur with these words: "Then my face drew back and I understood." What the man watching the axolotls in their tank - and one central axolotl in particular - apparently "understands" becomes clear in the next paragraph: he grasps the incredible identification/exchange with the object before him:

Afuera mi cara volvia a acercarse al vidrio, vera mi boca de labios apretados por el esfiierzo de comprender a los axolotl, Yo era un axolotl y sabia ahora instantaneamente que mnguna comprension era posible.

Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible.

Again, contradiction. The man has just said that he understands; but what he understands is that no understanding is possible. Reversal and confusion continue:

Conociendolo, siendo el mismo, yo era un axolotl y estaba en mi mundo. El horror viia - lo supe en el mismo momento - de creerme pnsionero en un cuerpo de axolotl, transmigrado a el con mi pensamiento de hombre, enterrado vivo en un axolotl, condenado a moverme lucidamente entre cnaturas insensibles.

Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world The horror began - I learned in the same moment - of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, buned ahve in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures.

Now consciousness seems clearly located in the axolotl, for the narrator speaks (and here we must repress a smile, even through our terror) from the tank, from among other axolotls. What was told in paragraph five as from the human-narrator's stance has come true, that "the eyes of the axolotls spoke to me of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing." This other way of seeing appears to involve contradiction as its very essence. As an axolotl, die narrator sees another axolotl next to him looking at him, one who understands him, the narrator assures us, for he "can tell"; yet the narration also assures us that despite that communication of understanding between these two tiny creatures, there was "no communication possible." All the axolotls look at the face of the man outside the tank now, including presumably the man-turned-axolotl himself, all these tiny brilliantly drawn primeval forces questioning and confronting the human condition; but the modern-day God, man, grows less and less interested in the axolotls from which he once sprang, and to whose species he still belongs, since he is both down inside the tank looking up at the exalted human, and also up above staring hypnotically at his past self.

One must halt again. The man grows disinterested in those creatures of his own primeval being, the axolotls from which he evolved. This should mean - though apparently it does not - a corresponding lessening of interest of the axolotls in the man

since, as the man-axolotl narrator informs us, "every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone resemblance." Contradiction, contradiction. Bafflement again.

All attempts at rational comprehension of this tale, all efforts to make it mirror an actual, coherent, believable world, again resist our pleas, yet the more we deny understanding, the more we seem to be on the verge of capturing it. For of course the narrator was not mad at the moment of his identification with the larval salamander, the primitive creature who stepped out of the waters to live in a wholly new environment, the land, the creature that prophesied the coming of humans in its very form: the feet ending in tiny fingers with minutely *human* nails, the little pink *Aztec faces*, the "handsome eyes so similar to our own," in which the human observer read at last "that liquid hell they were undergoing" because it was his own. That moment of identification, rather than a plunge into madness, was the human's one instant of enlightenment, his realization that "Thou art That" and "That art Thou," his simultaneous grasp of Darwinian evolution and the counter-truth of the Buddhistic doctrine of Nothingness, that progress and regression alike are illusory

In the end, however, the only world this tale agrees to present on the surface is a language world. The situation is as if the manifest content of a dream has been cut off from the latent content, repressed underworlds are denied the chance to surface, and an artistically inclined, self-indulgent dreamer busily and engagingly works on processes of secondary elaboration, spinning a tale of words by words about words.

"I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls," says the forlorn object, the subject that has gone over completely into the mirror image, the man/axolotl. Alas, the severed subject, the man above the tank, never thinks the desired message, "Save us, Save us", for though axolotls think like humans, humans refuse to think like axolotls. The man, having left the tank in boredom, is now too busy analyzing his experience, rationalizing, conjuring words, words, words, trying to describe logically, and thus contradictorily, the impossible historical event that never took place in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris one spring after a wintry Lent.

Source: Dons T. Wight, "Cortazar's 'Axolotl'," in *The Exphcator*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Winter, 1987, pp 59-63

Critical Essay #3

Rosser is a professor at Boston University In the following essay, he examines the theme of transformation in "Axolotl," relating it to the psychology of Carl Jung.

