The Pursuer Study Guide

The Pursuer by Julio Cortázar

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Introduction

In 1959, the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar published a short story entitled "El Perseguidor" ("The Pursuer") that vividly brought to life the bebop scene of 1950s Paris. Taking the final months in the life of the prodigious jazz musician Johnny Carter as its subject, the story is in many ways an exploration of the career and personal life of the famous alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, the most influential musician of the style of jazz music known as bebop. "The Pursuer" offers a glimpse into Johnny's personal life, from his severe drug addiction and psychological instability to his profound philosophical insights, and it follows the key moments of Johnny's relationship with his biographer and critic Bruno, the narrator of the story.

With its daring narrative structure, which uses shifting verb tenses as a way of reinforcing its challenging conception of time and philosophy, Cortázar's short story is clearly the work of a talented and ambitious writer. By the time he published his early short stories, such as "The Pursuer" in Paris, Cortázar had begun to establish himself among an international community of innovative writers. His depiction of the tensions between the critic and the artist, the theme of pursuit in art and life, and newly emerging philosophies of time and space, have earned "The Pursuer" a place among the classic texts of post—World War II literature. The story was originally published in the collection *Las Armas Secretas* (*The Secret Weapons*), but Paul Blackburn's translation from the Spanish became available in *End of the Game and Other Stories*, published by Random House in 1963.

Author Biography

The Pursuer: Julio Cortázar [graphic graphicname="TIF00039776" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Julio Cortázar was born in Belgium in 1914 and raised by his mother in a suburb of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Throughout his youth he developed a passion for classic literature, but he was forced because of his family's financial situation to drop out of the University of Buenos Aires after one year and become a teacher. He continued to read foreign literature and published a book of sonnets entitled *Presencia* (*Presence*) in 1938, under the pen name Julio Denis. In 1944 he took a post teaching French literature at the University of Cuyo in Mendoza. After his imprisonment for participating in demonstrations against the Argentine president Juan Perón in 1946, Cortázar resigned his teaching position and began working for a publishing company in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, Cortázar completed a course in public translation so rapidly that it led to neuroses, which (the author later noted) were reflected in the short stories he wrote during this period.

Cortázar published his first collection of short stories, *Bestiario* (*Bestiary*), and was awarded a scholarship to study in Paris in 1951. He left Argentina for Paris, where he resided for the rest of his life, in part because of political pressure that Perón was placing on the Argentine literary elite. Continuing to travel frequently throughout the world, however, Cortázar frequently gave lectures advocating social change in Latin America, and he remained an active socialist and human rights advocate throughout his life. In 1953, he married another translator, Aurora Bernández, whom he divorced after many years. Later in his life, he married the Canadian writer Carol Dunlap.

An extremely prolific poet, novelist, essayist, and short story writer, Cortázar produced early in his career the short story "Axolotl," a story about a man who is turned into a salamander, as well as "The Pursuer," which is not magical or mythical but challenges the reader's understanding of time. In 1963, the author published his most famous novel, *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), which employs a revolutionary narrative structure by way of chapters that are not read in chronological order but can be skipped through in at least two coherent sequences. Cortázar's later writings range widely in theme, from fantasy to political commentary to meditations on reality and perception. He died of leukemia and heart disease in Paris on February 12, 1984, three years after becoming a French citizen.

Plot Summary

After a dedication to "Ch. P.," which stands for Charlie Parker, a quote from the final book of the New Testament, and a quote from the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, "The Pursuer" opens with its narrator Bruno entering a trashed Paris hotel room. Inside, in "worse shape than usual," sits his friend about whom he has written a biography, the prodigious jazz musician Johnny Carter, and his current girlfriend Dédée. Johnny is recovering from another bout of heavy drinking and drug use, he has once again lost his sax, and he is in a bad mood. While the three of them drink rum and coffee, Johnny talks about time, one of his "manias," or intense obsessions, using the subway and an elevator as examples of time not working in a rational way.

Bruno tells Johnny that he will get him another sax and gets ready to leave, but while Bruno is saying goodbye to Dédée Johnny throws off the blanket that was covering his naked body. After giving Dédée some money and telling her not to let Johnny shoot up heroin before his first concert, Bruno leaves feeling grateful that Johnny would no longer make him see what he "didn't want to see."

Two or three days later, Bruno visits Tica, or "the marquesa," a rich friend and sometime lover of Johnny, to find out if she has been giving him heroin, or "junk." She is talking with two musicians, Art Boucaya and Marcel Gavoty, who are excited because of Johnny's excellent recording session with them on the previous day. Although Tica made up with Johnny at the recording session, Bruno discovers that she had gotten into a fight with him two months earlier, so it must have been Dédée that has been giving him heroin. Then Johnny arrives, in "great shape" (with a moderate amount of drugs in his system) and optimistic about the concert that night.

Next comes a brief section of Bruno's thoughts during the intermission of that night's concert, about Johnny and the music he uses "to explore himself, to bite into the reality that escapes every day." Then, four or five days later, Bruno finds out from Art Boucaya that Johnny had refused to play more than two songs at a recording session and started talking obsessively about funeral urns. Bruno delays going to see him until the next day, but he finds out in the police reports the next morning that Johnny set his hotel room on fire and escaped, running naked through the halls. Bruno is not able to get into the hospital where Johnny is under observation until Dédée calls him five days later to say that Johnny wants to see him.

Johnny is emaciated, or extremely thin from illness, but his temperature is normal, and he talks to Bruno about his visions of fields with urns that contain the ashes of dead people, as well as his conviction that the doctors and scientists that are so sure of themselves do not understand the world at all. He uses the example of cutting a loaf of bread, which he cannot understand because it seems that the bread must change into something else when he touches it or cuts it. Then Johnny falls asleep and Bruno observes that Johnny is not a genius "walk[ing] in the clouds," but a man more real than anyone else.

When Bruno goes with Art and Dédée to listen to the two songs Johnny recorded before this breakdown, he finds "terrible beauty" in the song *Amorous*, despite the deficiencies that led Johnny to demand that the engineer destroy the recording. Bruno then receives a call from Tica who says that Johnny's youngest daughter, Bee, has died in Chicago. Bruno goes to Johnny's hotel room and listens to Johnny explode about his friends keeping the recording of *Amorous*.

Bruno next sees Johnny while sitting at a cafe with Tica and Baby Lennox, another woman who adores Johnny. Tica goes over to deal with Johnny while Bruno flirts with Baby and finds out from two musicians in Johnny's new group that Johnny is "barely able to play anything." Suddenly, Johnny gets up, kneels at Bruno's feet, and cries for his daughter; and everyone in the cafe stares at them until Tica gets him to sit down. After everyone else leaves, Johnny and Bruno walk to the Seine River, and Bruno asks him about his biography, which has just been translated from French into English. Johnny says he liked it but there are things missing.

Considering his decision not to include Johnny's psychological and physical abnormalities and illnesses in the biography, Bruno asks him again about the book and Johnny responds, "what you forgot to put in is me." Before finally going to the hotel, Johnny speaks to Bruno about how the biography misses the point of Johnny and his music, and how once he, Johnny, came close to getting to "the other side of the door," when he was playing and looking at his ex-wife Lan's red dress, and how he doesn't believe in God.

