

Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings Short Guide

Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings by Jorge Luis Borges

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Characters

The Borgesian narratives are full of odd characters from all periods of history and from all nations. Some are famous, such as Averroes, some are not. And when history does not provide sufficient samples, he creates his own. Their uniqueness is often caused by a particular obsession or event.

Once they are possessed by a curiosity or a need to know, however, they no longer behave in ways that are comprehensible to the rest of society. It is as if the rules of the universe become suspended while the characters go in pursuit of their particular truth.

Labyrinths, it must be pointed out, contains the only short story written by Borges with a female protagonist, "Emma Zunz." It is the tale of a murder committed by a young woman to avenge her father's suicide. Here the gender of the main character is not especially significant; what is important is the irony of the situation: although she admits to having killed her victim, she is declared innocent.

Several critics have suggested that many of the protagonists of Borges's tales are individual manifestations of the author himself. In "The Library of Babel," for example, the first person narrator could easily be Borges using his experiences as a librarian and constructing an elaborate metaphor for the 2305 universe based on a library building and books in many tongues no one can decipher. In "Pierre Menard," the character's wish to write a masterpiece that already exists coincides with Borges's assessment of his own originality and creativity.



Social Concerns

Borges's fiction, many critics agree, reflects the author's interest in cerebral games and puzzles rather than in human emotions and relationships. His characters, on the whole, are not individuals with whom a casual reader might readily empathize and identify.

Borgesian protagonists find themselves in situations and circumstances unlikely to occur to most people; his universes are inhabited by creatures whose experiences — though at times rather routine — almost always lead to unexpected or problematic ends. He also offers little certainty, no solutions, and much paradox. And although some of his stories follow a conventional plot line and are written in perfectly simple, straightforward language, they always surprise.

One of the best known narratives in this collection "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," originally published in *Ficciones* (1944), recreates a completely imaginary universe of ordered symmetry where nouns do not exist in the language, and where objects disappear as soon as they are forgotten. This world, constructed along purely ideal forms, however, eventually intrudes into the real world, and society lets it in. Ideological constructs such as Marxism, anti-Semitism, and Nazism are, to the author, manifestations of this intrusion.

In "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" Borges forwards the possibility that Menard, his pompous yet learned protagonist, has written Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), not a separate version of the book but the identical one. This tale serves to highlight Borges's often quoted opinion that no writer — or artist — is an original creator but rather someone who reworks what already exists.

As these examples illustrate, Borges's choice of topics and situations is relevant to the human experience on a philosophical rather than a psychological or sociological plane. He deals with mental constructs and examines the limits to which one can extend them, given not only the constraints of the mind, but also the imperfections and foibles of individual representatives of mankind.

Techniques

Borges often stated that he was unable to write novels. He preferred the short narrative form, and he excelled at it. In fact, his stories are models of narrative style, less for his skill at character development and detail than for their power and impact on the reader. He accomplishes this in spite of the most economical use of language. It is rare for one of his pieces to exceed ten pages; some of the more memorable are less than five. Borges the narrator relies on a few important techniques.

In stories where there is a protagonist, the reader might learn his name, his age, and perhaps one or two details about his life. It is the person's mind and his reaction to a particular circumstance that propel the plot of the story.

This circumstance might be a certifiable historical event as easily as it might be a fabricated one. Both are treated equally and are assigned the same importance. Borges' penchant for writing about fictional events as if they were real — and vice versa — makes many of his tales seem more like essays and learned treatises than imaginative stories. He often includes footnotes, editor's and translator's notes, and other scholarly clarifications to introduce another interpretive level and add to the perplexity of the reader.

Themes

Several important themes are developed in this rich collection of stories.

One is the theme of idealism, revealing Borges as a disciple of the philosophical systems constructed by Berkeley and Hume — among others — that assert that ideas are the only true measure of reality and that objects are nothing but imperfect and transitory images. In the universe of "Tlon," a perfect idealist construct, objects do not exist outside the idea of their existence.

Another theme, that of the interplay between reason and the absurd, appears in several stories in which man attempts to understand reality around him by conceiving of a world according to his own sense of the perfect form. Invariably this universe, as in "The Library of Babel," is just as — if not more — paradoxical and labyrinthian as reality: its mysteries as secret and obscure, its custodians as ignorant, and its limits as endless. The quest for full understanding and perfection therefore, leads one into the world of the absurd.

A third related theme is that of the nature of knowledge, exemplified by the omniscient Ireneo, the protagonist of "Funes the Memorious." When a hapless farm boy falls off a horse, the fall causes him to develop extraordinary mental powers; he is able to recall all his experiences to the slightest, most irrelevant detail. The fall paralyzes him, literally and figuratively. He is injured and loses all mobility. At the same time his prodigious memory leads to excessive knowledge which, in turn, traps him, engaging his mind in trivial endeavors and making it as useless as his body.

One last theme is time, its confusing nature, and the difficulty of drawing clear lines between present, past and future. Its mysteries are eloquently portrayed in "The Secret Miracle" when Hladik the Jewish protagonist, about to be shot by a Nazi firing squad, receives a one-year reprieve from God, time he requests to finish a play. His wish is granted the instant the final order to shoot is given. Happily, Hladik has enough time to finish his work.

Literary Precedents

Borges was an erudite and voracious reader. His intellectual interests were wide and far reaching. He was a student of the Kabala, Oriental and preSocratic philosophy, medieval thought, and Icelandic literature. Insights from his investigations often made their way into his creative writing, giving it a learned and austere tone. He was also an admirer of Edgar Allan Poe and G. K. Chesterton, whose mystery and detective stories Borges emulated, and of H. G. Wells's scientific fiction.



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