In the narratives of Julio Cortazar there is an intense preoccupation with the unexplainable phenomena which invade individual and collective experience. This restless, self-exiled Argentine rejects the rational, convenient, and limiting interpretations of the every-day world He defies man-made formulae and simplistic explanations of reality. Cortazar believes that human beings can change and act upon their limitless potential for self-realization, for spiritual fulfillment, for a totality of life.

Cortazar uses the word "fantastic" in defining his fiction and his own special way of understanding reality. By "fantastic" he means the alternative to what he calls "false realism" or the view that "everything can be described and explained in line with the philosophical and scientific optimism of the eighteenth century, that is, within a world governed by a system of laws, of principles, of causal relations, of well-defined psychologies, of well-mapped geographies." He has emphasized that for him there exists "the suspicion of another order, more secret and less communicable" in which the true study of reality is found in the exceptions to the laws rather than in those laws themselves. For Cortazar, the approach to this order requires a loosening of the mind in order to make it a more receptive instrument of knowledge to stimulate authentic transformations in man. This approach is evident in many of the short stories of this imaginative non-conformist.

Of the several stories that reflect Cortazar's fascination with fantastic incursions into the rational world of the self, "Axolotl" most memorably portrays a transformation experience and raises questions about the nature of that experience. While the story can be read as a direct narration of novehsbc events, it lends itself to elucidation on another level as well. The purpose here is to offer an interpretation of Cortazar's narrative within the context of his unusual view of reality. This first requires a brief synthesis of the plot and an examination of the literary techniques which make the story work.

"Axolotl" is the autobiographical account of a lonely man, Cortazar's anonymous narrator-protagonist, who frequents the city zoo and one day wanders into an aquarium where he has never been before. There he feels a peculiar attraction toward a group of translucent, rose colored axolotls, a species of Mexican salamander with large golden eyes. He returns day after day to be drawn into hypnotic contemplation of the fishy creatures. He senses that they are endowed with a special intelligence and project an inexplicable power which he finds irresistible. He perceives that he has some remote link with the salamanders. Time and space disappear for him in the presence of these beings belonging to a different life.

Gradually a metamorphosis takes place as the man becomes convinced that he has been transformed into one of the tranquil salamanders looking at him from inside the

aquarium. He feels alarmed but also strangely comforted. He senses that his human mind is inside the body of the amphibian. At the same time he feels a oneness with the other salamanders which glide about him inside the tank. The salamander element in the man has left him to establish a separate kind of existence. The expanded ego of the narrator goes from one side of the glass to the other. The salamander is no longer simply the object of the narrator's observation, it now becomes engaged in the act of observing.

The enigmatic communication between man and salamander, it becomes clear, cannot be sustained. A rupture of sorts occurs. Silence invades the atmosphere. By the end of the story, the narrator-protagonist is the salamander and comments on the man who had previously been the narrator. On one side of the glass the man, no longer the person he used to be, stops visiting the aquarium. On the other side remains the salamander, consoled by the possibility that the man will write a story about this unsettling experience.

Cortazar uses a variety of literary techniques in "Axolotl." The events of the story take place over a period of a few days during which the narrator-protagonist focuses on critical phases of the transformation process. There is no linear sequence or spatial constancy. There appears to be no plot development, an impression conveyed by a circular kind of narrative procedure. The central idea established in the first few lines of the story is regularly reiterated: "There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl."

The opening paragraph is in itself a closed circle which, as one critic has pointed out, functions as the center of the larger circle of the story. For Antonio Pages Larraya [in *Homenaje a Julio Cortazar*, 1972] three distinct parts can be found in this cyclical structure. The first involves the protagonist's gradual approach to the fascinating but foreign world of the salamanders. He observes and describes them from outside the aquarium glass: "I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass." The second deals with the metamorphosis process: "No transition, no surprise," says the narrator, "I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass." At this point, the man believes himself to have metamorphosed into a salamander with his human mind intact - "buried alive," as he puts it, "condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures." In the third division, the feeling of horror stops as he becomes so immersed in his new world that he is able to sense what he could not perceive on the other side: "... a foot grazed my face, when I moved just a little to one side and saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me...."

