The Switchman Study Guide

The Switchman by Juan José Arreola

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Introduction

"The Switchman" was published in 1952 in the collection *Confabulario*. Ten years later it was rereleased, along with the rest of his published work at the time, in the collection *El Confabulario total*. Arreola invented the word "Confabulario," meaning a collection of fables, and his ability for invention is apparent from the stylistic originality of "The Switchman" as well as the broad range of his other work.

"The Switchman" is a dialogue between an anonymous traveler and a switchman on the railroads, in which the railroader details the horrors of the sub-operational rail system. He describes areas where one or no rails exist, facades of stations designed to trick passengers into disboarding, and the slim odds of the stranger ever reaching his destination. On one level the story operates as a satire on the Mexican transportation system, while on another the railroad is an analogy for the hopeless absurdity of the human condition. At the time of publication, *Confabulario* was relatively well-received, but over time Arreola's short stories have come to be seen as his strongest work. "The Switchman" in particular has received attention as a piece that is emblematic of the author's mastery of allegory and satire.

Author Biography

Juan José Arreola was born on September 12, 1918, in Ciudad Guzman, in Jalisco, Mexico. The fourth of fourteen children in an intensely religious family, he was forced to leave school at twelve to apprentice with a bookbinder. Although he worked at a series of jobs as a young man, he was drawn to writing and acting from an early age, and in 1939 he enrolled in the Instituto de Bellas Artes in Mexico City to study acting. His acting career took him briefly to France, but the bulk of his professional work consists of the written word.

Arreola began writing when he moved to Mexico City, where he collaborated with other young Mexican writers, including Juan Rulfo, on a literary journal entitled *Pan*. His first story to gain recognition was *Hizo el bien Mientras Vivio*, which was published in 1943. Over the course of the next two decades he would write a play, *La Hora de todos*, which won best play of 1953 by the Mexican National Institute of Fine Arts, and many short stories and prose sketches, most of which were compiled in the collection *Confabulario total*, published in 1962. The year 1963 saw the publication of his chaotically structured novel, *La feria*, which at the time received mostly negative reviews, and in 1971 he published *Palindroma*, a collection including stories and a one-act play. Although he is famous for the broad range of genres in which he writes, Arreola is best known for his short stories, which are markedly philosophical in content and range from satirical animal fables to biographies of historical figures. His best-known works include his *Bestiaro*, in which he satirizes human qualities through a series of animals, and the absurd short story "The Switchman." For the most part, Arreola stopped producing new fiction by the early 1970s, although he remains productive today. Over the years he has worked as an editor, in television, and as a lecturer conducting writers' workshops.

Plot Summary

"The Switchman" opens at a deserted train station in an unnamed country. The stranger arrives sweaty and out of breath from the effort of carrying his heavy suitcase, and mops his face with his handkerchief. His watch reads the exact time his train is scheduled to depart, but there is no sign of it; he worries that he has missed the train.

Out of nowhere appears an old man who taps him on the shoulder. The man is dressed like a railroader and carries a red lantern that is so small it looks like a toy. The stranger assumes he is affiliated with the railroad, and the implication is that he is the switchman for whom the story is named. The stranger asks the old man if the train has left, and in response the old man asks him if he has not been in the country long, indicating that the question is ridiculous and that the stranger is clearly not familiar with the system. The stranger insists that he must be in T__ by the following day at the latest, and the switchman responds that the stranger obviously doesn't understand the situation. He advises him to procure a room at the inn, ideally by the month. The stranger argues that he doesn't want to stay, and in response the switchman says he should let him work out his problem himself, but instead he will inform him of the situation. Thus begins their dialogue comprised almost solely of the stranger's questions and the switchman's answers.

According to the switchman, "This country is famous for its railroads." Apparently this fame is due to the poor reputation of the railroads, but the switchman insists that the timetables and ticket sales have been greatly improved. In effect, he reports, it has been improved such that by all appearances there is a working rail system linking every town in the country, but in fact the trains do not adhere to the schedules. In the meantime, he insists, everyone is patient with the system out of patriotism. The stranger learns that although rails do pass through the town, the train doesn't necessarily come through it, although a few have been known to do so, and perhaps he might be lucky enough to get one. The stranger asks if the theoretical train will go to his destination, and the switchman treats the question as if he is asking more than is reasonable. The stranger argues that his ticket is for his destination, and the switchman concedes that although most people would agree with his logic, locals cope with the circumstances by purchasing massive amounts of tickets to locations all over the country, and never expect to reach their destination.

The switchman explains that the railroads take the trains through impassable areas in their desire to serve their citizens, and as a result, the trains can take a long time. In fact, he says, people often die in the course of their trip, and as a result funeral coaches are available. He also describes areas in which there is only one rail or none at all, resulting in wrecks, and tells of a town which came into being because of such a wreck. At the stranger's dismay at this news, the old man tries to bolster his courage, relaying a story about a group who found their train at an abyss without a bridge. According to the nowfamous story, the group carried the train in pieces across the abyss and a river at its bottom, reassembled it on the other side, and received a discount for their trouble.

In response to these anecdotes, the stranger continues to insist that he must reach his destination by the next day. The switchman applauds his tenacity and suggests he stay at the inn until a train arrives and then take that one. He explains that most people take this course, and it is possible that thousands of people may compete with him to board the train, but it is worth a try. Apparently riots often result from passengers trying to board trains, and a school of railroad etiquette was established to cope with the situation. The switchman also urges the stranger to be vigilant about disboarding at the correct stop, because in an effort to remedy overcrowding, the railroad has built imitation cities inhabited by dummies. People are often tricked into leaving the train and abandoned in such places. The trains are also equipped to project mirages in the windows, to trick passengers into believing the train is moving or that they have reached their destinations. The switchman explains that in hopes of reaching his destination, he must focus on his goal and speak to no one, because the railroads are full of spies who might undermine his efforts and in fact force him to spend the rest of his life in a prison car. According to the switchman, all of this effort on the part of the railroad is designed to convince all passengers to give in to their fates and cease caring about a destination.

At this the stranger asks the old man if he has traveled the rails much, and the old man replies that he is a retired switchman who comes to the station to remember the good old days. In fact he has never traveled, but relies on the stories of others. He relays another story of passengers tricked into disboarding to admire the scenery and then abandoned, and then asks the stranger if he would like to spend the rest of his life in a remote, beautiful spot with a girl. He winks and smiles at the stranger, and then jumps in alarm at the sound of a train whistle. The switchman runs at the train, gesturing wildly with his lantern, and calls back to the stranger, asking again the name of his destination. The stranger replies that it is X__, a different destination from his previous one. This reply coincides with a name or identity change for him; previously called the stranger, he is now called the traveler. At the moment he submits to the ways of the railroad, the old man disappears into the morning, and the train noisily approaches the station.

Summary

"The Switchman" is Juan Jose Arreola's satiric short story about a railway passenger and a switchman. The latter provides confusing information about the train system, symbolizing not only the inefficiency of the Mexican railroad system, but also the mysteries of life.

The story begins as a stranger carrying a large suitcase hurries breathlessly to a railroad station and arrives just at the time that his train bound for a town identified only as T_____ is scheduled to depart. As the man speculates about his train, he feels a touch on his shoulder and turns to see an old man dressed like a railroader and carrying a lantern, small enough to be a toy.

When he asks if the train has left, the old man wonders if the traveler has been in the country very long. He advises him to find lodging at the hotel nearby, preferably for a month. The stranger is baffled at this advice, because he has no plans to stay overnight, let alone for an extended period. The switchman admits that he should leave the stranger to his fate but decides to provide some information, much to the stranger's relief.

The switchman tells the stranger that the country is famous for its railroad system, and although the organization of the system is not efficient, there have been many tickets and timetables produced. The switchman feels that the only thing that is necessary now is for the trains to actually follow the timetables and destination guides. The residents accept this flawed system, for now, but always hope for a resolution to the problems.

The stranger wants to know if a train passes through this station, and the switchman cannot provide a direct answer. There are clearly rails laid down for a train, but there is no system in place to dictate that a train pass through. This station is more progressive than some, though, which have only chalk lines where rails should be. The switchman cannot promise that the stranger will be able to board a train to T_____, but the switchman will be happy to accommodate the stranger should another train come by.

The switchman does not understand why the stranger insists on going to T_____, when it is a privilege to board any train. Then, a man's life has some direction. The stranger argues that he should be able to go to T_____, since that is the destination marked on his ticket. The switchman tells the stranger that the hotel is filled with people who had made the same assumption regarding their own tickets and have purchased large quantities of tickets in the hopes that they will someday be able to reach their destinations.

