

Jorge Luis Borges – use of ambiguity

Profession, Writer



The Art of Being Ambiguous In his collection of short stories, *Ficciones*, Jorge Luis Borges uses dreams, imagination and fantasy to establish ambiguity in his stories. With the use of juxtaposition and symbols, Borges blends a realm of dreams and imagination into the individual's everyday worldly experiences. Through these devices, Borges commonly blurs the line between aspects of reality for his characters versus the constructs of his or her mind.

By combining the real with the fictitious, Borges incorporates ambiguity into his stories and introduces his readers to new perspectives of world around them. In "The South," Borges establishes ambiguity by dropping subtle textual hints that would ultimately allow for the reader to attain vastly different interpretations of the same text. If taken at face value, the main character Dahlmann is released from a sanatorium after a serious head injury.

On the train ride back from the sanatorium, Borges hints that Dahlmann periodically transitions into his illusory past of the old South. Even as he enters the cab that would take him to the train station, he admits that "reality is partial to symmetries and slight anachronism" (175) meaning that his past, although misplaced and irrelevant to modern times, continues to have significance in the present. The reader can argue that Dahlmann's nostalgia induces illusions of the world from a time he remembered and celebrated it.

On the train ride back to his ranch, he describes that the car "was not the same car that had pulled out of the station... the plains and the hours had penetrated and transfigured it" (177) and that Dahlmann "was traveling not

only into the South but into the past " (177). Borges uses this description to indicate that Dahlmann transcends into his fantasies of the old South on the train ride home as a result of a longing for the past. However, Borges also hints that Dahlmann might not have left the sanatorium at all, but has actually only dreamed about his release.

Some readers find it improbable how Dahlmann is told he is " coming right along" (175) by the doctors at the sanatorium when only the day before Dahlmann was told that he was on the brink of death from septicemia. For Dahlmann, dying in the sanatorium would be a humiliating ending. When he is informed of his near death experience, Dahlmann felt " suddenly self-pitying" (175) and broke down crying. Borges points out that Dahlmann aspires to be like his ancestors and die heroically in the old Argentinian manner. Because dying in the sanatorium would have been a disgrace for Dahlmann, Borges highlights the possibility that Dahlmann dreamed up a perfect, heroic death in which he would defend the honor of the Old South. This is portrayed when Dahlmann gears up to fight " a young thug" (179), symbolic of modern Argentina, outside a country store at the end of his journey. When Borges states that " it was as the South itself had decided that Dahlmann should accept the challenge" (179), he emphasizes how Dahlmann viewed himself as about to fight in the name of the Old South.

For this reason, it is arguable that Dahlmann fantasized his whole journey home and his dreams reflect how he desires to die a heroic death in reality. By incorporating these subtle hints throughout " The South", Borges establishes ambiguity between whether Dahlmann had actually left the sanatorium or simply dreamed the whole story. Through this ambiguity,

Borges allows for readers to form multiple interpretations to the same story. In “ The Secret Miracle”, Borges blurs the line between the factual world and what constitutes as a fantasy by introducing the idea of having dreams transcend into reality.

The main character Hladik has begun to formulate his own play through the inner-workings of his imagination. Aspects of this play mimic Hladik’s reality as he reveals in the end that the main character of his play, Jaroslav Kubin, actually dreams up the events that occurred before in the story. “ The play has not taken place; it is a circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences and re-experiences (160). ” As Kubin dreams up the plotline of his story, Hladik constructs and reenacts the plotline of the play in which Kubin is part of through a dream, thus incorporating a dream within a dream.

By juxtaposing Hladik’s reality and the play he has constructed in his mind, Borges introduces the overarching idea of how the mind constitutes for a different realm in which the dreamers and thinkers can shape, share, and confide in. This idea is again prominent when the bullet that is intended to kill Hladik on the day of his execution stops seconds before taking him. Borges states that, “ in Hladik’s mind a year would pass between the order of the fire and the discharge of the rifle” (162) as a result of God.

If taken at face value, God has intervened as promised in Hladik’s dream. If the reader was to interpret this story in this manner, it is clear that events from Hladik’s dream transform and impact his reality. In which case, Borges clouds the distinction between Hladik’s reality and dreams. However, oddly enough, when Hladik requests the assistance of God in a dream the night

before, the librarian states “ I myself have gone blind searching for it [God]” (161), indicating that presence of God is questionable at most.

If God is not yet found, He could not have given Hladik the extra year. By incorporating these subtle hints, Borges also allows the reader to interpret that it was solely Hladik’s perception of time, rather than the intervention of God, that allowed him another year. By blurring the line between aspects of Hladik’s reality versus the constructs of his mind, Borges permits the reader to question the presence of God in Hladik’s execution and introduces the idea that time is relative to how an individual’s mind perceives it.

In the last short story “ Circular Ruins,” Borges again uses dreams to introduce the reader to a new way of perceiving the world. In this story, the protagonist would dream each individual part of a boy until he would have finally engineered a son using his own imagination. However, the irony lies herein that the creator realizes at the end of the story he too “ was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him” (100). The protagonist was nothing but a dream of another dreamer like his son was the dream of himself.

Through “ The Circular Ruins,” Borges asserts that the individual’s perception of reality might simply be an elaborate illusion. The protagonist did not realize he himself was a dream until the end of the story when he steps into the flames. Similarly, Borges questions the credibility of the reader’s own existence. Borges uses the circular ruins where the protagonist dreams his son - and where his son might possibly dream his own creation - as a symbol to represent the infinite loop of dreams.

Additionally, because a circle does not have a definite beginning or end, it signifies the dreams itself have an ambiguous beginning and an indefinite end. In essence, the ambiguity within this story lies in that the reader is left to question the original dreamer, had there even been an original. The individual is left to ponder whether the circular ruins are to constitute reality or whether the dreamer is simply experiencing a dream within a dream, another popular style of Borges as delineated within "The Secret Miracle". Overall, Borges opens up a door of possibilities that lead to a string of unanswerable questions left to the reader's interpretation. In general, Borges uses dreams, imagination, and constructs of the mind to brilliantly incorporate ambiguity into his short stories and thereby allow his readers to ponder new thoughts and ideas. In "The South", the readers are left to question whether Dahlmann's journey back to the South had actually taken place or whether it was only a dream in which he portrays his desire to want to die a heroic death like his ancestors.

Within "The Secret Miracle", Borges weaves aspects from Hladik's own imagination into his reality such as the possible presence of God. This in turn allows the reader to question the distinction between factors of Hladik's real world versus that in his mind. Finally, in "The Circular Ruins," the ending leaves the reader to question whether dreams constitute a reality of its own or whether these dreams had an original dreamer who was simply dreaming within a dream, a popular motif in other Borges stories.

When Borges blurs the line between reality and fiction, he establishes ambiguity and often induces his reader to question the credibility of their own reality. Through this ambiguity, Borges asserts that there is no clear or

correct way to understand his short stories and that each story is open to the individual's own interpretation. As a result, the short stories are open to a wide range of interpretations. Through these multiple interpretations, the reader opens him or herself up to new ways of perceiving the world.