It should be added that a fourth part to the story is found in its last paragraph, which functions as an epilogue. Here there is a definite separation between two worlds. The narrator-protagonist had achieved a kind of unity. There is now, however, a division between the man who became a salamander and the man whose visits to the aquarium have ceased. The salamander declares: "I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance.

I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he."

As in a number of Cortazar's stories, suspense in "Axolotl1' is not dependent upon the element of surprise but upon the particular experience described and upon the atmosphere of tension in which that experience takes place. Cortazar has stated that it is of utmost importance to him to hold the attention of his reader-accomplices, as he likes to call them, and to widen their horizons. Thus he advocates a style that, in his words, "consists of those elements of form and expression that fit the thematic nature of the story in a precise fashion, elements that give it its most penetrating and original visual and auditory form, that make it unique, unforgettable, that fix it forever in its time, in its atmosphere and in its most primordial sense." "Axolotl" is typical of Cortazar in other ways: it introduces a protagonist in a situation characterized by a routine existence; it recounts the way in which an alien presence interrupts that routine; and it reveals - at least partially - the consequences of that intervention.

"Axolotl" is a story in which the line between reality and fantasy gradually blurs in the reader's mind. It is narrated from several different perspectives that shift unpredictably and whose sources are somewhat ambiguous. Intentional confusion is caused by the skillful use of personal pronouns, verbal suffixes, and several verb tenses that are associated with the varying points of view The fact that pronouns can be readily abandoned in Spanish in favor of implications carried by the verb makes for even more subtle variations in perspective (e. g., "era" can mean "I was," "you were" [formal singular], "he was," "she was," or "it was"). In addition to this, the reader must keep track of to whom the first person singular refers as well as of the function of the first person plural and the third person singular and plural. There is the "ego I" of the man before and after the metamorphosis; there is the collective "we" of the man and the salamanders, and of the salamanders as a group; there is the use of the third person singular "he" and plural "they" by the man, both before and after the change, as well as by a kind of omniscient narrator.

The multiple perspectives established through the use of various pronouns and verbal suffixes are developed even further by a constant change in the temporal context. Several verb tenses appear in the same short paragraph or even in the same sentence: "The axolotls huddled on the wretched, narrow (only I can know how narrow and wretched) floor of stone and moss." The story begins in the past ("There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls."), skips back and forth in time and then draws to a close in the present. The use of the present tense imbues the account with a sense of open-endedness. The last words of the salamander are: "And in this final solitude, to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls."

Taken together, these literary techniques underscore the multiplicity of reality which Cortazar is so intent upon conveying through his fiction. The constant interchange of perspectives and temporal planes that the techniques create undermines the reliability of rational thought. Cortazar's innovative methods are meant to revitalize language as

well as people. "I've always found it absurd," he says, "to talk about transforming man if man doesn't simultaneously, or previously, transform his instruments of knowledge. How to transform oneself if oneself continues to use the same language Plato used?"

In "Axolotl" Cortazar has sought to express something for which there is no verbal concept within the realist mode of writing. He rejects writing on the basis of logical conceptualizations, for the mode he refers to as "fantastic" is not practiced from an intellectual standpoint. In fact, he has explained that, for the most part, writing just happens to him. It is a kind of literary exorcism. By his own admission it is a process by which he attempts to deal with the products of his own imagination which resist control and upset a carefully, albeit precariously, established way of life. On occasion it is as though he were a medium receiving a force over which he has no conscious control. The story under analysis, therefore, can be seen as a metaphor because it clearly has that mysterious quality of suggesting meaning beyond the mere anecdote of the narrative.

