The Garden of Forking Paths Study Guide

The Garden of Forking Paths by Jorge Luis Borges

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Introduction

His fiction received immediate critical acclaim in Argentina, even though he failed to win an important prize the year of the book's release. Outraged, other Argentinean writers and critics devoted an entire issue of the prominent literary journal, *Sur,* to Borges and his work.

As in his other stories, Borges uses fiction as a vehicle to explore philosophical and literary issues. Consequently, the characters in his stories seem less developed. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," he uses the genre of the detective story&mdah;a genre that requires clue-gathering and puzzle-solving&mdah;in order to explore the way time branches into an infinite number of futures.

Author Biography

Borges was born into an old, wealthy Argentinean family. He learned both English and Spanish as a child and later studied French, German, Latin, and Old English. His early fascination with language and words became a defining characteristic of his later work. His family traveled extensively when he was a boy.

The Borges family lived in Geneva, Switzerland, during World War I. During this time, Jorge attended college in Geneva and earned his degree in 1918. When the war ended, the Borges family resumed their tour of Europe, spending the next three years in Spain. It was during this period that Borges began to write poetry and became acquainted with a group of young avant-garde Spanish poets known as the "Ultraistas."

In 1921 the Borges family returned to Buenos Aires. Jorge published his first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires,* in 1923. This first publication was followed by two more books of poetry. In addition, he also published three books of essays between 1925 and 1927. These works served to establish him as a leading literary voice of Argentina.

In 1938 the death of his father and subsequent financial difficulties forced Borges into accepting a position as a municipal librarian. In the same year, he suffered a serious head injury. Some biographers suggest a link between the fall and his turn toward prose fiction in the following years. Between 1938 and 1954 he wrote several stories that elevated him to the pinnacle of Argentinean literary life. Moreover, as his stories were translated into other languages he became a writer of international reputation.

Borges' first major collection of short stories, *El jardin de senderos que se bifurcan (The Garden of Forking Paths)* was published in 1941 and included the title story, "The Garden of Forking Paths." These stories were later collected in *Ficciones (1935-1944),* published in 1944. This volume was translated into English in 1962.

Although Borges' stories garnered critical acclaim, the jury charged with selecting the 1941 National Literary Prize did not choose *The Garden of Forking Paths* as the recipient of the award. Many Argentinean writers and critics were outraged, and they subsequently dedicated an entire issue of *Sur,* an important literary magazine, to a consideration of his work.

Borges continued to write poetry, short stories, and essays despite the blindness that plagued him during his final twenty-five years. Although Borges published little new work after 1977, he remained actively involved in literary life until his death in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1986.

Plot Summary

Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese national and a former professor of English, reveals in his statement that he is a German spy. He recounts the events leading to his arrest, beginning with when he discovers that his contact has been killed. He knows he must devise a way to get an important message to the Germans. He looks in a telephone book and finds the name of a man, Stephen Albert. Yu Tsun thinks Albert will be able to help, although he does not reveal how he knows this.

Yu Tsun then recounts how he travels to Dr. Albert's house, pursued by Captain Richard Madden, an Irishman in service to the English. When Yu Tsun arrives, Dr. Albert mistakes him for a Chinese consul that he knows; Dr. Albert assumes that the Chinese man is there to view his garden. Yu Tsun discovers that Dr. Albert is a sinologist, which is a scholar who studies Chinese culture.

By a strange coincidence, Dr. Albert has created a garden identical to one created by Yu Tsun's ancestor, Ts'ui Pen, a writer who worked for thirteen years on a novel called *The Garden of Forking Paths;* he also was working on a labyrinth before being murdered by a stranger. In addition to recreating Ts'ui Pen's garden, Dr. Albert further reveals that he has been studying the novel. Dr. Albert tells Yu Tsun that he has solved the riddle of the lost labyrinth, arguing that the novel itself is the labyrinth. Furthermore, Dr. Albert tells Yu Tsun that the *The Garden of Forking Paths* is "an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time." Albert explains that the novel reveals that time is not singular, but rather a "dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times." Like the labyrinth, each turn leads to different possible futures. Dr. Albert shows Yu Tsun a letter written by his ancestor that says, "I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths." This letter has provided the key Dr. Albert needs to make sense of both the novel and the missing labyrinth, that the "forking" referred to by Ts'ui Pen is not a forking of space, but a forking of time.

Yu Tsun experiences for a moment a sense of himself and Albert in many other times. Suddenly, he sees Madden approaching. Yu Tsun asks Albert to let him see once again the letter written by his ancestor. When Albert's back is turned, Yu Tsun shoots and kills him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens with an unnamed narrator reading a statement by Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese national and a former professor of English, confessing that he is a German spy. He is recounting the events that led to his arrest, beginning with the discovery that his contact has been killed and the knowledge that he will be next. He must find a way to deliver a message to the Germans, the location of a British artillery park that must be destroyed.

He finds Dr. Stephen Albert's name in a phone book and thinks he might be able to help, although he does not say how. Tsun races to the train, pursued by Capt. Richard Madden, an Irishman working for English intelligence, the same man who has killed his contact. Tsun sees Madden arrive too late to catch the same train, giving him almost an hour's head start. To keep his mind off the deadly chase, Tsun turns his thoughts to his grandfather, Ts'ui Pen, who devoted the last years of his life to an incomplete and incomprehensible novel and the construction of "a labyrinth in which all men would get lost." Tsun fears that he will now die before he understands his grandfather's work.

As he tries to find his way from the train station to Albert's, Tsun describes the roads as forking "among the now confused meadows," then finds himself trapped in a garden maze at the home of Albert, a noted scholar of the Chinese language and culture. A former missionary, he is an expert in the works of Ts'ui Pen. Albert lets Tsun in, and after introductions, tells him that he has solved the riddle of his grandfather's novel and labyrinth, that they are the same. As he explains it, "In the work of Ts'ui Pen, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge: for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible paths you are my enemy, in another, my friend."

Albert leaves only the theme of the labyrinth for Tsun to decipher, leading him in a philosophical discussion until he realizes that the novel, which is the labyrinth, cannot contain its own name. The word he finds missing is "time." In addition, time is running out for Tsun. He has the answers he sought and a perfect plan to execute. He shoots Albert. The following day when the story is published in the papers, the headline gives the Germans the information they need and they bomb the artillery park in Albert, Belgium.

Analysis

Jorge Luis Borges first published "The Garden of Forking Paths" in 1941 in Argentina. The work was received with critical acclaim and marked a turning point in Borges' career. The popular short story is widely published in anthologies including those

devoted to Magical Realism. This genre is characterized by a plethora of realistic details, magical elements and a position that is "anti-bureaucratic."

The story takes place during World War I. Its characters are spies, an intelligence officer and an intellectual. All have good reason to be who they are and where they are, carrying a logical plot to its conclusion. Yet, Borges introduces to the story the magical element of a labyrinth, nearly incomprehensible to anyone except its creator who has been buried with his secrets. In addition, his protagonist, Tsun, meets -- by impossible odds -- the intellectual who can explain his grandfather's work. The story takes its "anti-bureaucratic" element in Tsun's confession that he is not motivated as a proper spy should be. "I didn't do it for Germany, no. I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the abjection of being a spy." Instead, he says, he wanted to prove "that a yellow man could save his armies."

The labyrinth is also symbolic of finding one's way blindly and making difficult choices. Tsun who needs to do both sees a maze in the meadows he describes as "confused" and feels "trapped" in the garden of forking paths surrounding Albert's home. This symbol also gives the reader a visual perspective of the philosophical exchange between Albert and Tsun. It sets out the numerous paths open to a traveler and the possible outcomes. In reality, a person can choose only one direction when a path forks, but in Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth, time and imagination allow the exploration of multiple choices and outcomes. Moreover, at times, paths cross just as they have for Tsun and Albert.

Albert explains it this way. "Once in a while, the paths of that labyrinth converge: for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another my friend." The story reaches its climax as Tsun makes his choice and shoots Albert.

As in other works, Borges uses his story as a vehicle in which to explore philosophical issues. While "The Garden of Forking Paths" is essentially a detective story, it is also a dissertation on the nature of time.

Characters

Richard Madden

Captain Richard Madden is an Irishman who works for English intelligence. After he kills Yu Tsun's contact, Viktor Runeberg, he stalks Yu Tsun to prevent him from passing along the information. Yu Tsun characterizes Madden as "a man accused of laxity and perhaps of treason." Madden tracks Yu Tsun to Albert's house, and arrests him for the murder.

Narrator

The narrator's words open the story, directing the reader to a particular page in a history of World War I. The narrator then introduces the statement made by a Dr. Yu Tsun.

Yu Tsun

Dr. Yu Tsun is a Chinese professor living in England during World War I. He is also a German spy. Yu Tsun takes on the role of narrator of the story as the original narrator provides Yu Tsun's statement to the reader.

The document is a statement made by Yu Tsun after his murder of Dr. Stephen Albert. Yu Tsun, in order to get vital information to the Germans after his contact is killed, describes how he devises a plan to relay the site of the British artillery park in Belgium.

Yu Tsun is a contradictory character; although he is Chinese, he teaches English. Although he does not like the Germans, he works for them as a spy. Yu Tsun is also the great-grandson of a Chinese writer, Ts'ui Pen, whose goal it was to write a huge novel and a build a great labyrinth. Yu Tsun visits Dr. Stephen Albert for the sole purpose of murdering him so that his name will appear in the newspaper and reveal to the Germans the name of the city Albert.