Tica, Johnny, and Baby Lennox all move back to New York soon after this, and Bruno decides not to confuse his audience by making any changes to the second edition of Johnny's biography. Bruno then receives a telegram from Baby Lennox saying that Johnny has died. Bruno finds out that he was at Tica's place and likely died of a severe drug overdose. Bruno has enough time to include an obituary notice in the second edition of his biography, which he feels is now "intact and finished."

Characters

Bee

Johnny's youngest daughter with Lan, Bee dies of pneumonia in Chicago. Her death is quite a blow to Johnny, who later says about his music: "What I'm playing is Bee dead."

Dr. Bernard

Dr. Bernard, whom Johnny calls a "sad-assed idiot," is the physician taking care of Johnny in Paris.

Art Boucaya

Art is a musician, perhaps a bassist, and a friend of Johnny. Bruno calls him a "teahead," or a marijuana smoker, and he sometimes feels sorry for him because Johnny has let him down in Paris. Bruno also recognizes that, like Tica and Dédée, Art takes advantage of Johnny. Like Johnny, Art is from the United States, and he has had "conversations with his agent about going back to New York as soon as possible."

Bruno

Bruno is a prestigious music critic who has recently published a very successful biography of Johnny. The narrator of the story, he is a Parisian intellectual who, although he is close friends with Johnny and the jazz crowd, does not take drugs or mix in much with their social life. Bruno is like Johnny's lovers, friends, and fellow musicians who exploit Johnny for their own devices, since Bruno's book and much of his career is founded on Johnny's genius. Yet Bruno seems to be the only person aware that he is doing this, and Bruno also (as becomes clear while he is listening to *Amorous*) understands Johnny's music, as well as his obsessions and philosophies, better than any of the other characters. Indeed, Bruno seems to understand more about Johnny's real self than anyone else, which is perhaps why Johnny considers him such a great friend.

Bruno's relationship with Johnny is quite complex. Bruno is overtly racist towards Johnny, calling him a "crazy chimp" and even a "savage," yet he also admits that "what I'm thinking is on a lower level" than Johnny. Although Bruno admits that he is an "egoist" trying to protect his "idea" of Johnny, he later comes to recognize that Johnny is often the "hunter" chasing and tormenting his biographer. Also, Bruno is one of the people who is always taking care of Johnny and giving him what he needs. However, by the end of the story, Johnny's combination of intriguing and tormenting Bruno results in Bruno's refusal to include Johnny's complex personal life in the second edition of the biography.

Johnny Carter

A prodigious jazz saxophonist and one of the great talents of his time, Johnny Carter is the main subject of the story. His character is closely based on the famous bebop musician Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, and, like Parker, Johnny is a heroin addict and an alcoholic with severe psychological illnesses. He has abandoned his wife, children, and an unknown number of other lovers, he continually loses or sells his saxophone, he fails to come to performances or refuses to play while there, he has a tendency to be suicidal, and it is sometimes necessary to confine him to a psychiatric hospital because he is a danger to himself or other people. But Johnny is also a unique genius whose understanding of life and psychological problems are inextricably connected to his philosophical and artistic insights.

These insights, expressed in Johnny's monologues to Bruno and his other friends, tend to have much in common with some of the new philosophical theories of the 1950s. The most pronounced of Johnny's obsessions is time, which confounds him because he sees that it is not a linear or collective phenomenon. This relates to the rhythmic innovations of his music and the fact that he is a "pursuer" or "hunter," which Bruno sees as a desperate struggle to find a crack in the "door" and discover a new way of thinking about the world.

Although Johnny often disappoints his friends and family, he is also a person who is almost universally revered and admired. His genius (although Bruno insists that he is not a "genius") is in the combination of his personal life, his music, and his philosophical theories, and Bruno's racist caricature of him as a "chimpanzee who wants to learn to read" also, ironically, suggests that he is struggling to evolve and understand things that his species, the human race, has not understood before. Johnny is ahead of his time, struggling to reach a new level of existence, and normal society, including his biographer Bruno, is ultimately unable to accept or understand him.

Miles Davis

Confusing reality with fiction, Bruno mentions an interview with Miles Davis, the famous jazz trumpeter who played with Charlie Parker during the peak of his career in New York. Davis was, together with Parker, one of the most influential jazz musicians of the bebop era. During his climactic discussion with Bruno near the end of the story, Johnny refers to playing with Davis when "the door open[ed] a little bit," and he found, or nearly found, what he was looking for.

Dédée

Dédée is Johnny's girlfriend who lives with him during most of "The Pursuer," although she stays behind in Paris when he moves to New York. By the time the story begins, she is already quite worn down by Johnny and the lifestyle they lead. Finding the red dress she is wearing during the opening scene repulsive, Bruno notices that she has

"gotten older." She later reveals that she is jealous of Tica. Bruno originally hopes that Dédée will refuse to let Johnny abuse heroin, but it appears that she shoots up with him frequently. Nevertheless, Dédée is constantly taking care of Johnny when he is sick and seems quite devoted to him, although she becomes "happily settled" with a trombonist after he goes to New York.

Delaunay

Delaunay is from Paris and seems to be a manager or producer of some kind, since he runs things in the studio but does not play an instrument.

Marcel Gavoty

Marcel is Johnny's friend and fellow musician, likely a trumpet player from the United States. He enjoys joking with Tica, and he takes away Johnny's saxophone after a recording session so Johnny does not sell or destroy it. Bruno feels that Marcel, like Art, fails to understand Johnny as well as he does.

Lan

Lan is Johnny's wife, although they seem to have been separated for a long time. She lives in Chicago with her daughter Bee, who dies of pneumonia. During Johnny's description of the moment when, as he was playing a solo, "time" began to "open out," he remembers Lan's red dress, and he also tells Bruno that Lan's red dress is one of the things Johnny's biography is "missing." Nevertheless, Johnny seems to have abandoned Lan, as he has abandoned many people.

Baby Lennox

The twenty-year-old beauty that goes back to New York with Johnny at the end of the story, Baby is one of Johnny's admirers. Bruno calls her stupid and promiscuous, but she seems to know how to handle Johnny despite Bruno's suspicion that she would readily shoot up heroin and become "lost" with him.

The Marquesa

See Tica

Pepe Ramírez

Pepe is the musician who talks with Art and Delaunay about Lester Young, the alto saxophonist that was Charlie Parker's hero when he was growing up, in the hotel after Johnny learns that his daughter died.

Tica

Although her name is Tica, Bruno often refers to Johnny's friend and sometime lover, the wife (now separated) of a marquis, as "The Marquesa." Tica met Johnny in New York, when he was just beginning to create a sensation in the jazz world, and immediately admired him. Since then she has given him money, sometimes slept with him, shot up heroin with him, and used her unique ability to calm him down and provide comfort when he has needed it. Tica is both an enabler for Johnny's drug addiction, since she is the person who most frequently supplies him with heroin, and a sophisticated and generous friend that often saves him in social situations.