The meanings implied in the transformation may be numerous. The interpretation offered here is that the significance of the event described in "Axolotl" closely coincides with Carl Gustav Jung's views on the dynamics and development of the self. Indeed, the similarities are remarkable between Cortazar and the Swiss psychologist, particularly in regard to the concept of reality. "The distinctive thing about real facts," writes Jung [in *The Undiscovered Self*, tr. R. F. C. Hall, 1958], "is their individuality. Not to put too fine a point on it, one could say that the real picture consists of nothing but exceptions to the rule, and that, in consequence, absolute reality has predominantly the character of irregularity." What happens in "Axolotl" strongly suggests that Cortazar means to represent an ego-conscious personality striving for wholeness, or what Jung describes [in "On the Nature of Dreams"] as "the ultimate integration of conscious and unconscious, or better, the assimilation of the ego to a wider personality."

Throughout the narrative it is suggested that Cortazar is actually portraying aspects of a process of self- realization. The solitary, routine existence in which the protagonist is mired is interrupted by an unexpected obsession for the salamanders. He is unable to think of anything else. Through the function of intuition he senses the attractive power of a collective image: "I knew that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us, together." In Jungian terms the unconscious component of the self - that is, those personal psychic activities and contents which are "forgotten, repressed or subliminally perceived, thought, and felt" - erupts into consciousness. It does this on its own accord, requiring the ego somehow to assimilate the new content [Jung, "Psychological Types"]. Cortazar's protagonist describes psychic associations which suggest that the activity originates in the unconscious, not only on a personal but on a collective level as well In the unconscious, as Jung explains, there is interaction between "the acquisitions of the personal existence" and "the inherited possibility of psychic functioning in general, namely, in the inherited brain structure." Being the base of the psyche of every individual, the collective unconscious is a kind of heritage passed on to all human beings, and maybe even to all animals as well.

With these concepts in mind, the salamander in Cortazar's story may be seen as an archetypal representation of basic drives and appetites which include the urge for self-fulfillment. Like the snake, the salamander is a symbol of what Jung calls "the undifferentiated instinctual world in man" [Jolande Jacobi, *The Psychology of C.G. Jung*, 1975]. Struggling for understanding, the protagonist makes mention of "a diaphanous interior mystery," "a secret will," "a mysterious humanity," "nonexistent consciousness," "the mystery," etc which were all claiming him. Such references underscore the need for symbols to communicate something that cannot be fully expressed in rational terms.

The narrator-protagonist gives even more weight to the primordial image that amphibians convey by his persistent attention to the eyes of the salamanders: "Above all else, their eyes obsessed me," he reveals. They are referred to as "eyes of gold," "golden eyes," and "diminutive golden discs." Apart from the hypnotic effect that is suggested through the man's reaction to the eyes, they may be understood to have psychological meaning as well. The eye is traditionally considered to be a window to the soul. Like sparks and stars, it is an artistic motif associated with the illumination of consciousness. Indeed, consciousness has commonly been described in terms related to light. With regard to "Axolotl" it is worth noting that references to fishes' eyes can be found readily in medieval texts. Apparently they are meant to represent the introspective intuitions which in some way apprehend the state of the unconscious. Clearly, the eyes of the salamanders serve a similar purpose and evoke analogous associations in Cortazar' s text.

There is further and more telling evidence that the metamorphosis in this story has to do with a creative transformation, reflecting the archetypal experience of an inner rebirth. The protagonist overcomes his initial horror at feeling submerged in unconscious creatures. He conveys the idea of achieving a kind of complete unity, at least temporarily, in such statements as: "It would seem easy, almost obvious, to fall into mythology. I began seeing in the axolotls a metamorphosis which did not succeed in revoking a mysterious humanity. .. They were not human beings, but I had found in no animal such a profound relation with myself." The man's consciousness had been struggling against the primitive unconsciousness of unmitigated instinctuality. Jung eloquently describes this kind of conflict: "The closer one comes to the instinct world, the more violent is the urge to shy away from the murks of the sultry abyss. Psychologically, however, the archetype as an image of instinct is a spiritual goal toward which the whole nature of man strives; it is the sea to which all rivers wend their way, the prize which the hero wrests from the fight with the dragon." [Jung, "On the Nature of the Psyche"].