He discovers that Dr. Albert has studied the work of Ts'ui Pen and understands it. Nevertheless, he carries through with his plan to murder Dr. Albert, thus revealing to the Germans the information they need to bomb the English artillery.

Themes

Time

Dr. Stephen Albert tells Yu Tsun, *"The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time. . . ." Likewise, Borges seems to be implying that the major theme of the short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" is also time.

Yu Tsun reflects early in the story, "everything happens to a man precisely *now.* Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen. . . ."

With this, Yu Tsun describes time in a linear manner. That is, humans experience time as a series of present moments, one following the other. As soon as the moment is experienced, however, it no longer exists. On account of this, the past is no more real than the future. Both exist nowhere but in the human mind: the past belongs to the realm of memory, while the future belongs to the realm of imagination.

When Yu Tsun arrives at the home of Albert, however, the notion of time as linear is challenged. Albert argues Yu Tsun's ancestor "did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times." In this construction of time, all presents, pasts, and futures exist simultaneously. Further, each decision a person makes leads to different future. The branching, or forking, of all these decisions suggests that time is not a line, but rather is a web or a network of possibilities. The image of the labyrinth, thought of as a forking of time, rather than space, is the clue that Albert needs to rethink the concept of time.

For a moment, Yu Tsun experiences time as Albert describes it: "It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy, and multiform in other dimensions of time." The appearance of Madden, however, pulls Yu Tsun into the future he chose when he got on the train. In this moment, in *this* present, Yu Tsun murders Dr. Albert.

Order and Disorder

In addition to the consideration of time in "The Garden of Forking Paths," Borges also seems to be exploring the concepts of order and disorder. Indeed, Thomas P. Weissert argues that the subject of the story is "chaos and order." Within the short story there exists a novel by Yu Tsun's ancestor.

The novel is described variously as "incoherent," "chaotic," "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts," and "confused." In short, the novel appears to represent the very essence of disorder. However, Albert believes that he has solved the mystery of the lost labyrinth and the chaotic novel.

He argues that if one assumes that the novel itself is the labyrinth, and is the author's attempt to represent the webbing nature of time, the novel is not an example of chaos, but of order. Furthermore, Albert works to create order out of the disorder of the novel. He says, "I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors that the negligence of the copyists has introduced, I have guessed the plan of this chaos, I have re-established . . . the primordial organization."

In other words, Albert acts as an ideal reader of this text, imposing form and structure to what might otherwise be seen as nonsense. Like a labyrinth, which only *seems* chaotic to someone who does not hold the key to its solution, the novel itself becomes, in Weissert's words, "an ordered maze" once Albert discovers the key to the novel.

Borges seems to be implying that while the universe may appear to be chaotic and disordered, the chaos itself may represent an order-as-yet-notunderstood. Certainly, the tension between Yu Tsun's reading of his ancestor's text as incoherent and Albert's reading of the same text as ordered parallels the human experience of trying to render meaningful the apparently random events of life.

Style

Narrator and Narration

One of the most interesting tricks Borges plays in "The Garden of Forking Paths" is his narrative technique. As the story opens, an unknown narrator speaks directly to the reader: "On page 22 of Liddell Hart's *History of World War I* you will read. . . ." The narrator summarizes Hart's position that rain delayed a British attack.

In the second paragraph, the narrator suggests that rain may not have been the reason for the delay. He offers as evidence a statement from a Dr. Yu Tsun, but the first two pages of the document are missing. Consequently, the narrator throws the reader into the statement mid-sentence. The effect of this is to disconcert readers momentarily as they try to piece together the missing portion of the text and to absorb the sudden introduction of a new narrator. Interestingly, although it appears that the original narrator drops completely out of the story after introducing the statement, there is one further intrusion by the original narrator in the form of a footnote.

The footnote serves several purposes in the narration. In the first place, footnotes are generally found only in scholarly works, not short fictions. Consequently, the appearance of the footnote seems to suggest that Borges wants to place the story within a certain genre of work—a nonfiction report. In the second place, the inclusion of the footnote suggests that Yu Tsun's account of his murder of Dr. Albert may not be entirely trustworthy.

Although Yu Tsun says that Viktor Runeberg has been murdered by Richard Madden, the narrator in the footnote calls this "an hypothesis both hateful and odd." The narrator offers another point of view: Richard Madden acted in self-defense. This defense of Madden causes readers to wonder if the narrator and Madden might not be one and the same. At the very least, it casts serious doubt in the minds of readers over the missing two pages of the document. What else has the narrator chosen to hide from readers?

Although superficially the footnote helps to preserve the fiction that this is a factual report, its presence offers yet another troubling detail for the reader to absorb: throughout Yu Tsun's long statement, there is a narrator standing behind him, ready to edit or excise or add bits of text. Furthermore, by calling attention to the narrator that stands outside the margin of the story, Borges also calls attention to himself as the writer. The writer stands behind the narrator, manipulating and formulating plot, character, and setting. Thus, through the use of the narration inside the narration and the footnote inside the inner narration, Borges confuses the fiction of his story. He makes it simultaneously more and less "real" by his inclusion of the footnote.

Detective Story

Critics often refer to "The Garden of Forking Paths" as a detective story. The genre was invented by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s. In detective stories, details are very important. A writer of a detective story is obligated to follow certain rules and conventions, including the inclusion of clues and details that will allow the reader to solve the mystery at just the same moment the detective does. Sometimes, the resolution of a detective story requires some small bit of information that the writer withholds from the reader until the very last moment. Certainly Borges follows the conventions. His protagonist, Yu Tsun, is a spy. He has a secret he must transmit. He has limited time. He offers clues to the reader without revealing the final secret. Borges even places another mystery within the framework of Yu Tsun's mystery. That is, he offers readers the mystery of Yu Tsun's ancestor and his labyrinth, a mystery that Dr. Albert solves.

However, although "The Garden of Forking Paths" fills the conventions of the detective story, it only resembles a detective story in structure. In reality, the story is more of a philosophical treatise, masquerading as a detective story. Yet even here, Borges plays games with his reader. Because the story is not only about time and mystery, but also about the making of fiction, it seems as if Borges is questioning the rules of fiction.

Consequently, the reader is left wondering: is this a detective story that appears to be about philosophy, or is this a philosophical treatise that resembles a detective story?

Historical Context

In 1816 Argentina gained independence from Spanish colonial rule. Argentina was becoming a wealthy country, most notably for its beef, wheat, and wool. In spite of their growing wealth, many of the old families of Argentina, including the Borges family, looked to Europe for culture and education.

Consequently, the Borges family left for an extended vacation in Europe in 1916. After World War I broke out, the Borges family chose to stay in Geneva, Switzerland, for the next four years. Consequently, the historical and cultural milieu that shaped Borges during this period was not Argentinean at all, but continental.

While in Switzerland, Borges discovered a number of influential writers: Chesterton, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kafka. Although the war raged across Europe during this time, it seems to have had little effect on Borges or his work. With World War I new forms of literature and art emerged throughout Europe. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Miguel de Unamuno, James Joyce, and Luigi Pirandello, among many others, published a new kind of literature that was classified as modern literature. Experimental art also flourished in the form of dada and surrealism. As Borges continued his travels across Europe in the years after the war, he found himself surrounded by new thinking and new ideas.

The Borges family returned to Argentina in 1921. During the 1920s, Argentina flourished; both mining and oil exploration were well under way, and Buenos Aires even had subway system for the city. At the same time that Argentineans embraced all things modern, they also rediscovered the traditional Argentine dance form of the tango.

While the economy was healthy, the Radical party government of Hipólito Irigoyen maintained power through the 1920s. However, the economy crashed in 1930 and Argentina slumped into depression. A military-Conservative coalition came to power and continued to rule throughout the period.

Borges continued to publish short stories throughout the 1940s. Politically, a new power began to take shape in Argentina. Juan Perón was elected president, and effectively became dictator of Argentina. Just before Perón was elected, Borges had signed a petition protesting fascism and military rule. Consequently, Perón fired him as a city librarian. He also offered Borges a post as a poultry inspector in order to embarrass him. Borges, in an uncharacteristically political gesture, denounced dictatorships at a banquet given in his honor. The Perón years were difficult ones for Borges as well as for Argentina.

Some critics have suggested that the fantastic and imaginative prose that Borges produced during the years of World War II and the Perón years was in response to the grim realities and horrors of daily life. Still others believe that he was a man ahead of his time, prefiguring many of the concerns of postmodernism some thirty years early.

Whether he was a man of his times, or a man ahead of his time, Borges is considered an innovative and evocative author.

Critical Overview

When Borges' collection of short stories, *The Garden of Forking Paths,* initially appeared in Argentina in 1941, reviewers were quick to recognize something new. Most critical commentary had concentrated on his poetry, although in 1933 a special issue of the magazine *Megafono* devoted to a discussion of him reveals that critics had begun to treat him as a writer of prose as well as poetry.

The rejection of *The Garden of Forking Paths* for the 1941 National Literary Prize did much to solidify support for his work among the literary intelligentsia of Argentina who were outraged at the oversight. Nevertheless, even among those critics who felt he should have received the award, there was some reservation. Most commonly, these reservations focused on his cerebral style and his esoteric subject matter.

