

Julio cortazar casa tomada analysis



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Analyse the treatment of the “ outsider” or “ outsiders” in one of the texts studied on the course. What role does this tension play in the socio-political vision of the author?

Julio Cortazar was one of most influential Argentine writers of all time. He was one of the great masters of short stories and was compared to the likes of Jorge Luis Borges. Cortazar’s literature is closely linked to social and cultural realities of Latin America and in particular Argentina. This essay will begin with the history of Julio Cortazar including his background influences and the style of his texts with focus on the short story ‘ La Casa Tomada’. Then this shall lead on to the analysis of the treatment of characters that are considered as “ outsiders” in the story focusing on the different interpretations of the main characters and the unknown invaders that take over the house. Furthermore, the role of these “ outsiders” will be discussed relating to the socio-political vision of Cortazar and the influence of politics on his writing, incorporating the socio-political situation in Buenos Aires, Argentina at that time.

In 1914, Julio Cortazar was born in Brussels, Belgium of Argentine parents, after World War 1 his family returned to Buenos Aires, Argentina. This was where he grew up and became educated, then later moved to Paris in 1951, after obtaining a French scholarship, where he died in 1984 at the age of 70. Prior to becoming a writer, he worked as a teacher and then as a translator. (Prego & Cortazar, 1997)

Cortazar is known as one of the Latin American writers of the “ boom” that exploded onto the world literary scene. The literary boom was during the middle of the 20th century when Latin American writers work became

published in Europe and the rest of the world. The stories were known to associate with magical realism which is where 'unreal things are treated as if realistic and mundane, and mundane things as if unreal'. The plots of these stories usually combined real and fantastic elements in a way that makes them difficult to separate. (www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Latin-American-Boom) Stories that have been written by Julio Cortázar normally mix fantasy with Latin American reality.

The story being focused on, 'La Casa Tomada' by Julio Cortázar, was initially published in the 1946 review 'Los Anales de Buenos Aires' which was directed by Jorge Luis Borges. It then appeared in his first volume of short stories 'Bestiario' in 1951. (www.juliocortazar.com.ar/hislife.htm) In the story, a middle-aged brother and sister live together in an old large family house, situated in the North district of Buenos Aires. They spend their days doing routine tasks with little variation. The sister, Irene, knits and the brother reads and collects stamps. They both clean the house and cook meals together. One day they hear mysterious noises within the house, but they do not worry. Without much explanation, they abandon parts of the house because of this invading noise. When eventually the unknown noises take over the whole house, they leave the house with nothing and throw the key away.

It is written in the first person with the narrator being the protagonist in the story. This means the protagonist is the centre of attention and this allows the reader to participate in all the events. The reader can see all the thoughts and ideas of the protagonist so they can easily identify with the protagonist. This adds realism to the story in contrast with the 'unknown

characters' that bring an element of the surrealism that 'boom' writers are known for.

The northern district of Buenos Aires where the protagonist and his sister live is the rich and privileged area and from the start of the story, it sets out to the reader that the siblings are from privileged backgrounds. "Nos gustaba la casa porque aparte de espaciosa y antigua (hoy que las casas antiguas sucumben a la más ventajosa liquidación de sus materiales) [...]" (Cortázar, page 1). The house has eight bedrooms so previously their family would have occupied all the rooms and they would have had maids to work for them.

The large house was previously owned by their ancestors and they are the last of a long line of family. "[...] guardaba los recuerdos de nuestros bisabuelos, el abuelo paterno, nuestros padres y toda la infancia." (Cortázar, page 1). It seems they can afford to live without working. Instead they spend their days doing little more than cleaning, reading and knitting with rare communication with the outside world.

From this, the theme of "outsiders" comes into play, which plays a strong role throughout the story. From analyzing the story, the unknown invaders are immediately seen as the "outsiders" that come in and take over. However, the siblings could also be "outsiders" giving that they are so cut off from the rest of society. Cortázar portrays the siblings as very unusual and lonely characters that do little to prevent themselves from being outsiders in society.