It is understood that what the man in "Axolotl" has undergone is not only fantastic but primitive and symbolic as well. The more primordial the experience seems, the more it represents the potentiality of being. The contents of the unconscious can provide a more complete way of living and perceiving. The salamanders' eyes speak to the man "of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing." Such subjective perception and introverted sensation have been discussed at length by Jung. He believes that primordial images, in their totality, constitute a "psychic mirror world" that represents the

present contents of consciousness, not in their familiar form but in the way a million-year old consciousness might see them [Jung, "Psychological Types"].

More primordial imagery can be found in "Axolotl." The narrator protagonist reiterates that to his way of thinking the salamanders are not human beings, but that they are not animals either. In comparing the two, he insists on the positive value of the animal. This is a recurring theme in Cortazar's fiction. "The intention is not to degrade man," as [Antonio Pages Larraya] has put it, "but to do away with certain ill-founded pretensions regarding the nature of mankind." The protagonist's sense of a superior perceptive faculty is alluded to at the end of the story. The transformed protagonist asserts that the salamander next to him "knew also, no communication possible, but very clearly knew." This observation seems to point to the idea of a world-soul which pervades all living creatures, enabling them to have a special sense of things, including those that are yet to be.

Jung's psychology of the unconscious provides for the specific kinds of instinctual patterns in human biology. The existence of these patterns, however, is difficult to establish through the empirical approach to knowledge. Cortazar deals with this very point in "Axolotl." He develops the idea that the ways for apprehending these patterns in man are characterized by an inherent duality. This kind of duality has been discussed by Jung, who explains that consciousness itself is a transformation of the original instinctual image while at the same time it is the transformer of that image. The man in Cortazar's story feels conflicts between conscious and unconscious contents, between knowledge and faith, and between spirit and nature. His psychic situation has disrupted him to the point where he admits, on the one hand, that he is frightened by a compulsive force within him. On the other hand, he implies that his consciousness has deepened and broadened, allowing him to deal with the instincts which he feared would make him a prisoner within the salamander.

Cortazar's protagonist, then, has been caught up in an unsettling development process which leads to a kind of synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements. As it is explained in the story "what was his obsession is now an axolotl." In other words, the narrator's momentous transformation signifies that he has become consciously aware of the effects of an instinctual side that he had neglected or suppressed. He has now integrated its valuable elements into his being. He no longer yields entirely to his rational conception of himself. He has discovered that he has a larger capacity for self-awareness. The details of what the hidden mind and spirit reveal to the narrator-protagonist are not disclosed specifically to the reader, but it is suggested that he has gained a deeper understanding of life. In relating to the amphibious creatures of the aquarium he acquires the insights, the means of comparison, that he needed for self-knowledge and for a sense of continuity as a living being. "Only the person who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality," Jung has written [Jacobi, *The Psychology of Jung*], The man in "Axolotl" has heard that voice in the salamander and has gained the psychological advantage of a larger sense of life and of a reaffirmation of the spirit. He is now a changed, more complete being.

There may be disagreement over whether or not the transformation experience depicted in "Axolotl" has positive connotations. Some readers are of the opinion that Cortazar has told a story about a personal failure, about a defeat. The argument is that the salamander abandons the man, that a lack of communication ensues, and that at the end the man is left impoverished by the experience. "The T is denied the possibility of living on two planes," concludes one critic [Malva Filer in Homenaje a Julio Cortazar]. The interpretation that has been presented here views the transformation as positive. The conflicts over the matter arise from the enigmatic qualities of Cortazar's fiction, which reflects the inherent ambiguities of reality itself. Most likely, debate over the issue will go on. In any event, what is clear is that the readers of Cortazar's "Axolotl" are left with a heightened sense of awe regarding the potentialities of biological, spiritual and, most of all, literary realities.

Source: Harry L. Rosser, "The Voice of the Salamander Cortazar's 'Axolotl' and the Transformation of the Self," in Kentucky Romance Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1983, pp. 419-27

Critical Essay #4

Reedy is a professor at the University of Kentucky In the following excerpt, he presents his views on the mythic structure of "Axolotl," focusing on its theme of rebirth.