The switchman tries to convince the stranger that the system is not as flawed as it may seem, because there are many trains that can take people to many different places. The only caveat is that boarding a train will not assure that a person will reach his intended destination.

The switchman presents the case of the railroad management, which, in its eagerness to serve customers, has devised an elaborate system that could keep a passenger on board a train for many years. The system even accommodates death on these long trips and will professionally embalm anyone who expires onboard.

In some remote areas, there is only one rail on which a train can travel, so the railway's customer service program seats first class passengers on the side of the train riding on the rail. In areas where no rails exist, all passengers are equally disadvantaged until the unavoidable wreck that eventually occurs. The switchman tells the stranger that a town named F_____ was established as the result of one of these unfortunate accidents.

The switchman shares another incredible story with the stranger in which a train reaches an abyss with no bridge leading to the other side. The train conductor was able to convince the passengers to join together and transport the train, piece by piece on their backs, to the opposite side. The railroad management was so pleased that they proclaimed the building of a bridge to be unnecessary and gave the passengers discounts on their fares.

The stranger is fixed on his arrival in T_____ tomorrow, and the switchman is pleased to see such perseverance. He advises the stranger to get a room at the hotel and take the next train possible. The switchman also advises about the possibility of riots breaking out, as all the other hotel guests will also clamber to board. In an attempt to avoid such situations in the future, the railroad management has instituted an etiquette school to teach people how to appropriately board trains in riot situations.

The switchman tells the stranger that if he is lucky enough to board a train, he must also be vigilant about his point of departure. The railroad has implemented a system of relieving the passenger congestion on trains and has created false train stations in remote locations, where people exit, and the trains speed off before the passengers realize the ruse.

According to the switchman, there are those rare occasions where a passenger buys a ticket to T_____ and actually is transported to T_____ the next day. Of course, the stranger is interested in this scenario. The switchman encourages him to try his luck and hope for the best, when he boards the next train. The switchman also advises the stranger not to talk to other passengers. He says that railroad management has spies infiltrated among the travelers, who may use any conversation to thwart an individual's itinerary and force him into a prison car on a trumped up charge.

As the stranger knows no one in T_____, the switchman tells him to take extra precautions and not fall for the mirage of what looks like a railway station or the false movements of a stopped train. These conjure the illusion of travel, making the passenger think that he has arrived at a new station, when he has not moved at all.

The stranger asks the switchman about his experience with train travel. The old man tells him that he is a retired switchman, who just visits train stations to reminisce. The switchman has never traveled on a train and does not wish to, given the precarious

nature of the railroad's duplicitous motives of making money and expediently relieving passenger congestion with questionable strategies.

Suddenly, both men hear the whistle of a train. The switchman begins to signal wildly with his lantern and runs along the track toward the oncoming train. The switchman turns to yell at the stranger that he is lucky. He asks the stranger to name his destination, and the stranger confirms that it is X_____.

Analysis

The story is told from the third person narrative point of view, which means that someone other than the two characters is sharing the action as viewed by an invisible person. The narrator does not have access to the characters' emotions or motives and can relay only the dialogue and actions, as they are presented.

The story is a satire on the Mexican railway system told through the absurd anecdotes of the old man. A satire is a method of ridiculing a person or an institution by portraying it in an unfavorable light. The old man's stories and advice to the stranger accomplish this goal, with the Mexican railroad as its target. The author is known for his sense of humor and outrageous wit. "The Switchman" is one of his most famous pieces in this genre.

Arreola has fun with the reader by providing symbolism, especially with the character of the switchman, who carries a "red lantern but so small it seemed a toy." The lantern is the typical tool identifying a switchman, but the diminutive size indicates the man's lack of real knowledge or power. This is also a method of foreshadowing. It indicates that the switchman will tell outrageous stories, and the encounter between the two men will become almost like a game that no one wins.

Arreola also uses symbolism in that the flawed railway system can be viewed as a metaphor for life, in general. Life goals and plans can be interrupted and rerouted unexpectedly, just as railway itineraries can be altered without reason or solution. This precarious position is evident in the stranger's insistence on his destination of T_____ throughout the story.

At the end, the stranger, who is now identified as the traveler, has listened to the switchman's advice, and identifies his destination as X_____, indicating that he has accepted the volatility of his position and his need for flexibility in moving forward in any direction.

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Characters

The Stranger

The stranger is a man waiting for a train at a deserted station. The first of the two characters in the story, he is a foreigner to the area, as indicated by the switchman's question, "Haven't you been in this country very long?" When he is first introduced, the stranger is out of breath and sweating profusely from the effort of carrying his suitcase. He urgently needs to get to the town of T__ by the next day at the latest, and initially he is dejected at the possibility that he has missed his train. He asks the switchman if the train has already left, and when he first hears the story of the rail system in this anonymous country, he is incredulous and horrified. He questions the switchman methodically, insisting upon the logic that he has purchased a ticket, so he must be able to reach his destination. Over the course of the story, however, he comes to accept the switchman's logic, and by the end he has changed the name of his destination to fit the absurdity of the situation, and is identified as a traveler.

The Switchman

The switchman for whom the story is named is actually a retired switchman, who comes to the station to "remember the good old days." He appears out of nowhere, carrying a red lantern so tiny it looks like a toy. When the stranger asks him if the train has come and gone, the switchman advises him to book a room at the inn for as long as possible, suggesting it may be a long time before a train comes through the town. Thus begins his absurd account of the rail system, which he delivers in a matter-of-fact way and without irony. Throughout the dialogue, the switchman is kind and congenial, committed to his bizarre story, and patient with the stranger's protests and questions. He offers the stranger advice and encouragement in a good-natured way, and when the train shows up, he runs at it, gesturing wildly with his lantern, and vanishes into the morning.

Themes

Existentialism

Arreola himself acknowledges that existentialist thought is an influence upon his work, and in particular upon "The Switchman." Existentialism is a philosophy that asserts that life in and of itself is without inherent meaning, and that man projects meaning onto it. When the stranger insists that he must reach his destination, he imparts urgency of purpose and thus meaning into his life. The switchman's stories, by contrast, imply the subjectivity of the stranger's desires. His bizarre tale of the railroad, with its myriad possibilities, suggests that the world□in this case the world of travel□is arbitrary and crazy, and that there is something ludicrous about trying to project set expectations onto it. The world of the rails is wild and unpredictable, without reasonable, rational laws, such as the stranger's logic that a ticket to his destination should take him to it. In this way the switchman's story epitomizes the existential world, in which nothing makes logical sense. In existential literature, characters tend to be identified by their role or function rather than by a name, as they are in "The Switchman." The stranger is an example of identity through function in that he first called the stranger because he is foreign to the area and to the system, but once he changes his destination and submits to the rail system, he becomes a traveler. When the stranger changes his destination, he ceases asserting his will and submits to the existential world of the railroad.

Absurdity

By definition, absurdity concerns that which is senseless, illogical and untrue. Although there is no school of thought devoted to the absurd, an absurd worldview suggests the meeting of a meaningless world with man's efforts to impart meaning onto that world. The switchman's stories are absurd in that the events are far-fetched and ridiculous. It is out of the question, for example, that passengers would carry a dismantled train down an abyss, across a river, and up the other side to reassemble it. Similarly, it is absurd that the stranger would take these stories as truth and change his plans accordingly. The absurdity of both the stranger's actions and the switchman's tales suggest that the stranger's urgency to reach his destination is absurd. The outcome of the story reflects upon man's role in the world in general, and the absurdity in the rhythms of everyday life.

The Fantastic/Magical Realism

The fantastic in literature involves the use of detail associated with fantasy, or out of bounds of what is considered realistic. The fantastic is closely tied to the genre known as Magical Realism, which generally entails a synthesis of magical or supernatural details with things rational or realistic. "The Switchman" incorporates both these genres in that the very unrealistic conversation between the stranger and switchman is narrated

in a very matter of fact, realistic way, which allows the reader to consider the larger implications of the story without focusing on what is bizarre about the story's details. Throughout the story, use of fantastic detail is tied to the sense of the absurd. For example, it is unrealistic that people would spend a life's fortune on train tickets without knowledge of their destination, as the switchman claims. He treats this fantastic suggestion as a matter of fact, and in so doing, draws the stranger into a world in which the fantastic is the norm. In the course of the story, the reader is drawn in such that the story reads as an allegory for everyday life, in which the most basic events are imbued with a sense of the absurd.