Other critics, however, found Borges' work to be important and original. In his book, *Jorge Luis Borges,* Martin Stabb cites, for instance, Pedro Henriquez Urena's famous comment: "There may be those who think that Borges is original because he proposes to be. I think quite the contrary: Borges would be original even when he might propose not to be."

In the early 1940s the translation of his work into English began in literary magazines, although it was not until the early 1960s that whole collections were translated and published. However, the work made an immediate impact. John Updike presented an important survey of his work in the *New Yorker* in 1965, a review in which he noted his fascination with calling attention to a work of literature as a work of literature.

Another seminal article on Borges by the novelist John Barth appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1967. In the article, Barth discussed the literature of the 1960s, placing Borges at the center of such literature. In addition, Barth paid careful attention to his use of the labyrinth as image in his work.

In the years since its initial publication and subsequent translation into English, Borges' work in general and "The Garden of Forking Paths" in particular have continued to inspire critical attention. Many commentators point to the influence he has had on a whole generation of South and North American writers, including Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and John Barth, among others. Moreover, as Roberto Gonzalez-Echevarria points out in the essay "Borges and Derrida," Borges has exerted considerable influence on the post-modernist philosophers Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes.

Other critics attempt to trace the influences on Borges' work. Andre Maurois, in a preface to Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby's edition of *Labyrinths* directly addresses his sources. He cites H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, G. K. Chesterton, and Franz Kafka as important influences on Borges' writing. Borges himself noted in several places the debt he owed to Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling.

As James Woodall indicates in *The Man in the Mirror of the Book,* "Chesterton's compact, witty short- story style was to have a lasting influence on the way Borges structured his stories over twenty years later." Kafka's influence seems also clear to many critics; Borges was largely responsible for introducing Kafka into Argentina through his translations of the Czech writer. Indeed, the image of the labyrinth is important both in Kafka as well as Borges.

Borges' choice of detective fiction as his favorite genre recalls both the stories of Poe and Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries. A number of critics have concentrated on this connection. John Irwin, for example, examines his construction of an analytic detective story in his article, "A Clew to a Clue: Locked Rooms and Labyrinths in Poe and Borges." In so doing, he also suggests that Borges associates the word "clue" with the word "thread," and in so doing, makes an allusion to the story of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth.

In other critical essays, scholars contend that Borges' early prose is essentially nihilistic. In other words, he denies any ground of objective truth in his stories. John Fraser examines the stories of *Ficciones,* including "The Garden of Forking Paths," maintaining that Borges both creates the threat of nihilism in the character of Pierre Menard in an early story, "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote"* and overcomes it through "his concern to connect rather than disjoin values, fictions, and action. . . ." A number of commentators have explored the metafictional nature of the story. That is, they interpret "The Garden of Forking Paths" to be a story about stories, a fiction about the writing of fiction. In her *Jorge Luis Borges: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Naomi Lindstrom, for example, argues that the "spy plot is tangled with a second narrative concerning the reading and appreciation of literature."

Didier T. Jaen offers a book-length study of metafiction in Borges, *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction.* In this book, Jaen asserts that using a "first-person impersonal narrator is one of the most characteristic metafictional devices used by Borges."

Finally, several recent critics view Borges as a writer who, years before the postmodernist era, prefigures both postmodernism and chaos theory. Thomas P. Weissert, for example, in *Chaos and Disorder: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science,* argues that "Jorge Luis Borges discovered the essence of bifurcation theory thirty years before chaos scientists mathematically formalized it."

Because Borges created a large body of highly esoteric, allusive prose, as well as poetry, it is likely that critical attention will continue to focus on his work. Although it is sometimes difficult for readers to grasp, his fiction, essays, and poetry offers great rewards for interested scholars and readers.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is an associate professor at Adrian College who writes widely on literature for educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Borges's use of metafiction in "The Garden of Forking Paths."

Before the publication of his first collection of short stories, *El jardin de senderos que se bifurcan [The Garden of Forking Paths*] in 1941, Argentine readers knew Jorge Luis Borges as a writer of poetry and essays.

The publication of his first short stories, however, marked a shift in his reputation. Soon, Borges would achieve an international reputation because of his short stories. By the late twentieth century, critics and scholars listed Borges as one of the most important writers of the century.

Although Borges is widely considered an important writer, not all critics appreciate his work— particularly his short stories. There are those who find his work overly cerebral and erudite, too filled with esoteric allusions and philosophical argument to qualify as literature at all. On the other hand, there are those such as Martin Staab who admire his "literary gamesmanship . . . playful philosophizing,. . . linguistic dabbling and . . . urbane humour." It seems that with Borges, readers feel strongly one way or another.

"The Garden of Forking Paths", first published in 1941 in the collection of the same name, is a typically Borgesian story if there is such a thing. James Woodall, in his book, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges,* maintains that the story "is the densest, and perhaps philosophically most nihilistic, story Borges ever wrote."

Moreover, he contends that Borges constructs an elaborate discussion of time, using "[s]inology, the philosophy of labyrinths and gardens, espionage and premonition" to demonstrate the "essentially fictitious and yet . . . inescapable" nature of time.

Readers of Borges, therefore, are left with many questions when reading this story. Is it a detective story? A philosophical treatise? Is it about time? About future(s) in potential? To these questions, it is possible to add one more: can "The Garden of Forking Paths" be read as an example of metafiction, fiction that takes as its subject the creation of fiction itself?

Metafiction is an important term in postmodern literature; yet Borges' story appeared some thirty years before the self-consciously metafictional texts of the postmodern era. Thomas Weissert identifies Borges as "a transitional figure between modern and postmodern literature," and it is through his use of metafiction that this seems most clear.

Indeed, writers such as Didier Jaén, Weissert, and others explore Borges' use of metafiction. The concept of metafiction may seem at first strange to readers used to reading realistic or mimetic texts, that is, texts that are constructed to reflect or mimic

reality. However, by examining first, the characteristics of metafiction, and second, how "The Garden of Forking Paths" illustrates those characteristics, readers can grow in their understanding of both the concept of metafiction and the story itself.

A metafictional text, according to Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and the Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,* is one that "selfconsciously and systematically draws attention to itself as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." "The Garden of Forking Paths" does this in a number of ways.

In the first place, the story opens with a reference to a historical event and a historical text, followed by the statement by Yu Tsun. This clearly calls into question the "relationship between fiction and reality." By suggesting that the statement to follow offers yet another historical explanation for the event referred to in the historical text, Borges undermines the truth of the historical text itself.

In addition, the impersonal narrator mentions that the first two pages of the document are missing. The information serves to remind the reader that what is to follow is a description of a series of events constructed after the fact. That the two pages are missing also serves to remind the reader that the editor of the statement can change and manipulate the material in the statement.

The fact is further emphasized by the inclusion of a footnote early in the story. The unnamed narrator corrects a statement made by Yu Tsun that Richard Madden murdered Viktor Runeberg. The narrator tells the reader that even the name used by Yu Tsun for Viktor Runeberg is incorrect. As a result, the reader does not know which narrator to trust: the unnamed opening narrator or Yu Tsun. Indeed, the inclusion of the footnote forces the reader to question the reality of the narrator, a violation of the unspoken agreement that readers enter into with writers of realistic texts. Narrators have to at least *seem* real or they cannot function as narrators.

As this further illustrates, metafictional texts often function at several narrative levels. In other words, there are stories within stories within stories in this text. At the first level, there is the unnamed narrator who instructs the reader to connect Yu Tsun's statement with a passage from a history text. At the second level is Yu Tsun's statement describing his journey and conversation with Dr. Stephen Albert. Within this level is the story of Yu Tsun's ancestor who withdraws from the world to write a book and build a labyrinth. At the innermost level is the novel itself, "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts," according to Yu Tsun, or according to Dr. Albert, a brilliant novel that reveals the labyrinthine nature of time.

By naming the novel at the innermost narrative level *The Garden of Forking Paths,* Borges calls attention to the fact that there is yet another narrative level above the unnamed primary narrator. That is, the story itself, "The Garden of Forking Paths" contains the first narrator and all of the narrative levels below it.

Therefore, if the novel at the center of the story is a fictional creation of the fictional Ts'ui Pen, then the story "The Garden of Forking Paths" is also a fictional creation. What, then, does this imply about Borges himself? Is he suggesting that the author is a fictional creation, someone constructed by the language and the reader?

Borges violates another unspoken agreement between writer and reader that the text will follow in a linear fashion from start to finish. Storytelling works because of the linear arrangement of the text. Borges, however, introduces the possibility that texts may not be linear.

He does this by revealing the nature of the fictitious novel at the center of the story. The novel, according to Albert, puts forward an infinite number of futures—many of them contradictory. According to Albert, "In the work of Ts'ui Pen, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings."

Likewise, metafictional texts, because they are texts about texts, introduce the possibility of multiple meanings. As Peter Stoicheff argues, "This is one way of saying that within the finite space of any text are an infinite number of possible meanings, whose hierarchy metafiction refuses to arbitrate." In other words, in the world of fiction no one meaning has any more connection to reality than any other meaning. Therefore, all meanings and no meanings are simultaneously possible, just as all of the futures in "The Garden of Forking Paths" are possible within the fictional world. However, since it is a fictional world, none of the futures exist in reality.