One of the threads common to the fabric of *Rayuela [Hopscotch]* and several of Cortazar's short stones is the looking-glass image which functions symbolically as the aperture through which the author reveals a recurrent mythic process involving many of his characters. These moments of revelation, which allow the perception of the essential nature of something or the intuitive grasp of a hidden reality, are akin to [James] Joyce's epiphanies which have been described as 'the single word that tells the whole story ... the simple gesture that reveals a complex set of relationships. What seem trivial details to others may be portentous symbols to him'

In one of the Expendable Chapters *of Rayuela*, Cortazar's alter ego, Morelli, describes the genetic archetype of the mirror image:

No podre renunciar jamas al sentimiento de que alu, pegado a mi cara, entrelazado en mis dedos, hay como una deslumbrante explosion hacia la luz, irrupcion de mi hacia lo otto o de lo otro en mi, algo infinitamente cristalmo que podna cuajar y resolverse en luz total sin tiempo ni espacio. Como una puerta de opalo y diamante desde la cual se empieza a ser eso que verdaderamente se es y que no se quiere y no se sabe y no se puede ser.

This crystalline door appears in Cortazar's early works in several related forms, as a crystal ball, the porthole of an airplane, the glass wall of a formicarium, the lens of a camera, or the refracted glass of a kaleidoscope. Each image has its own unique qualities, yet collectively their symbolic function is to shed light on the more recondite significance of the works in which they appear. It is worth while observing, as well, that they all share a certain kinship in form and substance with the mirror which may symbolize '... the mythic form of a door through which the soul may free itself "passing" to the other side___' [J. E. Cirlot, A

Dictionary of Symbols, translated by Jack Sage, 1962]. Such is the case of the mirror-door, for example, in [Lewis] Carroll's *Through the Look-ing-Glass....*

The emphatic statement by the protagonist of 'Axolotl' {*Final deljuego*, 1964) in the first line of the work - 'Ahora soy un axolotl' - leaves little mystery about his physical form. The unanswered questions in this work relate to the circumstances of how, by metamorphosis, transmigration, or some other transformation, he has become an axolotl. The protagonist's dual nature (man/axolotl) is further accentuated by his use of the first person plural, not as an editorial 'we,' but to denote his oneness with all axolotls. Yet he continues to describe them from a third-person objective, albeit emphatic point of view.

The inordinate attraction of these larval, embryonic creatures for the protagonist-narrator prompts his daily visits to the aquarium in the Jardin des Plantes. He is motivated in part by intellectual curiosity, by a desire to understand their voluntal secreta, and by what one critic [Antonio Pages Larraya, in Homenaje a Julio Cortazar, 1972] calls 'la busqueda de solidaridad y comprension' - sentiments which he appears not to have found in his own world. Each day he takes his station at the glass pane of the aquarium which separates, yet serves to join him to the captive axolotls which in their silence seem to communicate the promise of a world where temporal and spatial limitations do not exist. His problem is to find the passageway which will lead him into their midst.

Finally, as the protagonist contemplates the reflection of his own face in the glass of the aquarium with his axolotl counterpart on the other side, his spirit transmigrates into the body of the axolotl:

Mi cara estaba pegada al vidno del acuario, mis ojos trataban una vez mas de penetrar el misteno de esos ojos de oro sin iris y sin pupila Veia de muy cerca la cara de un axolotl inmovil junto al vidno. Sin transition, sin sorpresa, vi mi cara contra el vidno, en vez del axolotl vi mi cara contra el vidno Entonces mi cara se aparto y yo comprendi.

Solo una cosa era extrana: segvur pensando como antes, saber. Darme cuenta de eso fue en el primer momento como el horror del enterrado vivo que despierta a su destino Afuera, mi cara volvia a acercarse al vidno, veia mi boca de labios apretados por el esfuerzo de comprender a los axolotl. Yo era un axolotl y sabia ahora instantaneamente que ninguna comprension era posible.