Two months before the opening of "The Pursuer," Johnny had a falling-out with Tica, which is why Bruno is the one to pay for a new saxophone when Johnny loses his on the metro. But Johnny "makes up" with her during a recording session, and they remain close until the end of the story, when they both leave Paris for New York. In many ways, Tica's character is based on the Baroness Pannonica ("Nica") de Koenigswarter, a benefactor and socialite who befriended and financially supported many jazz musicians, including Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. Like Tica, Nica separated from her rich husband because of "dope and other, similar, reasons," and moved to New York and then Paris in pursuit of the bebop scene. She became quite famous, or infamous, after Parker died in her New York luxury apartment from complications due to drug and alcohol abuse.

Themes

Pursuit

As is clear from the title and the frequent speculation about who is "hunting" whom in the short story, Cortázar is very interested in the concept of both ideological and personal pursuit. Bruno's entire career is, in a sense, based on "pursuing" Johnny and Johnny's musical talent. He helps Johnny, in part, in order to make sure that his biography is successful, and he tries to keep Johnny off of drugs, in part, so that Johnny will remain famous for his music and not for his incredibly complex psychology, which Bruno's biography completely omits. As Bruno admits, "we're a bunch of egotists; under the pretext of watching out for Johnny what we're doing is protecting our idea of him." He is trying, as the critic, to confine and limit Johnny in order to pursue what Johnny's music means to him and his readers.

Bruno later suggests, however, that the theme of pursuit is more complex than this. When he states that Johnny "is the critic of us all," and that "Johnny pursues and is not pursued," Bruno is highlighting the fact that Johnny is not simply the prey of a critic like Bruno, a friend like Art, or a lover like Baby or Dédée. Johnny pursues a new definition and realm of possibility in art, and he pursues his friends as well; in his struggle to find what he is looking for with his prodigious music, he hunts and exposes his friends' weaknesses. Bruno admits that he is haunted by what Johnny reveals about his own failures and unhappiness and especially his "prestige," and he feels sorry for Art because Art could not succeed in Paris without Johnny. Although Bruno seems to have less sympathy for the women in Johnny's life, in many ways they seem to be hunted intensely, since Johnny has a tendency to abandon them once he has successfully caught them.

Cortázar uses these relationships and instances of pursuit in order to comment about more general themes. For example, one of his chief interests is in the relationship between the critic and the artist; critics like Bruno must pursue and clarify the truth or the nature of the artist so that the art itself can be comprehended. Critics are very often, like Bruno, successful in identifying key traits of the artwork while finding that some aspects of the artist and his/her work remain impenetrable. Similarly, artists like Johnny are constantly engaged in pursuing some of the basic values and assumptions of a society, trying desperately to open the door to a new understanding of the world. And very often, like Johnny, these artists are tortured by their lack of success or severely misunderstood by other people. Finally, the friendships and sexual relationships in Cortázar's story suggest that there is a common theme of hopelessness and inability to connect between lovers and friends in pursuit of one another.

Time and Metaphysics

Although Bruno has a tendency to dismiss Johnny's discussions of time after he is finished talking with him, these speculations are central to "The Pursuer." The story consistently questions the notion that time is linear or collective, and it often suggests that Johnny may not be crazy at all, but absolutely right about some or all of his convictions. In fact, many of his obsessive rants relate to some of the most pressing philosophical issues of the post—World War II era, particularly in the area of metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the "nature of reality." For example, Johnny's description of the realization that he is looking at himself in the mirror may relate to the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan's theory of an infant's self-recognition during the "mirror stage." Also, Johnny's insistence that touching or cutting a loaf of bread "changes" it may be a reference to the influential idea that an observer cannot interact with the natural world without altering its properties—an idea used to support theories that it is impossible to make objective claims about the world.

Since Johnny is principally an artist and not a philosopher, Cortázar seems to be suggesting that art is somehow connected to this new understanding of time and metaphysics. As Bruno admits, Johnny's moments of true artistic genius, as reflected in the recording of *Amorous*, occur not when he is technically accurate but when he is most desperately fighting against convention and searching for an "outlet" in time and existence. Charlie Parker was perhaps most famous for his innovations with rhythm and musical time, and bebop music is an appropriate metaphor for Cortázar's theme because it uniquely stretches the boundaries of the commonly accepted understanding of time.

Race

Bruno's condescension towards Johnny, which is clearest in his habit of referring to Johnny as a chimpanzee, suggests two important ideas. First, it emphasizes that Bruno uses racism as a way of dealing with his insecurity around Johnny. Bruno can feel better about himself and his "prestige" by convincing himself that because Johnny is a black man his "mental age does not permit him to understand" the biography's profundity. Second, the racism in the short story allows Cortázar to suggest that art critics make false judgments about racial inferiority, especially in such a black-dominated medium as bebop music, in order to convince themselves that the art form is simple and straightforward. The author may be suggesting that such racist judgments and simplifications are delusional.

Style

Verb Tenses

The most important stylistic technique of "The Pursuer" is its unique use of past, present, and future verb tenses to narrate the story. Bruno does not follow any commonly accepted standard of dramatic unity or narrative structure and insists on using awkward verb structures. He most frequently uses the present perfect verb tense, a verb form that is usually used to discuss events that happened at an uncertain point between the past and present. "Dédée has called," "I have gone," and "We have recognized," are examples of the present perfect tense translated literally from the opening paragraphs of the story, and they suggest how the persistent use of this verb tense challenges the distinction between past and present.

It is vital to recognize the distinction between the literal Spanish version of the verb usage in "The Pursuer" and the version presented by the translator. The above quotes are not identical to the translation by Paul Blackburn, for example, and Doris Sommer suggests in her article "Pursuing a Perfect Present," that this is because the translator "refuses to respect the redundant awkwardness" of Cortázar's language. Blackburn's translation does shift into different tenses, but it avoids the repetitive use of the present tense of "haber," or "to have," ("he, has, ha, hemos, han") that is so striking in the original Spanish.

Cortázar has at least two reasons for employing this unique mode of storytelling. The first, as Sommer argues, is to imitate the improvisational genius of Charlie Parker's bebop music. Parker, like Johnny, was able to move in and out of normal understandings of time and rhythm in order to create an entirely new understanding of music. Also, the story's use of verb tenses reinforces Cortázar's questions on the nature of time and metaphysics (see above), as well as the relationship of these questions to art, music, and storytelling.

Biographical Fiction

Johnny Carter's character is in many ways meant to refer to the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. In fact, the details of Johnny's life, including the years of his travels, his drug habits, his musical style, and his relationship with a rich friend and benefactor, suggest that Johnny may actually represent Charlie Parker. But "The Pursuer" uses a fictional medium to approach the famous jazz musician, and Johnny is presented as a fictional character, so in this sense the story is not strictly biographical fiction, but fiction inspired by real persons and events. As Cortázar makes clear by describing Bruno's biography of Johnny, telling the story of a person's life in the format of a biography often fails to actually capture someone's life. But the fictional dramatization of loosely biographical material reveals Cortázar's experimentation with a new and better way of recording the essence of a real person.