Furthermore, metafictional texts differ from realistic texts in that they often contain both contradictions and coincidences that force readers to question the "reality" of the universe created by the writer. In a realistic text, there is an agreement between the writer and the reader that the reader will believe the world the writer has created as long as the writer stays within the conventions of that fictional world. In a realistic text, natural law must be obeyed and characters must act as if they were real people.

However, in a metafictional text like "The Garden of Forking Paths," the coincidental nature of many of the events forces the reader to accept that the story has no connection to reality. For example, Yu Tsun picks a name out of a phone book. The person who has the name is a noted sinologist who has spent years studying a novel written by Yu Tsun's ancestor. Such coincidence calls attention to the fact that in the world of fiction, anything can happen. The writer controls the story because it is a story, not reality.

What a story like "The Garden of Forking Paths" reveals, then, is that all fiction, whether realistic or fantastic, is a product of language. The characters that exist in the pages of the text-no matter how real they seem—are no more than ink on paper. They have no existence before the beginning of the text, and they have no future at the end of the text. They are, pure and simple, creations of language and narration.

Consequently, the implications that a metafictional text like "The Garden of Forking Paths" finally introduce are profoundly disturbing. As the character Yu Tsun tells the

reader early in the story, "everything happens to a man precisely, precisely *now.* " Once an event is past, it exists nowhere but in memory and narration.

Likewise, the future exists nowhere but in the imagination and in narration. By calling attention to itself as fiction, the metafictional text also calls attention to the nature of reality itself, at least suggesting that the lines between fiction and the narration of lived experience are perhaps fuzzier than anyone wants to admit.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the essay below, Yarrow examines the ways Borges forces his reader to notice the act of reading and inspire in the reader an appreciation for the aesthetic experience.

"We must never forget that [Borges's] intelligence . . . is at the service of games rather than convictions. . . .The purpose of the game is not to discover incognizable reality; it has an aesthetic aim."

The "aesthetic aim" Jurado refers to suggests that Jorge Luis Borges is concerned with the effect of his work, and that this effect may have something to do with the mental processes that give shape to what is then called reality. To suggest that Borges is concerned with stimulating the creative faculties of his audience appears legitimate; he says his work is a means of "fusing the world of the reader and the world of the book."

This possibility implies an intention similar to Robbe-Grillet's demand for the active participation of the reader in the creation of the work. More than that, it is—as with Robbe-Grillet, or Proust or Coleridge before him—a recognition that "imagination" is precisely that process of constructing significance for oneself. Borges's "games" are designed to extend the "field of play" as far as possible and to make the reader aware that he or she is playing. Borges is aware, too, that the way in which this happens is through the physical changes induced in the brain by the demands made by his text: he states that "what is essential is the aesthetic factor, the thrill, the physical effect brought about by reading."

Looking at what happens when reading a story by Borges, one sees that the work necessarily and openly accepts the commitment made by the reader in entering the fictional sphere. Although the story may ultimately wish to correct the reader's notions about the relationship of fiction and reality, it first of all welcomes the assumption that these spheres are different and similar in the ways in which the reader has conventionally come to believe. The writer welcomes even more the reader's desire to gain something from the reading. This drive may be blocked, deflected, or turned upon itself, but it remains a necessity for reader and writer. The desire rests on assumptions much profounder, perhaps, than even a belief in the ability of language to signify—to say something meaningful about the world. It may reflect the sense that actions move towards some kind of completion, that there is some kind of shape to a succession of lived and willed events. That is, fundamentally, an intuition of order which is aesthetic in nature rather than merely intellectual. Thus the satisfaction gained from reading a book in its entirety has as much, if not more, to do with a grasping of pattern and plan, as with the simple knowledge of "what happens in the end." A book draws, then, on two kinds of rather crucial awareness—about the nature of reality, and about the way in which relating to it is a matter of perceiving a growth of plan and order. These concerns have perhaps become oversimplified and reduced to superficiality by conventional ideas about reading (both the mental and the physical operations involved) and by the large amount of easily "consumable" reading material available. So, in fact, Borges and others may not be making totally new demands, but rather attempting to reestablish the

fundamental issues of reading; a "revolution" in the sense of returning to something. That which has been forgotten must be reestablished, and in order for this to happen, the forgotten must be highlighted. The text will, therefore, at first appear extraordinary; indeed it *has* to appear extraordinary, so that people can see the process of reading as something "new" and worth investigation. Shock tactics may be in order at this stage in the process. Just as Rilke said that poetry needed to respond to the earth's wish to become "invisible," so reading must become a new and strange experience in order for it to register. Readers must be made aware of the fact that they are reading, otherwise they will never perceive the extraordinary richness and importance of this old and familiar process. So Borges's work, like that of Robbe-Grillet and Gombrowicz, hovers incessantly around the borders of the "normal" and the "abnormal," constantly interrelating and juxtaposing the two.

The text needs, therefore, to be doing at least two things at once: inviting and stimulating the sense that something is to be discovered, some "point" to the reading; and subverting or distorting the over-hasty assumptions that tend to be made about how that point is reached. A title may do the job quite well. Take, for instance, the well-known Borges story, "The Garden of Forking Paths." The title both seduces and subverts. Like other Borges stories, it offers a prospect of mystery but also suggests the opposite of a closed or simple solution. The garden and the labyrinthine implications have vaguely esoteric, Eastern, or exotic connotations. The detective format of the story (like "Death and the Compass") is similar not only to G. K. Chesterton, whom Borges certainly liked, but also to Robbe-Grillet (detectives in *Les Gommes, La Maison de Rendez-Vous,* labyrinths in *Dans le Labyrinthe, Topologie d'une Cite Fontome*). Butor (*Passage de Milan*) and Beckett (*Molloy*) also have something of the detective formula. Detective stories traditionally play a kind of game with the reader; they also traditionally offer a number of blind alleys, red herrings, spurious "clues," and so on. Whatever the "truth" may be, it will not be reached easily. In addition, the *nouveau roman* and other post-modernist writing (e.g., new American fiction in works like Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*) often reverses the implicit assumption encoded into the structure of detective fiction and deliberately refuses any single or definitive solution that will ultimately be "revealed" to the reader. All of these possibilities float about in Borges's title, promising in addition a kind of intimate and bizarre pleasure. Getting caught up in the forking paths is a kind of Baudelairean *invitation au voyage,* leading readers to engage both narrative and mental processes, and the ways in which they may interact.

The story advertises its dubious wares clearly enough; it lays them out more fully in the combination of seductive and suggestive settings, themes, and appellations which follow. A summarization of the narrative in linear fashion is unnecessary, but the ingredients are clearly chosen for their effect: a Chinese spy for the Germans; a sinologist holding the key to the labyrinthine work of the spy's ancestor; a plot involving murder, attempted killing, and a message that will result in many deaths; the conjunction of modern (1916) war and Chinese culture; the sending of a secret message. The structure of the narrative is a typical (for Borges, as for Robbe- Grillet) "Chinese-box" affair, moving from the apparent neutrality of the opening paragraph ["On page 22 of Liddell Hart's History of *World War I* you will read . . ." (*Labyrinths*)] to a statement by the Chinese spy-cum-professor, to the English sinologist Albert's outline of Ts'ui Pen's

work, to direct quotation from and involvement in that work. Version is enclosed within version, each narrative with its own range of reference and association, its own standards and horizons of "truth." Borges's fictional composition includes and comments upon the confessions of a spy, the philosophical exegesis of an academic, the traditionally inscrutable joke of a complex mind. The interference of the narratives incites reference back and forth, setting up analogies between contemporary historical events and cultural reflections, betwen the various levels of personal existence of Dr. Yu Tsun, between nationalities, beliefs, and codes.

This interaction is deliberately sought after in the structure and detail of the narratives. It is apparent even at the simple level of names and nationalities, with a Chinese-German spy, an English-Chinese expert, and an Irish-English secret service agent (who speaks German at the outset). The Chinese spy was formerly "professor of English at the *Hochschule* in Tsingtao" (*Labyrinths*). The result of his actions in Staffordshire will be understood in Berlin and translated into action in France.

This confusion of nationality and identity can suggest various aspects: the complexity of political interaction and its implications for national identity; the increasing difficulty of simplistic notions about culture and genealogy; twentieth-century doubts about the singleness and stability of personality; the issue of how much our behavior is affected by the language we speak.

What happens, in general terms, is that each notation (here and in other Borges stories) works less as an attempt to "clarify" someone's identity and role than as a kind of magnetic field for associations. The stories are so short, and the details so few, that "realistic" character-portrayal is clearly not intended. (The same is true for Robbe-Grillet's longer fictions: "characters" frequently change names, and in *La Maison de Rendez-Vous* many of the names they adopt are aliases or have theatrical connotations, e.g. "L'Americain," "Lady Ava.") Names (and other details), become a kind of vibratory Charge—not so much a definite symbol as a means of calling up associative possibilities (Chineseness, distinguished professorship) which themselves are usually deliberately vague. In this respect, the brevity of Borges' stories produces a highly-charged symbolism of doubt and possibility, which is intensified by many other techniques including the switch between narrative levels—realism and fantasy, for instance, or the confessional and the exegetic. Or the shifting or playing between psychological exploration and fantastic inventiveness; or the typical Borges mixture of genuine quotation and "spurious" scholarship. Uncertainty is produced whichever way you "read" the story, and principally if one manages to read it all ways at once—which is what the labyrinth at the center of the story suggests. It is "a labyrinth of symbols" (*Labyrinths*). These symbols point, however, not to some definitive grand interpretative scheme, but to the conjunction of apparently antagonistic possibilities: all four alternative endings, Albert explains, are possible for Ts'ui Pen's work.