Style

Point of View

"The Switchman" is relayed by a third-person narrator, delivered without explicit opinions. The only glimpse into either character's mind is the early description of the stranger as "dejected and thoughtful." Aside from this, any sense for the characters' thoughts and feelings comes from the dialogue, in which the stranger anxiously asks questions, and the old man matter-of-factly delivers answers. This use of a third-person omniscient narrator is typical of existential literature, in particular Kafka, and lends immediacy to the story. Throughout most of the text the reader identifies loosely with the stranger, whose incredulous reactions are appropriate to the ludicrous story he is told. However, when he changes the name of his destination and becomes a traveler at the end of the story, this identification halts. The fact that the character has submitted to the world of the rails leaves the reader suspended and alone to consider the implications of the absurd on his own life.

Construction

The structure of "The Switchman" is dictated by the title; it is a switching back and forth between the two men in conversation. The first paragraph and the last describe the action of the stranger arriving at the station, and of the old man running off into the distance waving his lantern. These two passages aside, the entire text is a dialogue between the two men, comprised mainly of short questions asked by the stranger, and answers delivered by the old man. This structure provides the text with two stories in one; the story that the old man tells about the railroad, and the larger story of the stranger being impacted by the old man's story. Throughout the tale, the reader identifies with the stranger's incredulity because the old man's story is bizarre and unbelievable. The stranger's change of destination on account of the story, however, breaks that identification and amplifies the absurdity of both stories. This construction is in keeping with the style of existentialist authors such as Kafka, whose matter-of-fact deliveries lend themselves to the absurdity of the subject matter.

Symbolism

As the title suggests, the switchman himself operates as a symbol in the story. At first glance it would appear that the title makes reference to the old man, who, by all appearances looks to be an employee of the railroad. His lantern in particular suggests his occupation, except for the fact that it is "so small it appears to be a toy." The size of the lantern calls into question the man's authority, and use of the word toy suggests that the encounter is a game. By definition a switchman is one who aids in transferring a train from one track to another, essentially a guide at a junction. In effect the old man is a guide for the stranger, indicated by the fact that he carries a light; he educates him

about the ins and outs of the rail system, and influences him literally to switch tracks and change his destination. Interestingly, the switchman is not only retired, but has never traveled himself, so his credibility is questionable. This change, however, suggests another interpretation of the word switchman; literally, one who switches, which is what the stranger does in changing his destination. Interpretation of the title calls into question the larger interpretation of the story and forces readers to examine how literally both the old man's story and the larger story should be taken.

As a means of transportation, the rail system is a symbol of travel, forward motion, and progress. Because trains can only move forward and backward, they suggest a limited range of motion and, as such, a limited version of progress. According to the old man, the image of the rail system has been much improved based on ticket sales and timetables. In reality, however, the system is sub-operational; it is only a myth that is possible to travel the country by rail, a story that is maintained by citizens out of patriotism. Obviously the rail system in the story represents public transportation in Mexico, which is famous for being poor. Metaphorically it represents progress and life in general, which is hindered by insistence upon maintaining an image.

Historical Context

Arreola was born only a year after the end of the Mexican Revolution, which was led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. The Revolution called for the transfer of land to peasant farmers and the right of Mexican citizens to elect their leaders. Hence Arreola was raised during a long period of social reform, which entailed new rights for the Mexican people, and redistribution and organization of resources. The new constitution, which was drafted only a year before his birth, provided for radical reforms, including a labor code that gave workers the right to organize and strike. It also put into effect term limits for the president and placed severe limitations on the Roman Catholic Church, which had previously controlled a great deal of land as well as the school system. During the 1920s and 1930s social and land reform continued, including the restoration of communal lands to Native Americans. Despite the progress, however, politics entailed bribery, concessions, and assassinations, and many of the changes were very controversial. In 1926, the Catholic Church conducted a strike, which suspended all religious services, and resulted in the Cristero Rebellion. During the three-year conflict, at least 90,000 Mexicans were killed in battles over secular versus Church power. The 1930s saw continued land reform, including the establishment of communal farms and the seizure of private property for social welfare. It is noteworthy that the topography of Mexico continues to make transportation difficult, particularly between the western coastal plains and the central plateau. The railways were seized and nationalized in 1937 in the course of political reforms, but have never been adequately maintained. As a result, Mexican railroads have been infamous for being poor since then, and serve as an apt metaphor for insufficiently executed reform in the country.

During the years between the Revolution and World War II, most contemporary Mexican literature consisted of either escapist fantasy or strict realism, which documented the changing social structure. The Second World War, however, shifted global consciousness as the world considered man's new powers of destruction. Mexico joined the U.S. war effort against the Axis powers on May 22, 1942, which shifted the national focus from domestic to global reform and gave rise to new literary trends in Mexico. According to Ross Larson in Fantasy and Imagination in the Mexican Narrative, "young writers led by Juan Jose Arreola and later by Carlos Fuentes were disregarding the powerful Spanish tradition of regionalistic realism and were employing symbolic techniques to express other views of reality." Postwar Mexico, which is the period during which "The Switchman" was written, saw a shift in industrial and agricultural growth, as well as the growth of the middle class. These changes mainly served to widen the gap between rich and poor, and social inequality has grown steadily since then. Social discontent in Mexico in the 1960s resulted in activism similar to that seen in the United States. Population growth and uncontrolled urbanization became a problem during the 1970s, resulting in unemployment and massive malnutrition. Since then political corruption, staggering foreign debt, problems with the oil market, and government links to drug trafficking have plagued Mexico. The quality of life for the majority of Mexicans has continued to decline, and is responsible for the influx of its citizens across U.S. borders for work. The 1990s have been marked by uprisings of the Zapatista Army of

National Liberation, demanding economic and political reforms, and the NAFTA trade agreements between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., aimed at diminishing trade barriers among the nations.

Literary Heritage

The whole of Mexican literature is vast, various, and distinguished, characterized by the blend of cultures which have contributed to it. Mexican culture is an intersection of indigenous people, Africans who were brought to Mexico in the slave trade, and the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in 1519 and conquered the Aztec empire. The earliest Mexican works consist of Mayan oral histories; the earliest recorded works are the pre-Columbian *Chilam Balam* and *Popol Vuh*, which chronicle many Mayan myths and legends. Most other early literature is Spanish work on two main topics, missionary writing and documentation by the conquistadors. The writing of the conquistadors documents events, geography and the indigenous people they encountered, in the form of journals, annals and letters home and to the Spanish crown. One of the earliest of these is a collection of letters by Hernan Cortes entitled *Cartas de Relacion.* Spanish missionary writing chronicles the evangelical efforts to convert the native people to Christianity. Notably, almost none of the writing during the first century of colonialism was for pleasure. Poetry emerged before prose in the new Spain; the first poetry recorded from the late 1500s is a collection of Christmas carols, part of the conversion effort. Theater appeared in the late sixteenth century, also as part of religious ceremony. Scholars believe that theater initially involved clergy acting out religious scenarios, but by the seventeenth century both sacred and secular theater had emerged, often performed in the streets by professional actors.

The result of this cultural mix is the mestizo, of mixed blood, who since the end of the nineteenth century have comprised the largest ethnic group of the population; modern Mexican literature reflects this fundamental ethnic blend. What today is popularly known as Magical Realism has its roots in European literature, and is often identified with Kafka's use of the fantastic in a very matter-of-fact way, without explanation, as a part of everyday life resulting in an absurd effect. In the last fifty years, however, Magical Realism has become emblematic of Latin American literature as well. Magical Realism suits Mexican literature, as it does Latin American literature in general, in this blend of the fantastic with everyday life. The drama of Catholic spirituality converges with magic and legends inherent in Native American culture in such an way that the mystical is incorporated into everyday life and, in effect, into literature.

Critical Overview

When *Confabulario* was released in 1952, it was met with a generally warm reception. A decade later, however, when it was released with the rest of Arreola's published work in *Confabulario total*, it was met with great applause. By the 1960s, Arreola had earned his reputation as a skillful satirist. His fiction tends to lack traditional literary devices such as plot and character development; in these departures from literary convention, Arreola crafts stylistically original pieces grounded in allegory. Ross Larson, in *Fantasy and Imagination in the Mexican Narrative* , cites Arreola as a leader and revolutionary in Mexican literature during the 1950s in his use of "symbolic techniques to express other views of reality." He describes his work as "concise, ironic parables and satires that aspire to formal perfection." Arreola's work is characterized by a sense of the absurd, and the short stories in the collection, particularly "The Switchman," are considered emblematic of his work.