Historical Context

Bebop and Charlie Parker

Jazz began in the early years of the twentieth century as a combination of Western classical music and African American folk and blues music. Musicians such as Louis Armstrong soon became extremely popular with both white and black audiences, and by the time the "big band" era peaked in the 1930s, jazz was the mainstream music of the United States. Many black musicians began to be dissatisfied with the strict forms of big band or "swing" music during the 1940s, however, and bands with a new sound known as "bebop" began to earn a reputation because of their radical rhythms and experimental tonality.

Bebop bands were notable for their new style and distinct instrumentation, which they soon found worked better in small ensembles; they also were associated with a number of wider artistic and cultural movements, particularly after the big band era came to an end. Bebop was the musical form of the late 1940s and 1950s American and European counterculture; it occupied a very different political and racial climate, and it tended to be associated with artists, intellectuals, and big cities. Instead of mainstream dance music played in ballrooms and large restaurants, bebop music became associated with smoky nightclubs and musicians that ignored their audiences. Dixieland jazz and swing musicians such as Armstrong were so popular among whites, and made such an effort to please their white critics, that they developed a reputation among some black musicians as "Uncle Toms"□a label from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that was used to describe servile or accommodating blacks. Black bebop musicians, although they were popular with many whites, were often antagonistic to critics and had little interest in being a part of popular culture.

The most famous of the early bebop bands were those of Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie, and their popularity was in no small part due to the fact that they had hired an alto saxophonist from Kansas named Charlie Parker. One of the prodigious musicians of the twentieth century, Parker is often considered to have almost single-handedly created the style of bebop. Parker, later known as "Bird" or "Yardbird" throughout the jazz world, grew up in an abusive family and developed severe drug habits by the time he dropped out of school at fifteen. Although he never learned music formally, he practiced the alto saxophone constantly, emulated the tenor saxophonist Lester Young, and played in various groups in Kansas City, Chicago, and New York. In 1942 he made his first recordings, in 1944 he joined Billy Eckstine's band, and by 1945 he had changed jazz music forever.

Parker suffered a number of major breakdowns, due to his psychological illnesses and drug addictions, and spent a six-month term in a state hospital in 1946. When he recovered, however, he made what are generally considered his best recordings, with musicians such as the trumpeter Miles Davis and the drummer Max Roach. Parker's 1949 debut in Paris was a tremendous success, and during the following five years he

met with a mix of triumphs and disastrous failures due to his personal problems. In 1955, after traveling back to New York City, Parker had an ulcer attack in the room of his friend and benefactor Baroness "Nica" Ponnonica de Koenigswarter and died three days later of complications due to heroin and alcohol abuse.

The Hispanic Avant-garde

Like Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine author famous for his innovations in literature following the modernist movement, Cortázar was a member of a diverse group of writers and intellectuals known as "avant-garde" because of their departure from previous artistic styles and philosophies. Borges was already famous by the time Cortázar began writing, and he was a major influence over his countryman; in fact, Borges was the publisher of Cortázar's first short stories. Cortázar acknowledged this influence, particularly regarding Borges's challenging narratives, which resist traditional, linear understandings of time and space, and his interest in "intertextuality," the process by which texts refer not to the natural world or actual ideas, but solely to other texts.

While Borges was instrumental in the early development of some of these themes, Cortázar was one of the younger Hispanic avant-garde who were beginning their careers during the time when postmodernist ideas were in great vogue. In the years following World War II, French critical theorists such as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan were publishing their most influential theories, and the literary and cultural elite were rapidly moving away from the standards of modernism. While modernist writings tend to stress the unity of the work of art and frequently employ allegorical representation, postmodernist texts often call into question the very possibility of representation and highlight metaphysical problems, or problems that relate to the "nature of reality."

Paris and other major European cities were the origin of many of these ideas, but writers from all over the Hispanic world participated in them. One important new style that flowered in the 1940s and 1950s and was particularly Latin American in origin was "magical realism," or a fusion of fantasy and myth with realistic fiction. Like other writers of the Latin American avant-garde, Cortázar had a complex relationship with his home country of Argentina; Buenos Aires was never lost in his fiction and, on the contrary, became more important in much of his later writing. But he became associated with an international elite, and he never actually lived in Argentina after his departure for Paris in 1951.

Postwar Politics in France and Latin America

The 1950s was a decade of great turmoil in the French colonial world, as well as a decade of major political changes in the Hispanic world. By 1954, France had finally lost a costly war in colonial Indochina, and in 1958 a rebellion in Algeria by a combination of colonials and militarists effectively toppled the French government, resulting in Charles de Gaulle being called back to power as president of France. Meanwhile, in 1955, a

military-civilian uprising in Argentina had overthrown President Perón (against whom Cortázar had protested) and begun a series of dictatorships. And the Cuban socialist revolution in 1959 was extremely influential over the left-wing Hispanic elite. These political events deeply influenced Cortázar, but their effect on the Parisian social world depicted in "The Pursuer" is unclear.

Critical Overview

Cortázar was not yet very well known when he published "The Pursuer" in 1959, and the story met with mixed reactions in the press. Stanley Kauffman, for example, called the story "outstandingly the worst [in *End of the Game, and Other Stories*]: a juvenile and crude story," in his *New Republic* review of the English translation, although Kauffman praised the other stories in the collection. As Cortázar developed a reputation as a masterful and influential writer, however, the story's reputation benefited, and it came to be considered one of his classic texts.

The Pursuer: Charlie Parker, seen here in 1945 at Billy Bergs Club in Hollywood, California, is the basis for the character Johnny Carter in Cortázar's "The Pursuer" [graphic graphicname="TIF00167387" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Some critical analyses of "The Pursuer" have tended to focus on its portrayal of Charlie Parker and bebop music, as well as its theme of the relationship between the artist and the critic. Robert W. Felkel, for example, suggests in his article "The Historical Dimension in Julio Cortázar's 'The Pursuer'" that Charlie Parker's life corresponds in almost every way to that of Johnny Carter. Other critics, such as Doris Sommer in her essay "Pursuing a Perfect Present," discuss the relationship of the critic and the artist as it relates to the story's innovations in narrative structure: "Bruno needs the unfettered genius as the featured subject of an academic career and the catalyst for his own probing performance, while Johnny needs Bruno's sensible attentions in order to survive."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell explores the ways in which Cortázar's short story is a breakthrough in literary style and discusses how it reflects some of the new philosophies and artistic theories of the 1950s.

In her essay "Pursuing a Perfect Present," Doris Sommer observes that Cortázar's linguistic style in "The Pursuer," including his repetitive use of the present perfect verb tense and his tendency to rapidly and often vaguely switch between the past, present, and future tenses, is partly a method of capturing the style of bebop music. Cortázar, himself a great fan of bebop, is clearly interested in applying some of the musical form's most important innovations to a literary context. He recognizes that the "terrible beauty" of a song like *Amorous* is an important artistic development, and his language is an attempt to translate the sense of this style into the form of a short story.