Yu Tsun, however, chooses one of the endings and shoots Albert, in order to convey his secret message (the name Albert, as reported in the press, will also indicate the town in France that the Germans must attack). He, by a combination of historical necessity and psychological condition, opts for a single solution, which will inevitably result in his death

as a murderer. In Robbe-Grillet and Gombrowicz, as here, and elsewhere in Borges, killing as closure is always suspicious—it is usually heavily ironized, and virtually never achieves the kind of solution it promises.

Murder, then, or sudden death, is a means of presenting one of the two poles between which the story oscillates. Mentioned also is that Yu Tsun's ancestor was murdered, and Albert refers to excerpts from his book concerned with a battle and with the various possible outcomes of a meeting between a man with a secret and a stranger. Albert claims that Ts'ui Pen meant the reader to choose not one alternative outcome, but all of them: the book is intended as a demonstration of what Valery called *noeuds* and contemporary critical theory describes as *generateurs* . That is to say, there are points in a text (any point, by implication) where the reader, like the writer, may seize not only upon the selfperpetuating inventiveness of narrative and decide to draw on any prticular association or link to give the text a new twist, but the reader or writer is also aware at that moment of holding within his grasp (in his imaginative or magical power) the secret or possibility of all future developments of that text. He is at the point where the paths fork. Any path is a potential murder/death because it can lead to closure; but the dominating single-mindedness (obsession or terrorism, for Robbe-Grillet) of each textual departure can always be arrested, and hauled back to any point from which the plurality of possibility becomes available again.

Yu Tsun has a secret (Albert's name) that he must encode and transmit. Albert has a secret (the nature of Ts'ui Pen's book and of his labyrinth). The garden is a "secret" kind of location (with medieval, Chinese, mystical, erotic, biblical-genetic connotations). Borges's story teases us with its secretive atmosphere and offers a few clues (some helpful but hidden, others unhelpful and overt) as the reader is put in the position of trying to figure out what Yu Tsun is trying to do. In all cases, the real nature of the secret is generative rather than unitary. (A brief aside to The Sect of the Phoenix, whose aura of arcane profundity and talk of the Secret is a joke on the phoenix's propensities for sex.) Even Yu Tsun's message, when transmitted, has more than one possible outcome, and is important to him in more than one way. As an Oriental, he despises the Western conflict in which he finds himself caught up, but he needs to complete his mission to justify himself (and by implication his family and his race) in the eyes of his narrow-minded German boss (described as a "sick and hateful man—in his arid office"—*Labyrinths*). The import of the secrets is that in messages, in wisdom, and in all encoded texts (as shown by the successive frames of the story) reside not closed "answers" but structures of possibility.

That kind of structure is represented by Albert's proposition (fascinating to Yu Tsun and frequent in Borges) stating Ts'ui Pen's work reveals a conjunction of all time and identity. That is to say, when you actually stand at the point where paths fork, you hold sequence and causality in your power. This bifurcation is the "now" point of reading in contemporary critical theory, the point where reader and text converge. (Do battle, as in Simon's *La Bataille de Pharsale* (= *la phrase*) or Ricardou's *La Prise* (= *la prose*) *de Constantinople:* hence the battle quoted from Ts'ui Pen, of which two versions are given, and the battle Yu Tsun's act will influence.)

It is the location of moral choice, in existentialist theory: the place from which the self is constructed, or—consistent with phenomenology— consciousness wills or intends a new perception and construction of reality.

Borges's games are not trivial, because as L. A. Murillo contends, "The conjecture is about radical questions of human existence, time, personal will, consciousness, and destiny." Such questions are pertinent to the protagonist (Yu Tsun) of "The Garden of Forking Paths," and are mediated through him, and through the structure of interlocking narratives Borges builds around him, to the reader. Thus "The Garden" is a "representation of the very process by which . . . events acquire their symbolical significance in the consciousness of the protagonist and . . . reader." The games, then, are centrally "about" the exploration by the reader (where else can the story "take place"?) of certain states and procedures in consciousness: those states and procedures that concern the way in which we invest our experience with understanding or significance, by which we arrive at our ability to interact creatively and purposively with our environment. The elements of game play that Borges uses here are for the purpose of propelling the reader towards this exploration.

Murillo, in *The Cyclical Night,* suggests that Yu Tsun is presented as being in an ethical vacuum: existentially aware of his responsibility in a world whose political, social, and psychological upheaval has negated a priori values, and conscious of his need to locate himself and make a choice that endows being and acting with meaning. Again one sees the confusing intersection of personal, cultural, and historical identities in the story. The "vacuum," also presented to the reader through the mystery, paradox, and symbolic condensation of the narrative, demands to be grasped and developed as text, as another way of pinpointing the source of moral choice.

Yu Tsun takes, perhaps, the easy way out. He opts for the single, deadly solution, though knowing, as his wry admission at the end makes clear, that it is not really so simple. ("He does not know . . . my innumerable contrition and weariness." — *Labyrinths*). The odd adjective indicates Yu Tsun's acknowledgment of the chance of plurality, a chance he passes over.) Yu Tsun tries, by recalling his murder of Albert, to construct around the event a narrative that gives it the status of irrevocability (all incidents seem restrospectively compelling and essential).

His "confession" is thus fundamentally spurious. Its format proposes an acquiescence that, in fact, is quite the reverse of the confession's purpose. His narrated version, like his act of murder, seeks to impose a unique and dominant reading.

That uniqueness and dominance is, however, undermined by the multiplicity of narratives within which Borges frames the story. It is, moreover, further placed in perspective by the contrast between Yu Tsun (actually Chinese but betraying his culture and his identity) and Albert (a Westerner who is far more an incarnation of traditional Chinese wisdom). Yu Tsun disregards or distorts Albert's possibilities; he uses him only as a cipher in a code of language and action. Yu Tsun tries uneasily to justify his action as inevitable in terms of historical necessity. Albert is, however, also the sign of many other possibilities, more inclusive than the use to which his name is put as indicating a

place to be destroyed. In addition to his grasp of the fluid dynamism of the labyrinth, he seems to Yu Tsun a person of Goethean stature, endowed with wisdom and easy grace. Living within the procreative garden, or labyrinth, Albert is at the junction of East and West, uniting the contemplative and the active, the English and the German, in a harmonious and lively balance, like that of nature and the "sparkling music" through which he is approached. He is the kind of multiple possibility that Yu Tsun ignores. Murillo describes the labyrinthine structure by which consciousness is represented as a "metaphysical ground" (*The Cyclical Night*). The "hesitation" (Todorov's term)—characteristic of postmodernist texts and here instilled by the confusions and paradoxes, the ironic juxtaposition of versions, and so on—produced in protagonist and reader is the moment of absence (of choice, significance) that impels selection of world and action. The existentialist reading suggests that the motive force is an *angst* , a desperate need to fill the vacuum by projecting anything. That is certainly one factor, and it may be the principal one in Yu Tsun's case. But the contradictions, blocks, and ironic perspectives of the story's structure, together with its repeated indications about the plural significance of secrets, and the balance of forces harmonized in Albert, offer an alternative mode of response.

Such a response is also offered to Yu Tsun. As he moves towards Albert's house, he experiences a kind of detachment combined with a liveliness of perception. The "slope of the road . . . eliminated any possibility of weariness," and he feels himself to be "an abstract perceiver of the world" (*Labyrinths*). At this point he becomes aware of the "living countryside" and of an "almost syllabic music," which he later realizes is Chinese. Here, as always in Borges, the topology is not realistic scene-setting but directions to a mental state. Robbe- Grillet clearly works in a similar fashion in *Topologie d'une Cite Fantome,* but the parallel is not quite exact. Robbe-Grillet maps out with ironic geometrical precision the moves of an imagination confined by its own obsessions and by a passion for linguistic symmetry. Borges's landscapes have perhaps more in common with the *terrains vagues* of Beckett: they present not so much a process as a condition in which a process may take place. Beckett's world, for example, in *Molloy,* is one in which objects are cherished precisely because they are " *en voie de disparition* ": the protagonists are in the process of ridding themselves of inherited assumptions about reality and its relationship with language. What we have is a curious kind of precise vagueness, a very persistent and subtle attempt to render a state in which "meaning" is loosening its hold, dissolving the links between word and experience. (Everything dissolves or disintegrates in Beckett: bicycles, limbs, relationships-the onions in Moran's Irish stew in *Molloy: "On n'est pas lie* ?" is what the tramps in Godot ask each other.) Borge's descriptions, though they are in a way more detailed, frequently operate with a similar combination of the vague and the precise. That is to say, they are attempting to pinpoint a condition of increasing "vagueness," or distance from the restrictions of conventional levels of thinking and perceiving.