The siblings seem to be obsessed by routine and keeping the house clean. We find out little about the narrator except that he likes French literature. He portrays the sister Irene as a very passive female who is happy to just spend her time knitting. They share the cleaning and cooking chores between themselves. The narrator says how they never use the back part of the house except entering to clean. Therefore, there is already a barrier created between them and the "outsiders" with the large oak door. There is a reference to how much dust collects on the furniture. "Buenos Aires será una ciudad limpia, pero eso se lo debe a sus habitantes y no a otra cosa." The narrator seems to imply that the middle-class citizens keep the city clean. He also says "Hay demasiada tierra en el aire" which is ironic seeing as the city is called "Buenos Aires". (Holmes: 2004, pg254)

There is an incestuous aspect between the brother and sister as they have reached middle age and the only time they spend is with each other, uninterested in others outside the house. "Simple y silencioso matrimonio de hermanos[...]" (Cortázar) This shows they had no plans to marry anybody else and have children to pass on the house to. This incestuous theme is something Cortázar said may have been related to his own life; "Yo empecé a pensar y a descubrir que efectivamente a través de mis sueños yo tengo un problema incestuoso con una hermana mía" (Cortázar por Cortázar, pg 43)

The brother and sister can be seen as outsiders at the end of the story as well because they are the ones that end up on the outside of the house with nowhere to go. They have numerous possessions at the start of their story and bit by bit, it is taken away from them until they are left outside with

nothing. “¿Tuviste tiempo de traer alguna cosa? – le pregunté inútilmente. – No, nada.”

The other “outsiders” are the invaders that are seen as unknown enemies. They are referred to as plural during the story for example when they take over the first part of the house; “-Tuve que cerrar la puerta del pasillo. Han tomado parte del fondo.” (Cortázar) so the reader automatically presumes it is more than one unknown character.

The unknown outsiders are treated as very unwelcome and they can be seen as threatening. Throughout the story, Cortázar leaves no clues to whom or what these noises are and it seems as if the brother and sister are not necessarily that scared or shocked by them. An example is after the part where the brother says to Irene that they had taken over the back part:

“Dejó caer el tejido y me miró con sus graves ojos cansados. -¿Estas seguro? Asenti. -Entonces -dijo recogiendo las agujas- tendremos que vivir en este lado.”

She does not show any fear and just carries on knitting. They seem to have knowledge of whom or what has invaded the house and act alone in defending themselves against this invasion. At the end of the story, the outsiders are still left as unidentifiable and mysterious characters to the reader and leaves them guessing. It is up to the reader to come to their own conclusion about whom or what they think these strange noises are.

The beginning of the story starts as very realistic with a description of their lives then once the outsiders that invade take over the first part of the

house, it becomes surreal. Cortázar puts a lot of emphasis on the description of the house; the house seems unwelcoming as it lacks the comfort and security of a home. The characters feel unsafe in their home and ready to flee at any point and it loses any feeling of safety when the others take over. Cortázar explores the connection between identity and the home. The house shows everything about the siblings such as their wealth, their background and their hobbies and once they no longer have the house, they lose their identity.

The house is personified in the story; “ a veces llegamos a pensar que era ella que no nos dejó casar.” This shows it has some sort of control over the brother and sister living within and creates a barrier between them and the real world. The only time that the brother visits outside is when he goes to get his French literature or wool for Irene to knit and Irene never leaves the house. Also, note that the street name Rodríguez Peña was the name of Cortázar's street when he lived in Buenos Aires. (Maquiera: 2004, pg. 10) Therefore, this shows how the story relates to his own personal experience.

It seems the treatment of these outsiders seems to play a strong role in the vision of Cortázar as the story is related to his life. There are numerous interpretations for the meaning behind *La Casa Tomada* but the one that stands out seems to be that Cortázar uses the relation between the characters, the outsiders and the home as a way to respond to social and political tensions that were occurring in Buenos Aires during that time.

Cortázar wrote the story post-war when Juan Perón had recently come into power over Argentina. Initially Perón had worked his way up by taking a

position that nobody else was interested in as the head of the Labour department. From there he appealed to the workers. Péron aimed for an independent Argentina, free from foreign economical influence. Péron promised a "New Argentina" founded on "social justice, political sovereignty, and economic independence". He showed support for the workers that he called the "masas descamisadas" by increasing wage earners income and building a large number of low cost homes. (Rock: 1987 pg. 262-263)

Cortázar was anti-peronist and demonstrated against his regime. He saw Péron as a dictator and felt threatened by the control. "Si bien Cortázar no comulgaba aun con el socialismo, su postura hacia la política del nuevo gobierno era abiertamente crítica" (Maquieira: 2004, pg. 19.) Péron aimed to integrate the population and bring about social reforms. Many, including Cortázar saw him and his wife Evita as a political and economical threat and "a threat to good taste". They saw him "encouraging the invasion of Buenos Aires by riffraff from the provinces". The racist term "cabecitas negras" was used against the immigrant workers. (Standish: 2001 pg. 4) For the opponents of Péron his promises were myths and had caused a divided society with a bankrupt economy and a nation controlled by a dictatorship.