But this unique style is more than simply an emulation of bebop; it is a method of expressing a variety of philosophical and intellectual concepts for which bebop music serves as an excellent metaphor. Cortázar was part of a group of international artists and intellectuals who, in the years following World War II, were experimenting with new forms of expression and attempting to develop unique forms of art. The members of this group did not have a common agenda, and they did not necessarily employ a similar style, but they were often, like Cortázar, living in Paris and exploring new approaches to time, structure, and metaphysics in their writings. Influenced by postmodern theorists such as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, they were largely dissatisfied both with the conventions of the modernist era and the mainstream culture of their time. "The Pursuer" is a prime example of a postmodern story that departs from such conventions and envisions artistic creation as a multi-layered and ultimately futile attempt to access a vague goal such as "reality."

With a growing reputation as a radical thinker and writer, Cortázar was quite self-conscious about the ways in which his fiction departed from previous forms. As the title of the story suggests, he is interested in the idea of a "pursuer," which could refer to any number of characters, seeking a variety of goals. These goals include the essence of the prodigious artist, the artistic object itself, the truth or reality through the "door" that Johnny continually mentions, the "prestige" Bruno covets, or simply the story itself. But one thing that the pursuers all have in common is a difficult and frustrating desire to achieve their goals. For Cortázar, the attempt to find this goal has much in common with one of Johnny's solos or one of his obsessive conundrums about time□which frustrate Johnny so thoroughly that he cries and shakes and goes over the edge.

In order to accentuate this theme, Cortázar has erected a number of barriers and layers in the story that lie between the pursuer and the pursued, and the reader continually confronts obstacles while attempting to discern what is actually happening. Indeed, one of the most important "pursuers" is the reader of the story, hunting through the text in order to discover its meaning. The layers between the outside observer and the inner

reality and the distinct reading experience involved in sifting through these layers in order to find meaning are the chief innovations of "The Pursuer."

One of the first barriers the reader encounters, as well as one of the most important, is the divide between the fictional world of the story and the real world of the 1950s Parisian bebop scene, particularly the real life of Charlie Parker. Cortázar dedicates his story to Parker's memory and, as Robert Felkel argues in his article "The Historical Dimension in Julio Cortázar's 'The Pursuer,'" very few details of Johnny's life deviate from Parker's. However, while the reader naturally imagines that the story is an exploration of Parker's personal life, the entirely fictional pose of "The Pursuer" nevertheless prevents the reader from feeling as though he/she is actually pursuing the real bebop master. It is as though Cortázar dangles the actual biographical interest in front of the reader, suggesting that he is capturing Johnny's "me" as Bruno's biography cannot, yet refusing to completely remove the veil of a fiction. One of the most disorienting examples of this practice is the fact that Miles Davis, the famous jazz trumpeter who played with Parker, is a character mentioned in the story.

Cortázar's use of the traditional, analytical critic Bruno as the filter through whom the reader hears about Johnny's life is another example of an obstacle to the source of the reader's intrigue. Bruno's narration, which eventually falls into a clear past tense during the last section, continues to remind the reader that the critical and biographical eye is the sole access to imagining Johnny. Nevertheless, Bruno seems to allow the reader much closer to Johnny's real self and the essence of his musical talent than, presumably, his biography does, because Bruno exposes Johnny's desperate drug abuse problems and philosophical obsessions (Johnny's "me") in addition to his music. This is another example of Cortázar's effort to vaguely suggest the goal and the meaning for which the reader is searching but deny full access to it.

The layer of critical distance, however, is perhaps less insistent than the stylistic barrier to "reality" formed by Cortázar's language. As Sommer notes her article in "Pursuing a Perfect Present," "The Pursuer" constantly draws attention to its departure from typical past tense narrative by using a "clumsy," "redundant," and "anxious present perfect tense." Not only does this throw the narrative into a confusing ambiguity about past, present, and future events; it acts as a barrier to the action, forcing the reader to think about how he/she is receiving information and question the "reality" of the story. This is clearer in the original Spanish version, since the translator Paul Blackburn has edited out some of the awkwardness in language. But the disorientation and ambiguity of Cortázar's style is perfectly clear, even in the English translation, in the scene of Johnny's breakdown at the cafe, which is introduced by the phrase, "Two empty weeks will pass." Beginning in the future tense, time rapidly becomes so ambiguous in the course of the evening that tenses even begin to change in the middle of a thought: "My reaction is that human, I wanted to get Johnny up."

Sommer goes on to write that Bruno "may be serving as Johnny's instrument to be played on and with," and this is an important point not only for understanding the dynamic of their relationship, but for emphasizing that even the instrument of expression itself, the artistic tool without which the artist cannot express him/herself, is a barrier to

the "real." The very object for which Johnny is famous, his saxophone, acts in Cortázar's story as simply another barrier between the reader and the essence of what the story is attempting to capture. Perhaps this is one reason Johnny continually loses his saxophone; he desires to be taken not simply for his music but for himself. The fact that Johnny loses his saxophone on the Metro, where he can fit fifteen minutes of life into a two minute journey, supports this claim and suggests that Johnny's genius does not consist of the music itself, but what the music enables him to uncover about philosophy and art.

The solo of the bebop musician is the central metaphor of "The Pursuer" and, in many ways, the most important way in which Cortázar allows his reader to visualize his new style of fiction. So it is quite important to note that this artistic effort is characterized by such frustration and even futility in its ability to discover its goal and successfully find what it is seeking. Throughout the story, Cortázar portrays bebop with terms like "interminable," "continuous," and "infinite"; he is careful to emphasize that it is multi-layered and endless:

Incapable of satisfying itself, useful as a continual spur, an infinite construction, the pleasure of which is not its highest pinnacle but in the exploratory repetitions, in the use of faculties which leave the suddenly human behind without losing humanity.

This description, particularly the phrase "infinite construction," is an excellent paraphrase of the new aesthetic ideas of the 1950s. Cortázar takes bebop music as his subject, chooses a musician nicknamed because his music is as elusive and free as a "bird," and portrays Johnny as a hunter "with no arms and legs" who is constantly unable to find what he is seeking, because this is the best way to represent the postmodern "infinite construction" that the author saw as literature's new direction. "The Pursuer" is a radical work of art because it erects so many barriers between the pursuer and the pursued that□it becomes clear□these barriers are endless. More than the particulars of Johnny's new and unique vision of the world, this stylistic development is the story's major contribution to the period's changing philosophies of art and narrative.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "The Pursuer," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Brent holds a Ph.D. in American culture from the University of Michigan. In this essay, Brent discusses religious symbolism in Cortazar's "The Pursuer."

Cortazar's short story "The Pursuer" is narrated by jazz critic Bruno V., who recounts his experiences with a brilliant but self-destructive jazz saxophonist by the name of Johnny Carter. Bruno's narrative is an attempt to make up for the element that was "missing" from his published biography of Johnny. As Johnny tells Bruno, "what you forgot to put in is me."