The glass pane functions both as a reflector of his physical state as a man and as the doorway leading to the other side, to the reality of the axolotls. Dr Pages Larraya's observation is pertinent that 'La insistencia en el uso de la palabra "vidrio" subraya a la vez la transferencia de pianos que separa realidad e irrealidad.' The glass becomes an avenue of transcendence through which the protagonist passes into another reality.

While he does not bring the fact to the fore, Cortazar obviously had in mind a structure based on Aztec myth when he chose the axolotl as a counterpart of the protagonist of this work. One of the earliest versions of the transformation myth of the god Xolotl is recorded by Padre Bernardino Sahagun [in Historia general de las cosas de Nueva Espana, 1938], who points out that Xolotl was one of the twin brothers of the god Quetzalcoatl and a deity of dual phenomena, having existed in several dual forms:

.. dicese que uno llamado Xolotl rehusaba la muerte, y dijo a los dioses- '(Oh dioses1 jNo muera yo1' Y lloraba en gran manera, de suerte que se le hmcharon los ojos de llorar, y cuando Hego a el el que mataba echo a huir, y escondiose entre los maizales, y conviruose en pie de maiz que nene dos canas, y los labradores le Uaman xolotl; y fue visto y hallado entre los pies del maiz, otra vez echo a huir, y se escondio entre los magueyes, y conviruose en maguey que tiene dos cuerpos que se llama mexolotl; otra vez fue visto, y se echo a huir y metiose en el agua, y hizose pez que se llama axolotl, y de alh le tomaron y le mataron.

Of particular importance in the myth is the fact that the god Xolotl was the larval form assumed by Quetzalcoatl in the Land of the Dead, out of which he was born as spirit. For the protagonist of 'Axolotl,' the material, corporal state remains outside the aquarium glass as the spiritual self transmigrates through the glass medium to take its place within an axolotl where a sense of eternal entrapment results; nonetheless, the myth of Xolotl and the spiritual rebirth of his twin Quetzalcoatl suggest the promise of rebirth in a spiritual sense for the protagonist, as well, even though he is unaware of the fact.

There is an appropriate correspondence between the function of the aquarium glass as the medium through which the transmigration occurs and the water-filled aquarium with the embryonic axolotls representing the womb from which rebirth may take place. In his discussion of this type of myth, Mircea Eliade explains [in Myth and Reality, tr. Willard R. Trask, 1963] that 'the regressus ad uterum is accomplished in order that the beneficiary shall be born into a new mode of being or be regenerated. From the structural point of view, the return to the womb corresponds to the reversion of the Universe to the "chaotic" or embryonic state.' And he explains further the spiritual significance of the process: 'the "return to the origin" prepares a new birth, but the new birth is not a repetition of the first, physical birth. There is properly speaking a mystical rebirth, spiritual in nature....'

The significance of mythic structure in 'Axolotl' is found in the culmination of the protagonist's search which imitates the pattern of search for spiritual rebirth. His apparent fate as a prisoner in the body of an axolotl does not suggest necessarily a negative destiny for the central character; rather, his transformation promises a new state of being instead of the solitude and isolation of the aquarium. Like Quetzalcoatl, he must await the time of spiritual rebirth which will come from his present chrysolic form. Laurette Sejourne's observation that 'Xolotl ... is simply the seed of the spirit enclosed in matter, the dark region of Death' reinforces the idea that the protagonist's ultimate fate is not an eternal hell, but the promise of rebirth out of matter into spirit. In fact, this concept is at the centre of Man's desire to attain the paradisiacal state. Even though his protagonist seems unaware of his final destiny, Cortazar knows that passage to the other side awaits.

Source: Daniel R Reedy, "Through the Looking-Glass. Aspects of Cortazar's Epiphanies of Reality," in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. LIV, No. 2, April, 1977, pp. 125-34

Topics for Further Study

Investigate some of the myths, legends, stones, novels, and films in which humans turn into animals. Have people in real life ever claimed this has happened to them? Are there nonfiction accounts of this phenomenon' What features do these works have in common with "Axolotl" ?