Luis Dávila, in the Twayne's World Authors Series book entitled *Juan José Arreola*, reports that "Although . . . Arreola is one of the most distinguished writers in Mexico and Spanish America, and is much publicized, actual critical scrutiny of his works is surprisingly scarce." However, he asserts, "The Switchman" "is probably Arreola's most famous and most discussed story." As "the one story by Arreola which has been most commented upon by critics. . ." he reports, "its commentators differ widely in their interpretations." He continues, "The very fact that the critics' interpretations are so different, and yet all so fitting, says a great deal about Arreola's talent." In keeping with the author's stylistic reputation, Dávila asserts "The only consensus is that the story is not only a satire on Mexico's railroads, although it is at least that." He goes on to discuss the skill with which Arreola incorporates the existential into the story, creating bizarre scenarios which resonate with the familiar absurdity of daily life. He writes, "Even though the story is a fantasy, it accurately simulates the perceived and felt reality in which human beings live." Besides his skillful representation of the human condition, however, Dávila admires Arreola's particularly Latin American approach to existentialism and absurdity, which may advocate boarding the train of life without care for the destination. He quotes the switchman, who says, "While you travel, have faith," and suggests that "even though his words are no license to stretch the story into a manual of hope, they accompany Arreola's readers as they await their next trains for destinations unknown."

D. Curtis Pulsipher, in his dissertation "The Use of the Fantastic, Neo-Fantastic, Animals and Humor As Vehicles For Satire in the Works of Juan José Arreola and Murilo Rubiao," offers similar praise of the story. He, too, notes that "The Switchman" "is the short story by the Mexican author which has received the most critical acclaim; it is Arreola's single most anthologized piece and has been translated into various foreign languages." He continues, "Critics have seen in this tale the perfect example of the absurd, the forceful stamp of Kafka, and a political satire with a few metaphysical traces; they have even seen in it a paragon of Magic Realism." He continues, "This short story is one of the Mexican author's finest works, and through it he displays his concern with man in the twentiethcentury, knee-deep in inexplicable mire in which going

forward and going backward only leads him further into the quagmire. The only alternative open to man is to fight with the absurd by embracing it, somehow outdo the absurdity in absurdity." Overall, despite the disparity in interpretations of the story, critical consensus is that "The Switchman" is a finely crafted work of existentialist fiction, and continues to accumulate critical distinction as time passes.

Critical Essay #3

Jennifer Lynch

Lynch is a freelance writer in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she explores readings of "The Switchman" as an existentialist, absurdist work.

Although interpretations of "The Switchman" vary, most critics agree that the story is an existentialist work with an emphasis on the absurd. On the most obvious level the story is a satire on the Mexican public railroad, which is famous for being atrocious, and an allegory for Mexican public policy in general. On a deeper level, however, the story concerns man's search for meaning in an absurd world. Despite Arreola's use of the fantastic, the story resonates with familiarity; the reader identifies strongly with the outrage of the stranger who believes in the logic that a train ticket should take him to his destination. Although, as is generally the case in Arreola's fiction, the stranger's character does not necessarily develop, he undergoes a transformation that leaves the reader hanging; without identification aside from oneself, the reader is left to consider the implications of the story on everyday life. Arreola provides the stranger, and hence his readers, with a guide, the switchman, and may offer some unorthodox advice as to how to handle the existentialist crisis. Although his credibility is dubious, the switchman offers encouragement at the very least, and perhaps advocates to the reader, as he does to the stranger, switching tracks when boarding the train of life.

The story opens with the arrival of the stranger at the train station. He is identified only as a stranger, in keeping with the tendency in existentialist literature to identify characters with function, rather than with personal details or names. The stranger wishes to travel by train to the town of T__; in fact he has a ticket for his destination. However, there is no train in sight, and he wonders if it has already come and gone. The stranger encounters an old man, a retired switchman, who reports that travel in this country is an unpredictable, arbitrary experience, and so begins their dialogue, in which the switchman informs the stranger of the perils and idiosyncrasies of the rails.

"This country is famous for its railroads," the switchman begins, and it turns out they are famous for their timetables, ticket sales, and brochures. Actual regular, prescribed train service, however, is the exception rather than the rule. According to the switchman, train travel may just as easily result in getting marooned in the jungle as it may result in death. Fortunately, though, funeral cars are available for embalming purposes in the case of the latter. As was the case throughout Mexico in the 1950s, when the story was written, as well as today, the country's rugged terrain makes for unpredictable service at best. After the Mexican Revolution, the railroads were nationalized in an effort to put public resources in the hands of the people. The result, however well-intentioned, was, and still is, a neglected and sub-operational system rather like the one depicted in "The Switchman." Such a rail system is an apt metaphor for the decline of not only public transportation in Mexico, but public services in general. Based on the premise of delivering power to the people after the Revolution, the Mexican government consistently turned such properties over to the public through the 1930s and 1940s

without plans or resources for maintenance. Neglect and exploitation under the postulate of the good of the people resulted in the train system Mexico sports today: painfully like the switchman's image of the train pressing ahead without a track until, worn down to the axles, it grinds to a halt.

As an allegory for Mexican institutions, "The Switchman" is a grim portrait of the country. As an answer to twentieth-century existentialism, however, the story offers provocative alternative readings. Given that existentialism is based on the premise that life is without inherent meaning, "The Switchman" epitomizes man's attempt to project logic and reason onto life, both from the stranger's point of view and the reader's. The rail system, as an institution run in an arbitrary way by omnipotent management, is a model of the existentialist oppressor. Like Gregor's employers in Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* the management is all-powerful, and as for Gregor, any effort the stranger makes to fight them is hopeless. His destination is arbitrary despite the fact that he has purchased a ticket, in keeping with general human logic regarding travel, and in fact the goal of the management is to dissuade him of his imperative destination. In the switchman's words, "The hope is that one day the passengers will capitulate to fate, give themselves into the hands of an omnipotent management, and no longer care to know where they are going and where they have come from." It is entirely absurd that this should be the case, just as it is absurd that passengers who encounter a bridgeless abyss should dismantle the train, carry it down the abyss, across a river, and up the other side to reassemble it, only to receive a discount for their trouble.

The switchman delivers these fantastic tales as fact, and in so doing, identifies the reader with the stranger, who resists them as impossible, at least for a while. Although the switchman's matter-of-fact delivery is in keeping with the style of existentialist literature, the reader, like the stranger, contends with the idea that he is not in control of his circumstances; to do otherwise would be to relinquish control of not only his destination, but his destiny. The switchman, from the beginning of the story, is clearly a guide for the stranger. He carries a lantern, in effect a light, which generally symbolizes knowledge. He also tells the contentious stranger that, "Frankly, I ought to leave you to your fate. But just the same, I'll give you some information." In effect he offers to lead and counsel the stranger, in keeping with his occupation as a switchman, which is essentially a guide for a train at a junction. However, the switchman's credibility is called into question by certain details. The lantern that he carries is tiny and likened to a toy, suggesting that he is not an authority, but a caricature of authority. Also, his lantern is red, which is in keeping with his job as a switchman, but traditionally symbolic of danger or warning. The fact that logic and, consequently, tradition are called into question in the story makes the switchman's role even more a mystery. Above all, however, the switchman's credibility is called into question at the end of the story when he reveals that he is retired and no longer works on the railroad. He reports, ". . .I just come here now and again to remember the good old days. I've never traveled and I have no desire to. But the travelers tell me stories."

The stories relayed by the switchman would appear to undermine the stranger's imperative, especially by the climax of the story, when the switchman suggests, "Wouldn't you like to end your days in a picturesque unknown spot in the company of a

young girl?" According to most of his narrative, he might as well be part of the management, committed to dissuading the public of their projected destinations. However, throughout the text the switchman offers sporadic encouragement, such as "You need to pluck up your courage; perhaps you may even become a hero" and "All right! I'm glad to see you aren't giving up your project. It's plain you are a man of conviction" and "Try it anyway." These affirmations ring contrastingly throughout his discouraging stories, and reach a peak when the train arrives. He breaks into a run for the train and calls back to the stranger, "You are lucky! Tomorrow you will arrive at your famous station." The meaning of this statement is ambiguous, since it is followed by the question, "What did you say its name was?" The stranger replies with a different destination from his original, suggesting that he has, in fact, capitulated to fate.

The stranger's transformation into a traveler is, in keeping with the entire story, ambiguous. On one hand it can be viewed as the ultimate submission to the management, and unwillingness to "At least try." On the other hand, the fact that the stranger's name changes to traveler suggests an active role. As reported earlier in the story, "passengers' lives suffer important transformations" and the stranger/ traveler is willing to submit to change. The switchman tells the stranger, "While you travel, have faith," suggesting that the author advocates willingness to board the train of life, however meaningless and arbitrary it may be, regardless of destination. As the old man counsels, "Once on the train, your life will indeed take on some direction. What difference does it make whether it's T__ or not?"