What increasing vagueness leads towards is exactly that moment when no single interpretation is dominant and possibility has re-established itself. Yu Tsun is in a kind of suspended animation in which the possibilities of harmony present themselves most fully to him. His state of physical ease matches the time of day (late afternoon) and the surroundings: "the afternoon was intimate, infi- nite" (*Labyrinths*); his consciousness is

freed from its preoccupation with limited ends—he feels that it is not possible to be the enemy of a country, in the sense that he is now experiencing it. He is integrated with his surroundings, acting spontaneously, and feeling at home (he instinctively accepts the music and does not remember whether he knocks at Albert's gate or rings a bell). He is, in short, in a condition of very lively and expanded awareness in which his doubts about identity are replaced by a kind of oneness with nature as the source of order and mobility— "fireflies, words, gardens, streams of water, sunsets." Yu Tsun's state is what brings him to the center of the labyrinth, and Albert comes to open the gate, holding a symbolic lantern.

Yu Tsun is in fact blinded by the light, and cannot make out Albert's face. That is to say, in this situation where he becomes aware of himself as a center of possibility, an organizing potential, a consciousness which can shape and form, he is not able to pin Albert down as a limited and thus expendable identity. This "awareness of aware ness" is both positive and negative, a sense of hesitation in which simplistic single interpretations are found inadequate, and the pluralistic is on the verge of presenting itself.

Thus the two versions of the battle in Ts'ui Pen's book offer as reasons for victory apparently contrary states of mind: the warriors experience situations that make them feel either existential angst or joy. On the one hand, individual identity is felt to be insignificant; on the other it is merged in a communal celebration. In both cases an apparent negation of individual significance leads to a "victory" or fruitful outcome. In a similar way, the postmodernist "negative aesthetic" is a way of continually emphasizing the apparently negative in order to reveal hidden possibilities. Whatever is said also provides a way of *not* saying everything else: it puts off, conceals, and defers (differer, pace Derrida) all the other possibilities of language. So what is said is frequently contradicted or revealed to be inadequate, in order that it may be seen to have those other possibilities lurking behind or within it, as linguistic history for example, or as association, or as alternative readings.

In the one "direct quote," Borges gives us from Ts'ui Pen's text, the warriors are referred to as "heroes, tranquil their admirable hearts, violent their swords, resigned to kill and to die" (*Labyrinths*).

The line might have come out of the *Bhagavad Gita,* an epic much concerned with the problems of fighting in the proper way. (Although Borges may not have actually taken it from there, he did use the *Gita* as one source among many for esoteric references.)

Taking a leaf out of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's commentary on the Gita, Borges would probably interpret the quotation something like this: "swords" refer to the "outer" organs of action, "hearts" to the inner state of mind. An apparently contradictory condition here renders the mind still and the body violently active. This condition actually allows the warriors to perform action without attachment to the result (however drastic that may seem), and because of that the action is in fact most successful and the warriors can be classified as heroes. Taking the gloss further, one can see that this kind of neutrality is the mark of being in the state where the possibilities are held in play. "Negative" or

"positive" outcomes (apparent surrender or destruction of one "side") are balanced, or perhaps perceived to be equally false. At this point one is the master of the opposites (as Thomas Mann puts it in *The Magic Mountain*), as is the figure of Stephen Albert and his interpretation of Ts'ui Pen's narrative, and as is Borges with his construction of interlocking versions, and as the reader may be.

This interpretation is not inconsistent with Borgesian practice, but it does suggest a further point: "suspended animation" may be a more exact term than we suspected. It may be necessary to look further at this condition, since it does seem to be represented both by Yu Tsun and by the warriors. Useful parallels may be drawn between what occurs in reading and in certain states of consciousness closely analyzed in psycho-physiological terms by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. His theory, together with experimental evidence derived from scientific investigation, can provide some interesting angles on the nature of aesthetic experience. One of the most crucial conditions for the experience is precisely the one in which stillness and activity appear to be present simultaneously.

What appears to happen is that a kind of neutral expectancy may be produced, as a background against which a variety of possibilities may be generated. I think this happens in "The Garden of Forking Paths" and in other Borges texts as a result of what Murillo calls "displacement." In a phenomenological reading of the story, the narrator is realized via the narrative as a process; that is, as a succession of different vantage points, perceptions, or versions: the various styles and readings are a record of successive states of consciousness. (They move from the "outer" historical account of the war, through the deceptively confessional spy story, to Yu Tsun's more intimate sensations on approaching Albert's house, to Albert's gloss of Ts'ui Pen's work, and finally to the "direct quotation" given above: a graded progression towards the condition described and which Yu Tsun then reluctantly rejects.)

The narrator presents this succession as a record of successive locations of his being-in-theworld, much as, for instance, Sartre's Roquentin in *La Nausee* tries out a variety of styles in an attempt to express the shifts and variations of identity. But just as from the mock-detective perspective, none of the versions offers the whole truth, so too each style is relativized by the next frame that the narrative adopts. Each central symbol, theme, or idea is assimilated into a successively more extensive context, which displaces it from central to relative importance. In this way the reader is gradually pushed into a state in which he or she doesn't totally accept or reject anything. The movement of the narrative into new frameworks takes the reader along, and at the same time serves as a block to any once-and-for-all opting for the previous perspective. One has to take part in the process by which meanings are created, but one is prevented from attributing finality to any one interpretation. The movement is something like closing and opening a pair of nutcrackers, as each possibility is grasped, then released as its kernel is found to be generative rather than final. Murillo neatly explains Borges' semi-invented locality for the 1916 battle in this vein: *Serre-Montauhan* suggests a tension between "compulsion" and "freedom"—which is both that of Yu Tsun's moral dilemma and of the reader's progress through the text. Interestingly, Ludovic Janvier describes Robbe-Grillet's narrative as built around the " *couple fascination-liberte.* " This "disengaging compulsion toward ironical displacement" allows

the reader both to experience and to judge the progress of the protagonist/narrator. It further allows the reader to locate the source of creative and moral action, but forces him or her to return again and again to its nature as potential, and not to get carried away into one-sided choice.

The key to the production of this state is repetition. One reads on and on, and keeps getting blocked. Readers are somewhere between remembering and not remembering, between believing and not believing.

They are in one sense getting lost in a labyrinth, and in another discovering that the secret of a labyrinth can be found only in that way. The reader becomes both active—in that she or he continues to read and to weigh up further possible additions and outcomes—and nonactive, in that everything is somehow held in abeyance, given a kind of nonfinite status, its seeming definitiveness undermined in advance by the "let's wait and see" mood established at the center of our consciousness.

As a parallel to Yu Tsun's exposition of his state, with its moral and psychological implications, the text operates its own aesthetic procedure upon us. The state which Yu Tsun enters, in the labyrinthine center of Albert's enclave, but never fully explores, is offered as the means by which the thematic and structural development of Borges's tale can be most completely judged.

Irony gives more of a perspective so that more of the game can be judged. And yet one can only judge by being involved as well as detached. "Critical distance," so often held up as the aim of literary study, does not mean a kind of owlish glare that reduces a text to the status of a dead mouse. It does not mean the cultivation of a spurious and selfdelusive "objectivity" swathed in biographical detail or critical jargon. It means, and it requires, precisely the kind of participation in the reading of a text on all levels which Borges is here working to produce. The reader must "get lost" in the text. Ts'ui Pen "renounced worldly power in order . . . to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost" (*Labyrinths*). The labyrinth is *the* text, in the sense of the network of meanings through which people make the world known to themselves. If we go on using this text unthinkingly, we never really own the world at all, and perhaps never really experience it either. We have to make it *our* text, which means first of all forgetting the one convention dictates, and secondly becoming aware of our own propensity for memory and organization. Yu Tsun discovers his own past where he least expects it. Borges's narratives weave their spell of mystery, symbolic density, suggestiveness, and disruption in order to propel the reader into the area, the kind of mental activity, where dream and memory and imagination operate. But more than this, the narratives offer the chance to be and to perceive that operation in process. The reader must learn to manipulate symbol, metaphor, strange registers, and rhythms; to familiarize himself or herself with the most powerful properties, the generative structures of language.

Reading this story can show us our own linguistic and moral capacity. So "dreaming" is not evasion, but rather (as Borges suggests with inevitable irony in "The Circular Ruins") a very precise kind of work. Playing this sort of game—especially if engaged in

repeatedly—could very well serve as useful training for everyday activity, even if authors — and critics—tend to overplay the game for its own sake and forget the application.

Critical Essay #3

In the essay below, Rudy addresses Borges's use of two different plots in "Garden of Forking Paths" and argues that this use is "motivated by Borges' desire to upset any notion of plot under stood as simple chronological causality, as well as the conception of reality which underlies such a notion."

"Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted." - E. A. Poe ". . . Magic is not the contradiction of the law of cause and effect but its crown, or nightmare." - Borges

Michel Foucault in his magnificent preface to *The Order of Things* quotes a text by Borges, a taxonomy of animals, which is attributed by Borges to a certain Dr. Franz Kuhn, who in turn attributes it to "a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge.* " The text reads:

Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the above classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

Foucault's exegesis of this passage leads him to conclude that Borges is here creating a "heterotopia," a place that is an impossible and frightening non place, a place of language and of mind which manages to contain words "in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus." This procedure, according to Foucault, "destroys . . . that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together.'" I think it could be argued that what Foucault finds Borges doing with words in general, we find the same writer doing with *plots* in "The Garden of Forking Paths," a story from the celebrated collection *Ficciones.* Plot emerges in this story in typically Borgesian fashion as a central symbolic element which embodies the author's subversive metaphysics as much as do the elements of theme or imagery more often discussed in the critical literature on this most sophisticated of contemporary writers.