In Bruno's attempt to capture the essence of Johnny that was left out of his biography of the jazz musician, he makes many references to God, angels, devils, and religion. Johnny is repeatedly described by Bruno as a sort of angel or a god. Ultimately, Bruno represents Johnny as a Christ-like figure who suffers for the sins of mankind, and his own role as that of a preacher, whose task is to testify to the spiritually transcendent power of Johnny's music.

Bruno struggles to express the essence of what makes Johnny and his music so awe-inspiring. In the process, he explores a number of different explanations of the phenomenon of Johnny. Throughout "The Pursuer," Bruno makes frequent reference to both angels and devils in describing Johnny and his music. He describes Johnny as "this angel who's like my brother, this brother who's like my angel." At another point in the story Bruno states, "I really feel like saying straight off that Johnny is some kind of angel come down among men," and then, in the same sentence, suggests, "maybe what is really happening is that Johnny is a man among angels, one reality among the unrealities that are the rest of us."

However, Johnny is also referred to in terms that associate him with hell and the devil. Bruno describes Johnny's "supreme indifference" to the wellbeing of those around him, stating, "Johnny doesn't give a good [g□□d□□] if everything goes to hell." Bruno later describes Johnny as a devil, commenting, "Anyone can be like Johnny if he just resigns himself to being a poor devil." And Johnny likewise describes himself as "a poor devil . . . with more plagues than the devil under his skin."

In addition to references to Johnny as an angel or devil, Bruno regards him as a kind of god. In describing the effect of Johnny's music on him, Bruno asserts, "he played like I imagine only a god can play an alto sax, given that they quit using lyres and flutes." Later, Art, another musician, describes Johnny's astounding performance during a recording session in terms of his godlike qualities, asserting, "If God was anywhere yesterday, I think it was in that damned recording studio where it was as hot as ten thousand devils." Art goes on to describe Johnny's greatest moment of musical brilliance as a spiritually transcendent experience, telling Bruno, "all of a sudden he lets go with a blast, could of split the . . . celestial harmonies."

That Bruno regards Johnny's musical abilities as godlike is further expressed when he struggles to describe the awe-inspiring effect of Johnny's live performance at a club one night, observing,

I think I understand why prayer demands instinctively that one fall on one's knees. The change of position is a symbol of the change in the tone of voice, in what the voice is about to articulate, in the diction itself.

Bruno thus regards his own role as jazz critic as that of a devout worshipper prostrating himself before the awesome power of Johnny's music. Bruno's attitude of religious faith in his deification of Johnny is echoed in the first scene of the story, when Bruno comes to visit Johnny, who describes him as "faithful old buddy Bruno."

While Johnny is described variously as an angel, devil, or god, Bruno also describes Johnny's followers as angels of a sort. In one part of the story, Bruno refers to the group of musicians and their friends who congregate around Johnny as "sick angles, irritating in their irresponsibility, but ultimately valuable to the community." Later, Bruno refers to *himself* as an archangel, when he describes a group of friends who gather around him when he enters the room "as if I were the archangel himself." Thus, Bruno paints an allegorical picture of Johnny as a godlike figure, his friends and supporters as angels, and himself as the archangel, a sort of right-hand man to Johnny as god.

Other references to spirituality, religion, and god within the story are less direct. Bruno, for example, describes Johnny and two of his friends who greet each other by "exchanging . . . a complicated onomatopoetic ritual which made everybody feel great." This reference to ritual in relation to Johnny resonates with the narrator's representation of Johnny as a spiritual being who somehow transcends everyday humanity and whose followers engage in ritualistic forms of worship in his presence.

Bruno ultimately comes to regard Johnny as a Christ-like figure, whose music offers a form of spiritual transcendence to his listeners, while his self-destructive behaviors represent a Christ-like form of suffering for the sins of others. Late in the story, Bruno describes Johnny's role among his friends and listeners as that of a religious martyr, who provides a spiritual cleansing of the world by suffering for the sins of mankind. Bruno remarks,

every time Johnny gets hurt, goes to jail, wants to kill himself, sets a mattress on fire or runs naked down the corridors of a hotel, he's paying off something for them, he's killing himself for them. Without knowing it, and not like he was making great speeches from the gallows or writing books denouncing the evils of mankind or playing the piano with the air of someone washing away the sins of the world.

Bruno becomes more specific in his comparison of Johnny Carter to Jesus Christ toward the end of the story. One night at a café, Johnny, who is distraught over the recent death of his daughter, goes down on his knees in front of Bruno in a burst of tears. Bruno, embarrassed by this public display, tries to get Johnny to sit down in a chair. He describes the reactions of the other people in the café, noting, "they all look at

me as if they were looking at someone climbing up on the altar to tug Christ down from his cross."

Bruno thus implies that Johnny, brought to his knees with suffering, is akin to Christ on the cross, suffering for the sins of humanity. Further, the onlookers seem to derive some comfort or satisfaction from Johnny's display of suffering, and thus resent Bruno's efforts to end this display, just as, the narrator suggests, people derive a kind of comfort from the religious martyrdom of Jesus Christ.

Even Johnny Carter's initials□J. C.□align him with the figure of Jesus Christ. Other ways in which Bruno's narrative equates Johnny Carter with Jesus Christ include such details as Johnny's showing Bruno "what a pretty scar I got between my ribs." As Jesus is often portrayed on crucifixes with a knife wound in his chest, this comment subtly reinforces the narrator's representation of Johnny as a Christ-like figure. Later, Johnny refers to the "holes" in his hands, an image which evokes the stigmata of Christ, whose hands were nailed to the cross.

While Bruno describes Johnny's music in religious terms, Johnny describes his own relationship to organized religion as contentious. In explaining his childhood to Bruno, he equates both his parents' fights over money (specifically, over their home mortgage) with the religion they imposed upon him as aspects of his childhood that he found unbearable. Johnny tells Bruno that, when he plays the saxophone, he is able to find temporary relief from the stresses of "the mortgage and the religion."

Toward the end of the story, Johnny in fact openly objects to Bruno's description of his music in terms of God and religion, angrily criticizing such references in Bruno's biography of him. He tells Bruno, "I don't want your God, he's never been mine." Johnny continues,

Why've you made me accept [your God] in your book? I don't know if there's a God, I play my music, I make my God, I don't need your inventions.

Johnny further asserts that he resents Bruno's imposing of religious connotations on his music, telling him, "If I play and you see angels, that's not my fault."

While he regards Johnny as a Christ-like figure, Bruno regards himself as a sort of priest or proselytizer, spreading the gospel of Johnny Carter. "I'm beginning to compare myself to a preacher," he says. According to this metaphor, Bruno's biography of Johnny may be regarded as a biblical text, describing the religious message he derives from Johnny's music. After heavily criticizing Bruno's references to religion in his biography, Johnny ironically refers to the biography as "the good book," which is a phrase generally used in reference to the Bible. Johnny thus mocks Bruno's representation of his music as a religious phenomenon.