Source: Jennifer Lynch, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

John R. Burt

In the following review on Juan Jose Arreola's El guardagujas*, John R. Burt discusses this allegorical story and its possible ties to a story written by the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1843.*

The well known short story by Juan José Arreola, "El guardagujas" from *Confabulario* (1952) gives pleasure on at least two levels. On the surface it offers a humorous treatment of a literal railroad where almost everything imaginable seems to go wrong regularly. Beneath the surface it possesses a thoughtful allegorical nature which has been widely recognized. The only thing about the allegory for which there is considerable agreement is that more is intended than a mere chronicling of the inadequacies of Mexico's railway system. Interpretations vary greatly, ranging from a Mexican reply to a materialistic view of life (Menton), through an allegory of the lessons taught the soul before birth (Echevarría), to a satire on politics (Bente). Yulan M. Washburn, the most widely known critic of Arreola's work, ends his discussion of the allegory by admitting that perhaps the only adequate summary is the sweeping declaration "that it has to do with the irregularities of our whole world." (Since all these discussions deal with "allegory" in one way or another, let us understand by the term to mean: "A form of extended metaphor in which objects and persons in a narrative, either in prose or verse, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus it

represents one thing in the guise of another□an abstraction in that of a concrete image" [Thrall]).

Even though allegorical literature has been with us for centuries (Plato, Prudentius, Dante, Quevedo, Cervantes, Bunyan and many more), the selection of a railroad by Arreola strikes a peculiarly modern note, and seemingly suggests a contemporary, "machine-age" turn of mind.

On the surface the story of "El guardagujas" tells of a weary traveler who has reached a deserted station, exhausted from bearing his heavy baggage which no one would help carry ("su gran valija, que nadie quiso cargar, le había fatigado en extremo"). A little old man, the Switchman, appears as if from nowhere ("salido de quien sabe donde"), and begins conveying a strange set of revelations about the workings of the railroads in the unnamed country where the traveler now finds himself.

The ambiguity of the story lends itself easily to numerous possible interpretations. The traveler can be 'Anyman' journeying through 'life,' and the fact that he has reached a momentary, deserted way station reflects the isolation of the 'moment' (a pause) which we all feel from time to time in life. The baggage for which he is unable to find help is almost certainly his own personal past and concerns. The Switchman is his 'conscience,' or that part of his mind which sees life objectively, as if at a distance. The sections of track alluded to by the switchman are 'paths of life,' and the destinations are the 'careers and goals' reached by other "travelers" before. With these thoughts in mind the following interpretation becomes clearer.

Item in the story Deserted station Heavy luggage
Traveler Switchman Inn (fonda) for travelers Tracks
New sections of track Track sections lacking 1 rail
Trains Tickets Train Company (empresa) Police Spies
"T" "F" "X"*Possible meaning* [Elements of a "Christian" interpretation
are in brackets] A given moment of life/ the
present. One's personal past. [sins] Anyone. One's
conscience/ unconscious mind. [soul] Momentarily
"dwelling" in the present. Life. New careers,
destinations, goals. Some destinies are more difficult
for certain people to reach Movement through
life. Degrees/training for life's careers. Fate/destiny.
[God's will] The protection of the establishment.
Spiteful people. A specific goal in life. "Felicidad"□
serendipity/ unexpected happiness. Acceptance of
fate. [Christ]

The few suggestions above for a tentative (somewhat forced) Christian interpretation (as well as the use by Arreola of the metaphor of the railroad) bring to mind the allegorical presentation of another railroad written almost a century and a half ago by Nathaniel Hawthorne in a story entitled, "The Celestial Railroad" (1843).

In comparing the two stories, one is struck almost at once by the similar, lightly ironic tone of both works (as well as the similar use of the railroad to symbolize the journey through life). One wonders at this point if further investigation might reveal more than the expected surface similarities resulting from their common use of the one central metaphor. To find the answer let us undertake a more detailed comparison.

Because the two works share a good number of qualities, it is possible to compare them schematically:

Hawthorne *"The Celestial Railroad" (1843)* A Christian Allegory in which the traveler tries to choose his fate. Language explicitly contains religious overtones. The railroad makes several stops which are more important than is the act of traveling. The story cites John Bunyan, and in part is a light-hearted continuation of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The goal for the travelers is the Celestial City, but many stop at Vanity Fair and do not manage to leave again. Two pilgrims on foot reach the Celestial City long before those on the Train do. (Mr. Stick-to-theright and Mr. Foot-it-to-heaven.) A Major part of the story deals with Vanity Fair and the market which sells illusions and vanities. The whole story is deliberately shown to be a dream□narrator establishes dream state at beginning and end. The purpose clearly is to point out a Christian moral: "Railroads do not constitute an 'easy' way to get to heaven." Mr. Smooth-itaway has an answer for almost every question the traveler can raise. The result of these answers finds the traveler able to see the dichotomy between life's reality and the illusion of the train journey. This is emphasized by the Traveler's relief felt upon awakening at the end of the story. Mr Smooth-it-away is the director of the Railroad corporation and is revealed at the end to be either the devil himself or his agent.

ARREOLA *"El guardaguias" (1952)* An allegory of life in which the traveler learns to accept fate's choice for him. Very little in explicitly religious overtone. Railroad traverses various sections which symbolize paths through life. An acceptance of movement as fate is understood. No previous writer or work is men tioned. Only our traveler has specific goal□"T." Stops are fortuitous or "predestined" by the Company ("empresa"). The only foot travelers mentioned are those who advance the Company over sections not traversed by anyone before. Most of story is a dialog

between the Switchman and the traveler over the illusions and realities of travel. The whole story is perhaps an illusion with an ambiguous beginning and an unclear end (unclear as to the intended meaning of the illusion if there is one). The purpose is ambiguous in the interpretation suggested in this study, a choice is made at the end to accept the vicissitudes of life. The Switchman has an answer for almost every question the traveler can raise. The result of these answers finds the traveler able and willing to accept any destination the train may take. The Switchman is a lifetime employee of the railroad, and is revealed at the end to be (little more than) an inspirational beacon showing the way to where the traveler can rejoin life.

By establishing some of the principal elements of plot and motivation in which the stories seem to agree or disagree, it has been shown that there is a good deal of similarity much of it plausibly stemming from the use of a common metaphor the railroad, and from the use of a common technique a dialogue between an "innocent" traveler and a sophisticated, seasoned veteran of the tracks.

To carry the comparison one step farther it will be useful to compare specific images as well as choices of language.

Hawthorne tells us that his "friendly" guide, Mr. Smooth-it-away, "had never actually visited the Celestial City, yet seemed. . . well acquainted with its laws, customs, policy, and statistics." Arreola introduces a much simpler character in his Switchman, but one nonetheless who shares Mr. Smoothit- away's lack of having visited the traveler's destination, "Yo señor, sólo soy guardagujas. . . . No he viajado nunca, ni tengo ganas de hacerlo."

Both travelers learn about a bridge over a perilous body of water. In the first case, Hawthorne explains, "Our coach rattled out of the city, and at a short distance from its outskirts, passed over a bridge of elegant construction, but somewhat too slight, as I imagined, to sustain any considerable weight. On either side lay an extensive quagmire. . . ." The Switchman tells a considerably more heroic tale about a group of travelers who carry on despite the absence of a bridge. "En la ruta faltaba el puente que debía salvar un abismo." The engineer convinced the passengers to continue, and under his direction the train was disassembled and carried to the other side of the "abismo, que todavía reservaba la sorpresa de contener en su fondo un río caudaloso." The similarity of the peril is noteworthy even though resolved in very different ways.

Hawthorne comments through the narrator on the quantity of luggage many passengers carry, concluding that he would not care to trust the previously mentioned bridge, "if each passenger were encumbered with as heavy luggage as that gentleman and myself." Arreola discusses luggage only at the beginning of the story when the weary traveler appears at the deserted station, bearing heavy baggage which no one else

would help carry. Luggage forms a standard metaphor in many allegories for one's troubled past.