Critical Essay #4

The first paragraph of "The Garden of Forking Paths" acts as a frame to the body of the text, a firstperson confessional "document" written by Yu Tsun, a Chinese spy for the German Empire operating in England during the First World War. Ostensibly this framing paragraph serves to ground the confessional narrative in historical fact and provides the question to which Yu Tsun's "deposition" is supposedly an answer. The historical fact is the delay of a few days suffered in the British offensive on the Somme River in July, 1916. Borges (or more exactly, the "editor") cities Captain Liddell Hart's *A History of the World War* to the effect that "torrential rain caused this delay—which lacked any special significance." The reader assumes that Yu Tsun's "deposition" will prove (a) that "torrential rains" were not the decisive factor in the delay and—perhaps—(b) that the delay did have significance. This seems innocent enough if the reader is unaware, as no doubt he is, that the action on the Somme took place a month earlier than Borges quotes Liddell Hart, falsely, as having stated. He will be all the more surprised to discover that an obscure Chinese spy caused this delay by murdering a man who is, it seems, a reincarnation of his ancient ancestor Ts'ui Pen and that the delay thus had a significance of a most unsettling sort, indirectly and on another plane of "reality."

Yet Borges' intention in introducing us to the story via history is not simply to give his fiction an innocent motivation, that of answering the "offi- cial" account of a historical event, of attempting, on the basis of later "documentation," to assert historical "truth," whatever that may be. Rather, this frame is there for the purpose of exploding on itself: it is subversive. History, chronological time, has no place in Borges' universe, and since his universe so often appears as the "Book" or model of our universe, ours is left on shaky ground when he has completed his supposedly innocent operation of ascertaining the "truth." The historical work to which Borges refers is itself a "Borgesian" work: it is a startling narrative of "real" events which seem more fantastic than any fiction an author could invent. Borges understandbly likes Conrad's thought "that when one wrote, even in a realistic way about the world, one was writing a fantastic story because the world itself is fantastic and unfathomable and mysterious.") The historian Liddell Hart, who is of a positivistic bent to say the least, admits of his enterprise that "it is difficult to pick out salient features where there are either none, or else so many that they tend to merge into a formless mass." Nevertheless, he plods along, sorting out causes and effects, making judgments, interpolating the various "factors" of chance involved in a given battle (with the thoroughness of an Avalon-Hill war game)—and ends up with a fantastic narrative. Borges takes the model of this fantastic but literal narration of "real events" as his starting point: he will correct Liddell Hart (ostensibly in the interests of historical truth), outdoing the very concept of cause and effect to the point that it turns on itself, and all notions of history, causal time, and truth are overthrown by the "unfathomable."

Such a strategy is quite typical of Borges. As Ronald Christ, in his excellent book *The Narrow Act,* states: "On the one hand Borges taints the reality which his sources describe; on the other he corrupts the authenticity of those sources themselves; in both

cases the motive is to penetrate the metaphysical world which lies beyond fact and substance. . . ." In view of this critic's fine understanding of the meaningful distortion which even the simplest quoted text undergoes in Borges' hands, it is surprising that he completely misses the point of the reference to Liddell Hart in "The Garden. . . ," the opening of which, in his view, "shows Borges operating out of an historical background, grafting his fiction, once again, *on the stock of fact"* (italics mine). The mechanism of quotation, particularly quotation from an authoritative, non-fictional source, may be used as a device to mark the "factual," as opposed to "fictional," nature of a narrative. This is certainly the *overt* purpose of the opening paragraph of "The Garden. . . ." (This purpose is further served by the presentation of Yu Tsun's narrative as a "deposition," i.e., a genuine, if personal, account of an actual event, by its naturalistic fragmentation ["the first two pages are missing"], and by the "editor's note," which cantankerously corrects a supposedly slanderous accusation voiced in the deposition.) But the *covert* purpose of the opening, which, as we shall see, is more important for the story's total effect, is clearly to lull the reader into a type of false security as regards the status of "real" events, a security he will be forced to give up—if nothing else, in befuddlement. For the expectation of a "factual" type of narrative which the frame sets up is destroyed by Borges' play with two parallel yet incompatible plots, one of a detective, the other of a metaphysical, nature.

Critical Essay #5

Into the frame of a historical plot, an effort to sort out the cause and effect of a historical event, Borges inserts a detective plot, a more modest (or usually so) effort to find the hidden order underlying a crime. Borges himself has characterized "The Garden of Forking Paths" as a "detective story": "its readers will assist at the execution, and all the preliminaries of a crime, a crime whose purpose will not be unknown to them, but which they will not understand—it seems to me—until the last paragraph" (*Ficciones*). The reader learns early in the story that Yu Tsun has a secret—the site of a new British artillery park on the Ancre—to communicate to his Chief, a "sick and hateful man . . . sitting in his arid Berlin office," and that his message will result in the bombing of the site by the Germans and a consequent delay in the British offensive. The reader also learns that Yu Tsun is being pursued by his arch-enemy, the British secretservice agent Madden, and is desperate, and that he is contemplating, and then has planned, a crime — viz., the emphasis on the "revolver with a single bullet" and his various meditations of the sort, *"Whosever would undertake some atrocious enterprise.*

. . ." Furthermore, this planned crime is somehow connected with his communicating the necessary information to his Chief, but all we learn relative to the means of the communication is that "the telephone directory gave [Yu Tsun] the name of the one person capable of passing on the information." Only in the last paragraph of the story do we learn that the crime is the murder of a man named Albert, whose elimination will signal to the Chief the necessity of eliminating the depot at Albert on the Ancre River. (This is, incidentally, a typical "fantastic" replacement of the inanimate [the name, a sign] by the animate [the unfortunate person who happens to bear the name].) Thus the name, not the man, is to communicate the spy's secret; the murder is a coded message, the solution of which hinges on a semantic notion, that of elimination, and a key word, the name, to express location.

Critical Essay #6

The second plot develops out of a coincidence, namely that the man named Albert, chosen by Yu Tsun as his victim-message, is a Sinologist who has solved the metaphysical mystery of the novel-labyrinth left by Yu Tsun's illustrious ancestor, Ts'ui Pen. The second plot is also a detective plot, though of a literary-critical nature, whose solution is also based on the decoding of a message. This message is Ts'ui Pen's will (just as the newspaper article on Albert's murder is in some sense Yu Tsun's will), which is decoded on the basis of the key word *time,* which Ts'ui Pen eliminated from his novel (just as the key word *Albert* was "eliminated" by proxy to insure the success of Yu Tsun's plan). The unique novel left by Ts'ui Pen, considered by posterity to be "a shapeless mass of contradictory drafts" and decoded by the ingenious Albert, is actually a symbolic labyrinth of time in which the various possible futures of the characters are depicted simultaneously. As Albert puts it:

"In all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of the others. In the almost unfathomable Ts'ui Pen, he chooses—simultaneously— all of them. He thus *creates* various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times. This is the cause of the contradictions in the novel. "Fang, let us say, has a secret. A stranger knocks at his door. Fang makes up his mind to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes. Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, both can be saved, both can die and so on and so on. In Ts'ui Pen's work all the possible solutions occur, each one being the point of departure for other bifurcations. Sometimes the pathways of the labyrinth converge. . . ."

This novel conception of narrative echoes Borges' own view of time, presented throughout his stories and essays, a view which stresses the cyclical nature of history and the concept of the Eternal Return, resulting in a negation of the concept of "individuality" and, on the literary side, the radical assumption that all authors are ultimately one, all texts forming the collective text of a universal and eternal Author. Borges' theories of time have been admirably discussed by various critics and need not detain us here, though one could note in passing that certain pronouncements of Yu Tsun are rephrasings of Borges' own statement on the subject. In terms of plot, however, it should be stressed that the metaphysical plot parallels the murder plot in abstract form: both involve messages to be decoded on the basis of the elimination of a key term. The fact that one message relates to a man's life and the other to a literary work immediately suggests a disturbing parallelism between the universe (the "real" plane) and the book (the "fictional" plane).

Critical Essay #7

Coincidence brings the two plots together, and the second is contained in the first just as the first is framed historically. The reader expects the second plot to illuminate the first (or at least have some direct bearing upon it) just as the first supposedly illuminates the historical event referred to in the framing paragraph of the opening. Actually, it does so only indirectly, on a different level, and thus again subversively. Before exploring the devices by which the first and second plot are linked, let us turn briefly to one of Borges' most famous theoretical statements on narrative, which is of relevance for an understanding of the overall structure of "The Garden. . . ."

In an essay on "Narrative Art and Magic," first published in Spanish in 1932 (i.e., before Borges began writing the stories in *Ficciones*) and only recently translated into English, Borges outlines a primitive typology of narrative alternatives. His statements refer primarily to the genre of the novel, but are actually of little critical use in approaching that domain; they read more like a manifesto for the future poetics of the short stories in *Ficciones* . The main problem of the novel for Borges is that of cause and effect, or the motivation of fictional events. He sees two possible approaches. The first, which typifies fiction of "the slow-moving psychological variety," is grounded in character and depends for its success on a chain of cause and effect which may be termed "naturalistic": it is "the incessant result of endless, uncontrollable [psychological] processes." This approach Borges finds wholly unacceptable: as he puts it, citing Mallarme in his support, "the pleasure of reading is in anticipation, and the ideal lies in suggestion." The psychological novel succeeds through a consistency of motivation which, for Borges, is as tiresome as it is predictable. The second approach he discusses is based on "magic," and in it, "—clear and de- fined—every detail is an omen and a cause." In defining magic, "that craft, or ambition, of early man," Borges quotes the general principle formulated by Sir James Frazer, "the Law of Sympathy, which assumes that 'things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy,' either because their form is similar (imitative, or homeopathic, magic) or because of a previous physical contact (contagious, or contact, magic)," or in more contemporary terms, through association based on similarity or contiguity (respectively metaphoric or metonymic relations). According to Borges, "the only possible integrity" for the novel is to be found in "narrative magic." The novel should be "a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes, and affinities." "Every episode in a painstaking piece of fiction," Borges writes, "prefigures something still to come."