Research the government of Argentina during the 1950s as led by Juan Peron How did it treat artists and writers? From Cortazar's story, can you conclude what his political opinions may have been?

What is magic realism9 Could "Axolotl" be labeled magic realism ? Explain why or why not. Also, some writers object to the term magic realism; why do you think this is?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Zoos are popular destinations for children and adults alike. Animals are captured in the wild and live the rest of their lives in captivity.

1990s: Zoos commonly breed captive animals instead of capturing them from the wild since the U.S. Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973. Less than one percent of large mammals in U.S. zoos are captured from the wild. In order to encourage breeding of captive animals, most zoos have upgraded the animals' habitats so that the environment more closely resembles their natural habitats.

1950s: Literature by Latin American authors following the end of World War II becomes characterized by magic realism. The absurd or the fantastic marks the postwar Latin American writing, and a rational view of reality is rejected.

1997: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, considered a master of magic realism, receives critical attention for his new book, News of a Kidnapping, about the Colombian drug trade of the 1980s.

What Do I Read Next?

The Metamorphosis, Franz Kafka's 1915 novella. One day a man wakes up to find that he has been transformed into an insect.

Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings, Jorge Luis Borges's 1962 collection. Recognized all over the world as one of the most original and significant figures in modern literature, Borges was also Cortazar's mentor.

Evelyn Picon Garfield's 1975 critical study, *Julio Cortazar*, begins and ends with personal interviews that she conducted with Cortazar at his home in Provence, France. An invaluable guide to Cortazar's philosophies, his preferences, and even his nightmares, which illuminate much of the symbolism found in his work.

Cortazar's 1966 novel *Hopscotch* is recognized as a modern literary classic. Its main character, Horacio Oliveira, has an ambition: to so fragment his personality that his life will become a series of present moments, which never cohere into a perceptible whole. He leaves Argentina to join a floating, loose-knit circle known as "the Club," then returns to Buenos Aires, working by turns as a salesman, as keeper of a mathematically proficient circus cat, and as an attendant in a mental asylum owned by his friends. His is a life truly fragmented—a life of aloof sensuality and empty pleasure over which he has lost control.

Cortazar's 1960 novel *The Winners* is the story of the winners of a mystery cruise in a special state lottery. Not long after they leave the jubilant dockside cafe in Buenos Aires, tensions emerge among the widely varying personalities. Quarantined from a certain part of the ship, served by a silent and forbidding crew, and treated more like prisoners than winners, they split into two groups: those who want to know what's really going on, and those who prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.

Further Study

Alazraki, Jaime, and Ivan Ivask, eds. The Final Island.Norman. University of Oklahoma Press, 1978.

The Final Island is a collection of essays, including two by Cortazar himself, about the role of magic as it works alongside what appears to be realism in

Cortazar's fiction The essays are helpful, though advanced and complex in language and concept Garfield, Evelyn Picon *"An Encounter With Julio Cortazar* " In her Julio Cortazar, pp. 1-11 New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975

Garfield begins and ends her study with personal interviews she conducted with Cortazar at his home in Provence, France. An invaluable guide to Cortazar's philosophies, his preferences, and even his nightmares, which illuminate much of the symbolism found in his work Neyenesch, John G. "On This Side of the Glass: An Analysis of Cortazar's 'Axolotl'," in The Contemporary Latin-American Short Story, edited by Rose S. Mine, Senda Nueva De Ediciones, 1979, pp. 54-60.

Discusses "Axolotl" in the framework of Latm-Amen-can literature, especially in regards to imagery and themes Peavler, Terry J. Julio Cortazar, pp 1-23. Boston-Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Peavler argues that analyzing Cortazar's works as "psychological" or "political" produces a superficial understanding of his intent, which is to study the nature of fiction itself. A thorough and accessible study.

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Rabassa, Gregory "Lying to Athena Cortazar and the Art of Fiction." *Books Abroad*, Vol 50, No. 3, Summer, 1976, pp 542-7

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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