Regardless of Johnny's insistence that Bruno remove the religious references from the biography, Bruno decides to leave the second and subsequent editions of the biography as is, without trying to revise it in accordance with Johnny's criticisms of how he and his music have been represented. However, Bruno in the end expresses a certain

ambivalence about his role in relationship to Johnny and Johnny's music. He questions the validity and value of his own methods of preaching the message delivered by Johnny through his music, when he asks himself, "What kind of preacher am I?"

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "The Pursuer," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #3

Wallace is a writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace maps Cortázar's explosion of the categories of writer and character as well as his exploration of the entire project of writing.

An artist of great talent must, at some point, make a choice. One can stay comfortably, and probably successfully, within the borders of one's art as they have already been mapped. Or one can strike out into uncharted waters, unknown lands.

Julio Cortázar was a writer of great talent. Even before the publication of his first book of stories, *Bestiary*, his name was familiar to other Latin American greats such as Jorge Luis Borges, widely regarded as the father of Latin American realism, and an early publisher of the young Cortázar. In *Bestiary*, Cortázar played with the limits of realistic fiction, introducing elements of the fantastic into his sketches, in the tradition of the French surrealists and of Borges himself. But by the time Cortázar began work on his next collection, which would appear in English as *The End of the Game*, he could no longer be satisfied with writing again as he had already written.

"When I wrote "The Pursuer,"' Jaime Alazraki quotes him as saying in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, "I had reached a point where I felt I had to deal with something that was a lot closer to me. I wasn't sure of myself anymore in that story. . . . Fantasy itself had stopped interesting me. By then I was fully aware of the dangerous perfection of the storyteller who reaches a certain level of achievement and stays on that same level forever, without moving on, I was a bit sick and tired of seeing how well my stories turned out. In "The Pursuer' I wanted to stop inventing and stand on my own ground, to look at myself a bit."

Cortázar turns his own lens on himself through the character of Bruno, a jazz critic living in Paris at the time the action of "The Pursuer" unfolds. Bruno has made his name with a book on Johnny Carter, a brilliant alto saxophonist closely modeled on Charlie "Bird" Parker. Like Cortázar's collection of stories, Bruno's biography has met with critical success□a success that is most deeply threatened by Carter himself, who both exceeds the limits of Bruno's descriptive skills with his brilliance and endangers Bruno's purely aesthetic portrait of him with his raw humanity. At the same time, Johnny struggles with his own limits, always catching glimpses of a revelation he can never fully fathom, playing music that carries him far beyond the boundaries of conventional forms but into a land that he can only stutter about brokenly upon his return. In drawing the complicated friendship between the two men, Cortázar examines the strained relationship between any author and any character, and finally turns his light on the cracks in the base of literature itself. In many ways, "The Pursuer" is a manifesto, not just on the limits of a fictional jazz critic's ability to describe a fictional musician, but on the ability of modern literature to describe the great mystery of this life and what may lay behind or beyond it□a mystery Cortázar himself would spend the rest of his literary life pursuing, with some of the most highly experimental work of the century.

"The Pursuer" opens with a conversation about limits□not Bruno's, but Johnny's. Johnny is fascinated by the glimpse of transcendence he gets through his music, and profoundly frustrated by his inability to put it into words. So he turns to Bruno, whose art is working with words, for help. "Bruno, maybe someday you'll write" he says, before launching into an attempt at describing the way time stops and the known world fades for him when he plays. And Bruno is able to help him communicate, to a point, translating Johnny's almost incomprehensible assertion that "I'm playing that tomorrow" into clear, even lyrical, critical language: "Johnny is always blowing tomorrow, and the rest of them are chasing his tail, in this today he just jumps over, effortlessly, with the first notes of his music." But after this foray into capturing Johnny through criticism, Bruno offers the first hint of his own limitations: "I realize that what I'm thinking is on a lower level than where poor Johnny is trying to move forward with his decapitated sentences, his sighs, his impatient anger and his tears." This is the central tension of the story: Bruno is able, again and again, to translate Johnny's speech, which often borders on nonsense, back into comprehensible language. But he is always left with the sense that he has, perhaps, lost something in the translation, that he has not gone with Johnny over the boundaries, merely brought him back. It is a tension that Johnny uses to torment him, even in this early conversation. "It's easy to explain," he tells Bruno, "But it's easy because it's not the right answer. The right answer simply can't be explained."

Bruno's help may not actually help Johnny much. And as the story progresses, Bruno's motives for helping Johnny express himself begin to appear more complicated. When Johnny descends into another round of addiction and debauchery, his fellow musicians, patrons, and critics gather round, ostensibly to protect him from himself. But in a moment of clarity, Bruno realizes that "under the pretext of watching out for Johnny what we're really doing is protecting our idea of him. . . . All this has nothing to do with the other Johnny . . . Johnny with no horn, Johnny with no money and no clothes, Johnny obsessed by something his intelligence was not equal to comprehending." Bruno, and his friends, have made a character out of Johnny□one they all need, for various reasons. Their problem is that Johnny is still a living man, still capable of defying everything they think, or have written, about him.

It is a problem that every writer who works with true characters, with the crazily unpredictable winds and sparks of real life, should have. And it is an especially tempting problem for a writer of great talent, who can easily hide his small cheats, his capitulations to tradition and cliché, to solve forever by creating an airtight literary world, without surprises or true complications, in which he can move his characters like wonderfully-made dolls. Watching Johnny's descent, Bruno, and perhaps Cortázar, recognizes this tendency in himself, writing, "I prefer the words to the reality that I'm trying to describe."

But unlike a writer of fiction, whose success or failure in portraying a character can be measured finally only in their own hearts, Bruno the critic has the opportunity, or the punishment, of coming face to face with the man he has tried to capture in his now-famous biography. Johnny has not forgotten his early hope, that Bruno's talent for words will somehow help him to speak what for him is unspeakable. When he first brings up his own biography, Johnny refers to a clumsy metaphor he used in the story's initial

conversation, in which he described being shocked to see his own reflection in a mirror, and his sense that the man looking back could not possibly be him. It is an almost universal moment: a person's recognition of everything in oneself that a mirror cannot reflect. And Johnny hopes that Bruno, with words at his command, may have some way to express what the mirror cannot. "At first I thought that to read something that'd been written about you would be more like looking at yourself and not into a mirror," he says. But, he adds, Bruno's book is missing something.

Bruno, terrified by Johnny's criticism, which, voiced to the wrong person, could ruin his career, retorts, "What more do you want? Mirrors give faithful reflections." And then, frightened and infuriated by the effect the living man could have on his static portrait of him, Bruno admits, "Sure, there are moments when I wish he was already dead." But for Bruno, and for any writer, the death of a living man, or the stifling of a living character, will not really solve the problems they are capable of causing. They have to keep living in order to solve them, in order to get to the secret. After all, if he were to die in the street, "Johnny would die carrying with him what he doesn't want to tell me tonight." The dead man, the static character, may be controllable□but he also offers no revelation, no glimpse into the mystery.

Johnny, after a moment, is ready to let the discussion of Bruno's book pass, but Bruno cannot let it go at that. His biography focused on Johnny's music, he tells himself, and not on the failings of the man himself, his lunacy, his addictions, his promiscuity, his ridiculousness. If anything, he was protecting Johnny. What was wrong with the book? What was missing? Bruno asks. What did I forget?