It is not surprising that Borges supports his argument with references to the adventure novel, the detective story, and the "endless spectacular fictions made up in Hollywood." The first two, despite the primitiveness of many of their practitioners, offer manifold possibilities for intricate plotting, in which characters act as "functions" (much as they do in the folk tale) rather than as determiners of the action. The suppression of the psychological element in Borges may be regarded not merely as a philosophical and aesthetic reaction against "the psychologism bequeathed to us by the last century," as he puts it, but also as a reflection of a more general poetics of narrative. The emphasis on plot entails a reduction in the importance of character and necessitates a

concomitant increase in embedded, structurally significant details of description which prefigure the action and thus form a sort of "secret plot," to use Borges' term. In returning to "The Garden . . . ," one can see clearly how essential a role details play in cementing the two plots together in line with Borges' aesthetics of "anticipation" and "prefiguration." It is precisely the undercurrent of signification, the "secret plot" formed by connecting links between the two plots, which renders neither plot adequate in explaining the action and results in the disorienting "heterotopia" typical of Borges. The role of detail is most obvious on the level of imagery, where the emphasis on the circle reinforces the theory of cyclical time advanced in the metaphysical plot; as Ronald Christ has pointed out, "cyclical time is evinced in the portentous detail." On the level of plot Yu Tsun's meditation on his ancestor's labyrinth before meeting by "accident" the man who has solved its riddle—a meditation which would seem initially to be a mere "digression"—motivates the meeting with Albert, which does not in the least surprise Yu Tsun. Furthermore, as E. Rodriguez Monegal has shown, Yu Tsun's meditation actually anticipates on an intuitive level the intellectual solution later offered by Albert: "I thought of a maze of mazes, of a sinuous, ever growing maze *which would take in both past and future and would somehow involve the stars"* (italics mine). The details embodied in Albert's discussion of Ts'ui Pen's novel also serve to link the detective and metaphysical plots. In describing the novel's structure, besides the rather portentous example of the character Fang, a stranger, and a murder, Albert has recourse to an illustration based on the present situation, Yu Tsun's appearance at his house: "Sometimes the pathways of the labyrinth converge. For example, you come to this house; but in other possible pasts you are my enemy; in others my friend." And further:

" . . . your ancestor . . . believed in an infinite series of times in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favored me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very same words, but am an error, a phantom."

Yu Tsun replies: "In all of them . . . I deeply appreciate and am grateful to you for the restoration of Ts'ui Pen's garden." Albert's response, his last words before being assassinated by Yu Tsun, seem to reveal an intuition of his death at the spy's hands: "'Not in *all* ,' he murmured with a smile. 'Time is forever dividing itself toward innumerable futures and in one of them I am your enemy.'" In terms of the metaphysics of repetition, Albert's death may be interpreted as a reenactment of Ts'ui Pen's "assassination by a stranger" centuries before. Yu Tsun experiences the "pullulation" of past and future identities, a state in which he becomes an "abstract spectator" of his own life, which seems directed by a will other than his own. His last words to Albert, "The Future exists now . . . ," seem almost ironic. We are abruptly returned to the detective plot by the sudden appearance of Madden, whom Yu Tsun sees coming through the garden (as if emerging out of his vague hallucinations) to arrest him. The spy's enactment of his plan, the murder of Albert, occurs simultaneously on the level of the mundane causality of the detective plot and on that of the inscrutable causality of

the metaphysical; the moment of the murder is on the borderline between the "real" and the "fantastic."

The use of two plots, of a murder mystery and a metaphysical mystery which runs imperceptibly parallel and counter to it, is motivated by Borges' desire to upset any notion of plot understood as simple chronological causality, as well as the conception of reality which underlies such a notion. The disjunction of the two plots, the impossible distance which separates the realms to which each pertains, is so startling precisely because of their apparent and less obvious parallelisms. The two plots are connected with history through the framing device and make it (a potential model for plot in general) seem as fantastic as the time of Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth. The "delay" Yu Tsun has caused becomes more significant as having been the cause of his primal reenactment of Ts'ui Pen's assassination than it was in "real" history, and the total signifi- cance of the story is caught up in the unfathomable metaphysics of repetition. As one critic temptingly formulates it: "The labyrinth and the book are one and the same. But they are also something else as Borges insinuates—the universe."

Source: Stephen Rudy, "The Garden of and in Borges "Garden of Forking Paths,"' in *The Structural Analysis of Narrative Texts,* edited by Andrej Kodjak, Michael J. Connolly, pp. 132-144.

Adaptations

"The Garden of Forking Paths" was recorded on an audiocassette collection of Borges' stories titled *Selected Fictions.* The recording was made in 1998 by Penguin Audio Books, and is six hours long on four cassettes. Andrew Hurley and George Guidall read the stories.

Topics for Further Study

Stephen Albert cites Newton and Schopenhauer as he explains Ts'ui Pen's concept of time. Who are Newton and Schopenhauer? What do they have to say about the idea of time?

Chaos theory is a concept that has gained popularity in the scientific community. What is chaos theory? What is bifurcation theory? How do these ideas relate to "The Garden of Forking Paths" ?

Literary allusions are references within a story to other historical or literary figures, events, or objects. Try to identify at least five allusions in "The Garden of Forking Paths". Look up the allusions in a dictionary and/or encyclopedia. How does your understanding of the story change with your understanding of these allusions?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: World War II rages all over Europe as England, France and the Allied Powers fight Hitler's Nazi regime. When Japan bombs Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States enters the war on the side of the Allies.

Today: Although the decade is free of largescale war, several regional conflicts pose threats to world peace. Problems in the Middle East, in Africa, and in the Balkans force the United Nations to send troops around the world.

1940s: In Argentina, Juan Perón is elected to the presidency, but quickly becomes a dictator with the support of the military.

Today: After decades of repression—particularly of the press and intellectuals—Argentina moves toward a more open government with the return of a civilian government in the 1980s. The government puts forth a concerted effort to find the bodies of people who "disappeared" during the 1970s.

1940s: Building on the work of Albert Einstein and others, scientists build a cyclotron, which leads to the creation of the atomic bomb. Einstein's theory of relativity continues to be hotly debated, and Newtonian physics is displaced by quantum mechanics.

Today: Unified field theories, chaos theories, and nonlinear dynamics occupy mathematicians and physicists attempting to explain the nature of the universe.

1940s: Science fiction and fantasy literature become popular genres, particularly in North America. Pulp magazines such as John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* flourish.

Today: Science fiction and fantasy continue to generate wide readership. In addition, films such as the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* series attract large audiences.

1940s: Philosophical existentialism, developed in the works of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka, becomes an important movement. Existentialists believe that existence is of the greatest importance; however, an individual's understanding of him or herself as alone in the universe results in a sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and anxiety.

What Do I Read Next?

Detective Fiction, (1996) edited by James Robert Smith, offers a collection of classic detective stories, including Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders at the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter." The collection offers students a good opportunity to examine the genre closely.

Edited by Raymond Tostevin Bond, *The Man Who Was Chesteron: The Best Essays, Stories, Poems, and Other Writings of G.K. Chesterton* (1945) provides a glimpse into the man who influenced Borges.

Borges: A Life (1998), written by James Woodall, has been called by the *The New York Times Book Review* the best general biography of Borges available today. The writing is accessible and well-researched.

David Van Leer's edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *Selected Tales* (1998) also provides a good selection of mysteries from the master, including his famous detective stories.

Borges' *Labyrinths* (1962), edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, is an excellent translation of a collection of Borges' work. For the student interested in reading more of Borges' fantastic fictions, this is a good choice.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, editor. Jorge Luis Borges, New York: Chelsea House, 1986.

A collection of important critical essays, including the chapter-length essay, "Doubles and Counterparts: 'The Garden of Forking Paths'" by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan.

Lindstrom, Naomi. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Boston: Twayne, 1990.

Offers an introduction to Borges, as well as an interview, selected criticism, a chronology, and a bibliography.

Sorrentino, Fernando. *Seven Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges,* translated by Clark M. Zlotchew, Troy, NY: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1982.

A collection of seven interviews with Borges, considered to be among the best books of its kind. Includes a helpful appendix identifying personalities mentioned by Borges.

Weissert, Thomas P. "Representation and Bifurcation: Borges' Garden of Chaos Dynamics, " in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science,* edited by N, Katherine Hayles. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 223-43.

Provides an interesting account of chaos and bifurcation theory in lay terms. Weissert uses the theories to demonstrate Borges' fundamental determinism and modernism, as opposed to chaotic postmodernism. A good choice for the advanced student interested in both literature and science.

Woodall, James. *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges,* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996.

An accessible biography of Borges. Includes photographs and bibliography as well as a listing of films based on Borges' work.

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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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