"El Peronismo significó la llegada a la capital de la clase obrera del interior del país y la entrada de esa población en la vida social y cultural de la ciudad" (Maquieira: 2004, pg. 20). Although Cortázar does not link them directly, the 'outsiders' in the story can be seen as a satire in showing the socio-political vision of Cortázar against Peronism and the arrival of the working class during that period.

The story could be portrayed as showing the anxieties of the upper and middle classes of Buenos Aires during the nine-year administration of Juan Perón. By showing how they felt marginalised because of the increasing number of rural immigrants that were coming into the city for work. Just like the protagonists in the story, their way of life had changed and these invaders into the house may symbolise the workers coming into the city.

Therefore, the role of these outsiders could be an allegory of the migrant workers that moved into Buenos Aires and took over a lot of the jobs and the brother and sister could symbolise the Argentines that felt like these migrants invaded them.

“ Bien podría representar todos mis miedos, o quizá, todas mis aversiones; en ese caso la interpretación antiperonista me parece bastante posible, emergiendo incluso inconscientemente”. - Julio Cortázar (www. abretelibro.com)

The story is most commonly seen as an anti-peronist allegory and expresses the fear that Cortázar may have felt about 'outsiders' in Argentina. The feeling of fear felt that was caused by Perón's military government and by the invasion of industrialisation. However, the story has also been seen as similar to that of Adam and Eve; they are expelled from their small and closed paradise into an unknown world. http://rincondelvago.com/casa-tomada_julio-cortazar_2.html

When asked, Cortázar says that 'La Casa Tomada' was inspired from a nightmare that he had and that when he woke from this nightmare he immediately started writing the story. The house described in the story is the <https://assignbuster.com/julio-cortazar-casa-tomada-analysis/>

same as in his nightmare. "La única diferencia entre lo soñado y el cuento es que en la pesadilla yo estaba solo." (Prego: 1990, pg79) When he woke up, he immediately started writing the story. Therefore, he says that it is his dream that should be analyzed not the story. "Es un cuento que para mí no tiene absolutamente ningún contexto de ninguna naturaleza salvo la pesadilla." (Garfield: 1978 pg 89)

The architecture of the house plays an important role in the link between the present and the past in Buenos Aires. The house symbolizes the city's aristocratic past, after Independence, Buenos Aires chose European instead of colonial architecture. Architects were brought over by the Government from Europe to design buildings. (Holmes: 2003 pg254) Again, this shows the fear that the characters have of change from the past, as they prefer their traditional style European house.

During the time, that a large amount of immigrants from overseas and migrants from the countryside came there was a demand for more housing. So new housing projects were created for the middle-class resulting in higher value for houses like theirs as the narrator points out at the beginning of the story (Holmes: 2004), "las casas antiguas sucumben a la más ventajosa liquidación de sus materiales" (Cortázar). The brother and sister prefer the European style spacious house and enclose themselves in what represents the urban past. They seclude themselves from the city and in turn make themselves outsiders from the modern Argentina. Therefore, the invaders could be the city making them leave their home.

Throughout the text there are numerous historical references such as the French literature which the brother enjoys reading. This seems to be one of the few 'outside' things that are accepted into the house. He also finds that "Desde 1939 no llegaba nada valioso a la Argentina" which refers to the lack of European culture in Argentina because of the war. The brother only seems to find value in French literature and has to re-read what French literature he has. Once again, this also shows the link with their fear of change.

The relationship between the characters and the house shows their lack of interest in modernity and change. They seem to want to stay within a routine and show little interest towards changes outside of their house in Argentina. This story may represent Peronist Buenos Aires but can also represent the role of Europe in post-colonial space. It seems that Cortázar rejects how Argentina has become post-European influence. The story may also portray the modern Buenos Aires conflicting with the past city.

After looking in depth at the story and the history related to the story, I can conclude that the different "outsiders" in the story play a strong role in the socio-political vision of Julio Cortázar. *La Casa Tomada* has numerous interpretations about its hidden meaning. Although when questioned, he does not specifically relate it to a particular opinion but to a nightmare he had. This showed his underlying preoccupations with the events in Buenos Aires during that time.

The theme of outsiders is continued throughout the story and each character shows an aspect of being an outsider. The invaders that take over the house

from the siblings are seen both as the workers that moved into Buenos Aires invading the space of the middle-class or as the city making the protagonists leave their safe past and as face the changing Buenos Aires. The protagonists show a stereotype example of the middle-class people of Argentina during that time that feared any sort of change, though in the original nightmare it is Cortázar himself. It is Cortázar that it seems had this fear of invasion from “outsiders” and was concerned about the changes occurring. The role of the outsiders is very effective in demonstrating his feelings about Perón and the changes within Argentina.