"What you forgot to put in is me," Johnny tells him. "A man can't say anything, right away you translate it into your filthy language. . . . Old Bruno writes down everything in his notebook that you say, except the important things."

His statement is an indictment of Bruno's writing, but it could very well be an indictment of Cortázar himself, and of any writer with the facility to easily trap a caricature on a page, while ignoring the more grueling work of building a language and a literature with the capability of conveying a whole life, or a whole character.

For Cortázar, the character of Johnny Carter in "The Pursuer" is not simply a jazz musician at odds with his critic. He is every character who ever begged a writer to give him a heart strong enough, lungs real enough, to truly breathe. He is every reader who ever depended on a writer to express for him the one thing he has never known how to put into words, the only thing he has ever really wanted to say, the only thing that means anything. And Cortázar's Carter is bigger than all of these: he stands for the mystery of life itself, for everything that is not there when you glance back, for all the glimpses of glory, for all the filth in the streets, for everything that does not make sense the first time, for everything that cannot be captured easily. And Carter insists, again and again, that Bruno's efforts□and by extension, Cortázar's□have not yet, have never, in fact, been enough for him.

Bruno cannot rise to Johnny's challenge. After Johnny's death, he slaps together a quick obituary in time for the second printing of his false biography, further cementing Johnny in the jazz pantheon in which Bruno insists he belongs, and further obscuring the real man and his tortuous, failed search.

But for Cortázar, "The Pursuer" is a point of departure. Cortázar takes up Johnny's search himself and runs it down for the rest of his life. The question of what lies beyond the closed door, what is really glimpsed in those moments of revelation, will haunt the balance of the literature he produces, and Cortázar's quest to find new ways of stalking and revealing the secret will lead him to generate some of the most successful experimental prose of his century□and, some might even argue, in history. Johnny's suspicions and strife may be lost on his fictional critic, but, in the end, his struggle infects the actual writer who created both musician and critic. Cortázar claims Carter's struggle as his own. And unlike Bruno, in his future work he breaks free from the stifling perfection of his early successes, and takes his readers with him into the outer reaches of literature's unmapped borderlands.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "The Pursuer," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

Cortázar's "Las babas del Diablo" from the collection *Las armas secretas* was the basis for Michaelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blowup*. The film features David Hemmings and Vanessa Redgrave.

Topics for Further Study

Listen to some of Charlie Parker's recordings, such as *Confirmation: The Best of the Verve Years* (Polygram Records, 1995). What stands out to you about "Bird," as Charlie Parker is often called? Listen to other saxophone players such as Lester Young (Parker's hero when he was young) and Cannonball Adderley. How is Bird's style different from Young's and that of other saxophonists popular in the 1930s? How does Bird's sound differ from that of his contemporaries such as Adderley? What does Bird's music have in common with the literary style of "The Pursuer?" Explain the similarities and differences.

Read several short stories by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, such as "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941). How does Cortázar compare to Borges, who was considered the master of Latin American fiction when Cortázar began writing? Do the compatriots have similar interests and do they explore similar themes? How are they different? What was the relationship of the two writers? Choose a Borges story and compare it to "The Pursuer" in theme, style, and subject matter.

Research some of the French theorists that were influential during the 1950s, such as Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss. How would you describe their theories? What do they say about art, metaphysics and time? How do their theories relate to "The Pursuer?" Discuss what Cortázar's story says about psychology, philosophy, language, and time. How are these themes influenced by French critical theory from the 1950s? Which theories and theorists do you think are the most influential over the story?

Cortázar was writing around the same time as the American "Beat" writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Read some Beat poems or prose such as Kerouac's *On the Road*. What do the Beats have in common with Cortázar? How are they different? Consider the authors' philosophies, influences, approaches to music and other forms of culture, as well as styles, and themes in order to construct your answer.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Bebop is the hip style of music in the big city. Listeners cram into nightclubs to hear the stars of the day improvise.

Today: Live jazz is popular with an older crowd, and disc jockeys, playing everything from hip-hop to drum and bass, have taken over the nightclubs.

1950s: Heroin, a highly addictive opiate, is the most dangerous of the illegal drugs popular with jazz musicians.

Today: Heroin is still in use, although the potential danger to users is considerably greater because of the risks of contracting HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) from shared intravenous needles and because the (street) purity of the drug is greater. According to the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1.6 percent of the United States population aged over twelve has tried heroin at least once.

1950s: In Paris, a group of foreign artists and intellectuals congregate on the Left Bank of the Seine River to listen to music, sit in cafes, and discuss art and philosophy. They have become known as the second wave of the Lost Generation, a group of expatriates that came to Paris in the years following World War I.

Today: Although Paris retains its reputation as one of the cultural capitals of the world, it is no longer as popular a destination for expatriate writers and musicians.

1950s: Magical realism is an exciting new technique among prodigious Latin American writers like Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez.

Today: Latin American literature still tends to make use of myth and fantasy, but currently much critical interest is focused on previously neglected works by female authors and literature that focuses on women's issues.

What Do I Read Next?

Cortázar's most famous novel, *Hopscotch* (1963), is the story of an Argentine intellectual caught between the worlds of Buenos Aires and Paris. It is famous for its revolutionary narrative organization, which requires the reader to jump around the chapters, out of order, in order to read the novel. There are at least two sequences in which one can read the story, and this structure challenges linear notions of time and space.

Bird Lives!: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker (1996), by Ross Russell, is a compelling biography of Parker that explores his music without passing over his destructive and infamous personal life.

Jorge Luis Borges, who was a major influence over Cortázar and probably the most influential Argentinian author of the twentieth century, published the short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" in 1941. Now available in Anthony Bonner's 1989 translation of *Ficciones*, "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a detective story as well as an exploration of time and metaphysics.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), by Gabriel García Márquez, is an entrancing novel of "magical realism," the style of Latin American writing sometimes associated with Cortázar. It depicts the history of a small Columbian town using myth and fantasy in combination with striking realistic detail.

Further Study

Alazraki, Jaime, ed., *Critical Essays on Julio Cortázar*, G. K. Hall, 1999.

Alazraki is one of the leading scholars on Cortázar and provides a diverse collection of essays about a wide range of the author's work.

Alazraki, Jaime, and Ivar Ivask, eds., *The Final Island: The Fiction of Julio Cortázar*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1978.

The essays anthologized in this book are by the best and most influential of Cortázar's critics.

Garfield, Evelyn Picon, *Julio Cortázar*, Ungar, 1975.

Based on interviews with Cortázar, Garfield's book is one of the most important critical commentaries on the author that is written in English.

Hodeir, André, *Jazz, It's Evolution and Essence*, translated by David Noakes, Grove Press, 1956.

Hodeir, a biographer and critic largely grouped with the 1950s Parisian literati, is in many ways a model for Bruno. His analysis of jazz music, originally published in French in 1954, is most famous for the light it sheds on Charlie Parker.

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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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