Hawthorne presents the idea of tickets and the ticket office through a comparison with *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "The reader of John Bunyan will be glad to know that Christian's old friend Evangelist, who was accustomed to supply each pilgrim with a mystic roll, now presides at the ticket of- fice." Arreola presents the idea of tickets through the Switchman who agrees with the principle that a ticket to a specific destination should entitle the traveler to passage there, yet despite that, he notes that in the inn, there are people who have purchased numerous tickets for all the main destinations in the land, "podrá usted hablar con personas que han tomado sus precauciones, adquiriendo grandes cantidades de boletos." We all know people who have studied at school or in life preparing themselves for all kinds of futures (which never seem to come□they haven't yet boarded a train). In both stories the tickets are valuable, forming one means of initiating the movement towards one's destiny. They also continue the extended metaphor of railroading.

Hawthorne describes the boarding scene, comparing the moment to one in Bunyan: "A large number of passengers were already at the station house awaiting the departure of the cars. By the aspect and demeanor of these persons, it was easy to judge that the feelings of the community had undergone a very favorable change in reference to the celestial pilgrimage. It would have done Bunyan's heart good to see it." Arreola paints a vastly different moment when the Switchman advises the traveler to grab the first train he can, boarding as early as possible: "Trate de hacerlo cuando menos; mil personas estarán para impedírselo. Al llegar un convoy, los viajeros, irritados por una espera demasiado larga, salen de la fonda en tumulto para invadir ruidosamente la estación." As is often the case, many people try for the same job or career at the same time, and some, having waited a long time are especially irritable. Hawthorne's society seems artificially genteel and Arreola's perhaps just as artificially rude.

Hawthorne frequently speaks of the burden Bunyan's Pilgrim had to bear, and compares the luggage many are traveling with on the train, which "would be delivered to their respective owners at the journey's end." Arreola doesn't speak more of the burden of the luggage, but he does explain through the Switchman that in the event of death, "es motivo de orgullo para los conductores depositar el cadáver de un viajero□lujosamente embalsamado□en los andenes de la estación que prescribe su boleto." In essence the burden of one's past reaches the same destiny as the rest of the traveler.

Hawthorne's traveler is made aware of the propensity of the train to pass through areas replete with illusion, "mere delusions, which I ought to be heartily ashamed of; but all through the Dark Valley I was tormented and pestered, and dolefully bewildered with the same kind of waking dreams." Arreola conveys a similar idea. Once on the train (assuming a path in life towards a goal), even then one is not certain of reaching one's destination, "podriá darse el caso de que usted creyera haber llegado a T., y sólo fuese una illusión." One is often tempted to stop at an illusory goal in life. The Switchman continues the analogy: "Hay estaciones que son pura apariencia: han sido construidas

en plena selva y llevan el nombre de alguna ciudad importante." Illusion is an allegorical commonplace (Honig), but noteworthy in the similarity of use by both writers.

Hawthorne's traveler plans to enjoy his next stop□Vanity, "where Vanity Fair is still at the height of prosperity, and exhibits an epitome of whatever is brilliant, gay, and fascinating beneath the sun. As I purposed to make a considerable stay here. . . ." The length of his planned stay reminds us of the Switchman's advice: "Lo que debe hacer ahora mismo es buscar alojamiento en la fonda para viajeros." These rooms are highly sought after, and those who manage to get one dwell here on the long term, knowing that, "le resultará más barato y recibirá mejor atención." By taking lodging as the Switchman suggests, one accepts the present moment and lives entirely in the present. For many travelers through life, this is one way to remove oneself from the constant turmoil of the journey, not mattering whether the stop is in Vanity or simply a deserted station. Those who live on the long term in the present may find better treatment in the present than many of those who just pass through. Yet at the same time, this life style is a kind of imprisonment so that those who dwell here are likely to find themselves in an ashen building that looks and is much like a prison "un extraño edificio ceniciento que más bien parecía un presidio."

Hawthorne's traveler observes the spending behavior of his fellow passengers at Vanity Fair, noting that "some of the purchasers, I thought, made very foolish bargains. For instance, a young man, having inherited a splendid fortune, laid out a considerable portion of it in the purchase of diseases, and finally spent all the rest for a heavy lot of repentance and a suit of rags. In one shop, there were a great many crowns of laurel and myrtle, which soldiers, authors, statesmen, and various other people pressed eagerly to buy; some purchased these paltry wreaths with their lives, others by a toilsome servitude of years, and many sacrificed whatever was most valuable, yet finally slunk away without the crown." Arreola's Switchman speaks of one person who has spent a liftime and a fortune on round trip journeys, an amount great enough so that one whole new section of track is going to be built from the money. In both stories the idea is the same. Be it for glory or vainglory, the purchase may cost one's life.

Hawthorne's traveler comments on how part of the journey passed by as though through a haze. "My recollections of the journey are now, for a little space, dim and confused, inasmuch as a singular drowsiness here overcame me, owing to the fact that we were passing over the enchanted ground, the air of which encourages a disposition to sleep." Arreola tells us also of parts of the journey and unusual cars provided by the company, equipped with special slides to project on the windows and creating thus an illusion. The locomotives on those trains are also equipped to provide the sensation of moving even when the train is not doing so. Some times we advance through life while we think we are not moving, and are stationary when we think we are advancing.

Near the end of the story, Hawthorne notes a sudden change in the train in that "the engine now announced the close vicinity of the final station house by one last and horrible scream, in which there seemed to be distinguishable every kind of wailing and woe, and bitter fierceness of wrath, all mixed up with the wild laughter of a devil or a madman." Arreola too tells us that the approaching train is more than merely another

train, "Al fondo del paisaje, la locomotora se acercaba como un ruidoso advenimiento." Both trains and their engines are justifiably momentous□they have the power to change the route of one's life forever.

The friendly guide for Hawthorne's traveler is suddenly transformed at the end, "And then did my excellent friend Mr. Smooth-it-away laugh outright, in the midst of which cachinnation a smoke wreath issued from his mouth and nostrils, while a twinkle of lurid flame darted out of either eye, proving indubitably that his heart was all of a red blaze." Arreola's Switchman also changes, but in a much more genial manner: "El viejecillo sonriente hizo un guiño y se quedó mirando al viajero, lleno de bondad y de picardía." This sudden change in the two guides adds to the power of the moment by underlining it as a kind of transfiguration for all.

Whereas Hawthorne's traveler awakens at this moment, exclaiming "thank Heaven it was a dream!", Arreola's traveler decides that a change in his destination is appropriate, indicating that the Switchman has convinced him to accept destiny, to accept anything that life brings. That decision enables the Switchman to disappear and the train (a path through life) to appear. At that moment "el viejecillo se disovló en la clara mañana. Pero el punto rojo de la linterna siguió corriendo y saltando entre los rieles, imprudentemente, al encuentro del tren." The inspiration of the conversation, of the respite, lingers on, signaling a new awareness on the part of the traveler. No longer insistent on going to T., he is now prepared to accept what life offers, and in doing so, will be transported soon to a crossroads, and from there to another, and so on, and perhaps with luck may even wind up at "F."

By drawing the comparison between Hawthorne and Arreola, it has been seen that there are indeed a large number of similarities between their two stories. There seem to be enough to suggest that Arreola may have read Hawthorne's story and was "inspired" by it. Much of the similarity is undoubtedly due to the similarity of metaphor□once one decides to write an allegory using the railroad as the central metaphor, many of the other elements must accordingly fall into place: bridges, tunnels, tickets, stations, passengers, etc. That one would also choose to make it a dialogue between two men, one a complete stranger to the line, and the other a sophisticated denizen, is a bit less likely. Least likely of all would be a similarity of detail: the same burdensome luggage; a similar tumult at boarding; a canyon with water in the bottom that must be crossed; illusions occurring to all the passengers at the same time; a fools' paradise of vain, hollow people; an engine whose noise brings about an eerie sense of forboding.

Despite the considerable similarities that have been pointed out, the two works are vastly different in their manner of revealing allegorical meaning. For the chatty, deliberately humorous, tongue-incheek Hawthorne story, there is only one likely interpretation which all readers are led to recognize immediately. The first paragraph begins, "Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction." If the "gate of dreams" and "City of Destruction" aren't enough to cause recognition of Hawthorne's allegorical intent, he makes it more explicit yet in the first paragraph with the clearly meaningful names "Celestial City" and "Mr. Smooth-it-away." Many in his audience would already

have read or at least would have been acquainted with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and hence Hawthorne's deliberate borrowing of the term, "City of Destruction" from Bunyan would reinforce his allegorical intent as well as declare his purpose of humorously continuing Bunyan's story. His nineteenth- century audience would have been well-used to lengthy sermons with frequent, heavy-handed allegories, and would have enjoyed thoroughly both the satire and the serious meaning of his story.

On the other hand, for the more surrealistic allegory of Arreola, there are any number of interpretations, witness the possibilities mentioned in Ramírez and Washburn. While Hawthorne's story must be read as an allegory in order to be enjoyed, Arreola's story, with less obvious humor, satisfies on the surface as a dream-like story of a mysterious encounter with a friendly stranger in a land where the railroad behaves with a mind of its own. It satisfies a second time when the subtle hints of allegory cause the reader to recognize some of these possibilities as well. Had Arreola chosen the same heavy-handed technique used by Hawthorne, the story would have lost considerably thereby and might have seemed hopelessly old-fashioned to his twentieth-century audience. Instead, the open-ended nature of "El guardagujas" is very suggestive.

In the final analysis Hawthorne seeks to preach (albeit humorously) a Christian moral to his nineteenth- century audience, whereas Arreola intends merely to reveal interesting and amusing possibilities about life and railroading to his twentiethcentury audience.

What seems likely after having compared the two stories at length is that Arreola read Hawthorne's story as a young man and saw an idea and a technique in it that he liked very much. After some time, he consciously or unconsciously used its skeleton to flesh out his own allegory, utilizing his own philosophy of life, with the result being the little gem, "El guardagujas."

Source: John R. Burt, "This is no way to run a railroad: Arreola's Allegorical Railroad and a possible source," in *Hispania,* Vol. 71, No. 4, December, 1988, p. 806.

George R. McMurray

In the following essay, George R. McMurray outlines the shared insights regarding the twentieth- century experience between Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisphus *and Juan Jose Arreola's* The Switchman *to suggest that Arreola's short story aptly illustrates Camus' definition of the absurd.*

In 1942 Albert Camus published his book of essays entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which he developed his concept of the absurd in an effort to give meaning to human life in a senseless, war-torn world without God. A decade later, in 1952, the Mexican writer Juan José Arreola published "The Switchman," a short story that reveals a philosophical position somewhat similar to that of Camus. This essay attempts to delineate attitudes shared by these two authors, the first a kind of pagan moralist and the second an ironic observer of the human condition.

Arreola is only one of many contemporary writers who have demonstrated a sympathetic response to Camus' assessment of the complex modern environment. An

outstanding example of Mexican short fiction, "The Switchman" can be read on different levels and perhaps for this reason has never been completely understood. Briefly summarized, it is the tale of a stranger burdened with a large suitcase who arrives at a deserted station at the exact time his train is supposed to leave. As he gazes at the tracks that "melted away in the distance," an old man carrying a tiny red lantern appears from out of nowhere and proceeds to inform the stranger of the hazards of train travel in this country. It seems that, although an elaborate network of railroads has been planned and partially completed, the service is highly unreliable. Therefore the horrified stranger, who keeps indicating that he must arrive at his destination, "T," the next day, is advised to rent a room by the month in a nearby inn, an ash-colored building resembling a jail where many would-be travelers are lodged. The switchman then relates a series of preposterous anecdotes illustrating the numerous difficulties one might encounter in attempting to board the train, and the problems that might arise during any given trip. The stranger is also told that it should make no difference to him whether or not he reaches his destination, "T," that once he is on the train his life will indeed "take on some direction." When asked if he has traveled a great deal, the old man replies that he has never gotten on a train, nor does he have any desire to do so. At this moment a whistle is heard in the distance, indicating the train's arrival. But upon inquiring again where the stranger wants to go, the switchman receives the answer "X" instead of "T." In the final lines the old man vanishes as he breaks into a run along the tracks, and only the red lantern remains visible before the noisily approaching engine.

In *The Myth of Sisphus* Camus states that neither man alone nor the world by itself is absurd. Rather the absurd arises from the clash between reasoning, finite man, on the one hand, striving for order, unity and happiness and, on the other, the silent, unreasonable world offering no response to his persistent demands. The absurd man is one who recognizes a kind of void or lack of meaning in life and resolves to commit himself to the conflict between his intentions and the reality he encounters. Like Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to roll a huge stone up a hill again and again for eternity and whom Camus considers the epitome of the absurd hero, the absurd man can attain heroic proportions by rebelling against his torment and by demonstrating that the struggle itself gives definition to his existence. The absurd, then, is the metaphysical state of conscious man fully aware of death and nothingness; it is lucid reason pitted against chaos; it is the only certainty linking man with an alien world devoid of absolutes. The feeling of the absurd can come at any moment, but it is most likely to happen when "the stage sets collapse" and the individual, suddenly aware of the seductive rhythm of daily routine, asks himself the crucial question, "Why?" What follows can be a complete awakening to consciousness of the absurd or, if one is not on his guard, a loss of this awareness and a return to the chain of meaningless, repetitive acts. Thus, once man has recognized the absurd, he must keep it alive by maintaining a state of revolt against the certainty of ultimate defeat, this being his only means of achieving self-fulfillment and of transcending the tragedy of his existence.

According to Camus, the concept of the absurd restores man's freedom to live life to the fullest, liberating him from the bonds of preconceived values, and making fate a human and individual matter. The absurd also negates hope for the future and considers action in the Here and Now to be an end in itself. Suicide and faith in God, then, are out of the

question because either would represent an escape from the absurd, terminating the necessary state of tension between reasoning man and the unreasonable world. By his emphasis on this state of tension, Camus demonstrates his admiration for reason, but he also recognizes its limits and the impossibility of reducing the unintelligible world to rational principles. As prime examples of the absurd man, he lists the actor, the conqueror, Don Juan, the creator, and, perhaps most important here, the traveler, who is "constantly on the move."

Although the French thinker has defined and illustrated the absurd in lucid, rational language, subsequent practitioners of absurd literature have often relied on fantasy and other antirational devices to present their perceptions of life without purpose. Some of these writers, including Beckett, Ionesco, Borges, Cortázar and Arreola, have attacked reason more forcefully, and probably more effectively, than Camus.

In "The Switchman" the railroad journey could be construed as a metaphor of absurd existence, and the act of boarding the train, as both an awareness of the absurd and an acceptance of its challenges on the part of the passengers who, once on board, realize they may not be taken where they want to go. At the beginning of the story the stranger is a nonabsurd man and, one might add, an amusing victim of irony, because he has complete faith in reason and assumes that because he has purchased a ticket he will arrive at his destination on schedule. The switchman likewise is a nonabsurd man, for while he is fully aware of the absurd, he has never boarded a train, has no intention of doing so, and thus has in no way committed himself to revolt. He is, rather, a passive, ironic observer of life and perhaps the author's persona. The stranger's heavy suitcase would seem to represent the burden of reason he carries around with him, the railroad tracks melting into the distance his uncertain destiny, and the ashcolored inn a kind of jail for all the potential passengers who are still trapped in the mechanical cycle of daily routine and who have yet to pose the Camusian question, "Why?" The elaborate network of uncompleted railroads gives expression to man's fruitless efforts to reduce the unreasonable world to rational principles, an idea reinforced by the switchman's ludicrous allusions to expeditionary trains taking years to complete their runs and the necessity of adding funeral cars in case of deaths along the way. Furthermore, we are told that trains occasionally travel on roadbeds where the rails are missing, resulting in disastrous accidents. One such mishap occurred after the train wheels were worn away to their axels. The stranded passengers met the challenge by founding the town of "F," which became a happy, progressive community "filled with mischievous children playing with rusty vestiges of the train."

When the stranger exclaims that he has no desire for such adventures, the old man responds, "You need to pluck up your courage; perhaps you may ever become a hero." He then narrates the episode of two hundred passengers on a train that arrived at the edge of an abyss over which the railway builders had failed to construct a bridge. Inspired by the engineer's pep talk, the passengers took the train apart and carried it down an embankment and across a river so that they might continue their journey. The management was so pleased by the results of their ingenuity that plans for building a bridge were abandoned and a discount was offered to passengers willing to repeat the same adventure. In Camusian terms these travelers would represent absurd heroes

committed to the principle of living life to the fullest and making action an end in itself. The founding of the town of "F" after the accident, moreover, suggests the absurd man's rejection of the antiquated values of the past, symbolized by the rusty vestiges of the wrecked train, and his acceptance of the challenge to forge his own destiny.

The unreasonable, disorderly world encountered by the absurd man is also illustrated by the switchman's references to the violent disputes among ticketholders on the station platform and the schools organized to teach methods of getting on a fastmoving train, if necessary with the aid of armor. To the stranger's question regarding what he can do to assure his arrival at his destination, the switchman advises him to initiate his journey with the firm idea that he is going to "T," although it's hard to tell if it will do any good." Furthermore, once on board the train, the stranger should take every possible precaution. It seems there could be spies planted among the travelers to denounce them for their most innocent remarks, leading to their incarceration for life in a prison car. Moreover, in order to deceive the passengers and cause them to get off at the wrong stops, the management has constructed false stations referred to as "stage sets" enlivened with realistic dummies. At the same time, to reduce the anxiety of the travelers, the train windows have been provided with ingenious devices to create the illusion of movement through captivating landscapes when, in reality, the train is motionless. As the switchman explains, "The hope is that one day the passengers will capitulate to fate, give themselves into the hands of an omnipotent management, and no longer care to know where they are going or where they have come from." Thus, like Camus, Arreola seems to suggest the necessity of keeping the absurd alive by recognizing that reality is illusory, that nothing is certain except the absurd, and that only by facing life squarely can one give it meaning and value. This posture of permanent revolt against fate, embodied here in the "omnipotent management," will also prevent the absurd man from being lulled back into his state of unawareness prior to the collapse of the stage sets which triggered his initial encounter with the absurd.

The climax of the story occurs when the train approaches and the switchman asks the stranger to repeat his destination. The latter's reply, "X," indicates his acceptance of the absurd unknown. Moreover, the fact that in these lines for the first time in the story he is called the "traveler" instead of the "stranger" underscores his newly acquired role as an absurd man with the potential of becoming a hero like the passengers who carried the train across the abyss.

The images set forth in the final lines of the story are also closely related to its thematic content. Immediately after the traveler informs the switchman of his new destination, "X," we are told that "the little old man dissolved in the clear morning. But the red speck of his lantern kept on running and leaping imprudently between the rails to meet the train. In the distant landscape the train was noisily approaching." Thus, the stranger's transformation from a nonabsurd to an absurd man, the disappearance of the switchman, and the train's arrival set the stage for the ensuing absurd journey. It would seem, then, that the tiny lantern confronting the oncoming train symbolizes the absurd clash between limited human reason and the dark forces of destruction.

"The Switchman" is a tale that lends itself to multiple interpretations, its ambiguities serving to augment its impact. Whatever interpretation the reader may choose, it appears likely that Arreola is not only deeply concerned with man's quest for values in a world fraught with uncertainty, but also with the exploration of a reality lying beyond the confines of reason. The Mexican author is less militant than Camus in his revolt against the human condition, but at the same time he may be less optimistic about man's potential. Whereas Camus' hero Sisyphus constitutes a model for giving meaning to existence, Arreola's anonymous stranger would seem to personify twentieth-century alienation in a world dominated by institutionalized technology, namely the railroad, which has presented man with the illusion of self-determination but, in reality, has merely created a metaphoric labyrinth for his absurd and dangerous odyssey.

On an esthetic level, the symbolic imagery and structural balance of Arreola's tale represent his attempt to give artistic coherence to the elusive reality that he, as an absurd creator, finds unacceptable. Thus, when the tension between the ironic observer (the switchman) and the man of reason (the stranger) is finally dissolved, it is immediately replaced by the confrontation between the traveler (that absurd Camusian hero "constantly on the move") and his uncertain destiny. With this sudden shift from one level of dramatic tension to another, the reader realizes that the title of the story may not refer to a railroad switchman but to a kind of catalyst-agent whose role is to awaken the protagonist to the absurd and "switch" him onto another track. If we accept this premise, the switchman could represent the stranger's alter ego, and the entire story, a metaphor of modern man's awakening to Camus' famous question, "Why?"

In conclusion, there is no proof that Arreola has been directly influenced by Camus' philosophy. Still, it is not unlikely that a voracious reader like Arreola, who studied in France immediately after World War II, was acquainted with *The Myth of Sisyphus* by 1952, the year he published The "Switchman." Camus' essays indicate an ethical direction toward secular, anthropocentric humanism, one of his fundamental principles being that man must oppose the unreasonable universe even though his search for order may make him appear absurd. Arreola seems to share a similar metaphysical stance, although his roguish humor and fantasy set him apart from the more serious-minded Frenchman. Both authors, however, project philosophical insights corresponding closely to the twentieth-century experience. Unlike the naturalists, who envision a Utopian future characterized by man's domination of nature through science, and unlike Dostoevski's underground man, whose contradictions lie within himself, Camus and Arreola believe the human dilemma stems from the disproportion between lucid intention and chaotic reality. Camus' definition of the absurd, it seems to me, is poetically illustrated by the switchman's internalized journey whether or not Arreola was consciously aware of *The Myth of Sisyphus* at the time he wrote his story.

Source: George R. McMurray, "Albert Camus' Concept of the Absurd and Juan Jose Arreola's 'The Switchman,'" in *Latin American Literary Review,* Vol. VI, No. 11, Fall-Winter, 1977, p.30.

Topics for Further Study

Research existentialism, and then discuss how "The Switchman" fits into this school of writing. What evidence of Franz Kafka's influence do you find?

Critics disagree about the role of Magical Realism in "The Switchman." Research Magical Realism and discuss your opinion. Where do you draw the line between use of the fantastic and Magical Realism?

Critics offer widely disparate interpretations of "The Switchman." Compare and contrast several of these interpretations, and offer your own interpretation with evidence to back it up.

To what effect does Arreola use dialogue between his two characters as the bulk of the narrative? Discuss the role of point of view in the story, and use another contrasting work of short fiction as an example.

Compare and Contrast

1953: The Mexican President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines makes a constitutional change that gives women the right to vote. This is a tremendous step, as only since the Mexican Revolution have citizens had the right to elect their leaders.

Today: Everyone has the right to vote in Mexico, although government corruption is such that voting is seen as ineffective.

1947: President Miguel Ameman Valdes, the first Mexican president without a military background since the Revolution, becomes the first Mexican president to visit the U.S. as head of state, in an effort to boost foreign trade.

1994: Mexico, the U.S., and Canada agree to the NAFTA treaty, a joint trade endeavor aimed at meeting the trade needs of all three nations.

1950s: Postwar Mexico experiences the growth of industry and agriculture. The years after World War II reflect a rise in prosperity similar to that seen in the U.S., resulting in growth of the middle class.

Today: Mexican society is comprised of a vast lower class; poverty and malnutrition are the rule rather than the exception.

1930s and 1940s: The domestic focus is on redistribution of land to the peasantry for communal farming and production.

Today: Mexico is infamous for its uncontrolled urbanization, which has resulted in gigantic slums on the outskirts of all urban centers, and massive air and water pollution.

What Do I Read Next?

Bestiaro (1958) is Juan José Arreola's most famous work besides *Confabulario and Other Inventions*. It is a collection of short stories, vignettes, and fables using animals to personify human qualities.

Arreola's best-known work is *Confabulario and Other Inventions* (1964). It contains the sum total of his work through 1961, including his most acclaimed short stories.

Where the Air Is Clear (1971) is Carlos Fuentes' first and best-known novel. The lyrically told story includes members across the social spectrum in post-Revolutionary Mexico.

Existence and Being (1949) is Martin Heidegger's definitive work on existentialist thought.

Ross Larson's *Fantasy and Imagination in the Mexican Narrative* (1977) is an excellent resource for contextualizing the work of many Mexican authors, including Arreola.

Juan Rulfo is a contemporary of Arreola, and worked with him on publications in the early 1940s. His *The Burning Plain* (1941) is a collection of evocative, beautifully written stories about life after the Mexican Revolution.

Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community (1995) is an extremely thorough, up-to-date historical and critical discussion of Magical Realism by a variety of authors. Edited and with an introduction by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris.

Further Study

Menton, Seymour, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, Art Alliance Press, 1983.

Menton, an authority on all things Latin American, discusses the way Magical Realism is manifested in twentieth-century Latin American literature.

Pena, Carlo Gonzales, *History of Mexican Literature*, Southern Methodist University Press, 1968.

A thorough overview of Mexican literature through 1943, including an in-depth discussion of Spanish colonialism on all kinds of Mexican writing.

Washburn, Yulan M., *Juan José Arreola*, Twayne, 1983.

More criticism and interpretation on the author.

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Arreola, Juan José, *Confabulario and Other Inventions*, translated by George D. Schade, University of Texas Press, 1964, pp.78-85.

Davila, Luis, ed., *Juan José Arreola*, Twayne's World Authors Series, Indiana University, 1983, pp. 49-53.

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Pulsipher, Curtis D., *The Use of the Fantastic, Neo-Fantastic, Animals and Humor as Vehicles for Satire in the Works of Juan José Arreola and Murilo Rubiao*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1985, pp. 186, 192.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) 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, LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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

LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS 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.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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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