

# A comparison and contrast study: poe's and borges' labyrinths



**ASSIGN  
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A labyrinth, on the surface, can be described as “ a place constructed of or full of intricate passageways and blind alleys” (Merriam-Webster), but it can also be characterized as “ something extremely complex or tortuous” (Merriam-Webster). Both Poe and Borges intertwine labyrinths into their works, for example, Poe focuses on the more nonphysical representation of a labyrinth whereas Borges chooses to represent the labyrinth as a physical maze. The reader must pay close attention to the architectures of both variations - a detail that reveals how each labyrinth is different or similar. Labyrinths take on different interpretations and forms based on those who spawn them, but it is apparent similarities in the structure and entrapment of those within.

The major differences between the two authors' short stories is evident in how the labyrinths were presented. For example, Poe's labyrinth is present throughout the short story, while Borges' labyrinth only appears at the end of Lonnröt's investigation. Poe's interpretation in “ The Purloined Letter” involves a labyrinth based on ignorance keeping the trapped from progressing, alternatively Borges' interpretation in “ Death and the Compass” ostensibly consists of a labyrinth that depicts being one step behind. To compare both authors' labyrinths it is important to firstly identify the differences that make them unique. In Poe's “ The Purloined Letter,” the labyrinth is present as an entrapment that must be overcome by M. Dupin. The Prefect and Dupin are initially stuck in the search for the missing letter because of his ignorance of Minister D\_\_\_\_\_’s methods. According to the text this causes much embarrassment for the Prefect because he searches places where the letter could be hidden and doesn't account for things in

plain sight. The labyrinth can represent a maze or rhizome that traps its characters because they are unaware of the right path to take, causing numerous trials which result in dead ends and endless paths. Poe's labyrinth represents being "...trapped by microscopes and measurements, fixites, and definites" (Pops 94), almost like the random twist and turns of a maze.

However, it only traps those who are uneducated of the complexities that it possesses and those who are educated, Dupin, can escape it. Unbeknownst to him, the Prefect leads himself down an elongated maze by searching through every nook and cranny and even "...the jointings of every description of furniture" (Poe 212), reflecting the paths in a maze constructed with no outlets. Understanding the labyrinth of ignorance and the unknown is evident in how one would escape, according to Dupin he had to have "...an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent" (Poe 215). Dupin, in order to solve the case, had to not think like a detective searching for clues instead he had to 'reason' with the thief. The Prefect's shortcomings were present in his lack of the necessary characteristics to find the letter such as the ability to be creative.

Alternatively, Dupin through his imagination was able to discover the letter as not being hidden and that it was among a rack of hanging pasteboards.

In Borges' "Death and the Compass," the labyrinth depiction takes on the physical representation by trapping Lonnröt along a straight causing him to be one step behind Red Scharlach at all times. Unlike Dupin in Poe's work, Lonnröt doesn't learn that he is being trapped until it is already too late.

Throughout the short story he examined the relationship of the points at which the murders occurred, firstly discovering that the points were "...in

fact equidistant" and "...symmetrical in time" (Borges 82). Moreover, the labyrinth was designed to be like the straight line from the Greek culture; Scharlach assumed a detective would be lost along the line just as many have in the past. Furthermore, the simplicity of the labyrinth leads to the idea that Lonnröt lacks the intelligence that Scharlach possesses, which causing him to always fall behind. Similar to the previous pathways I feel like it should be noted that the labyrinth is warranted to be participated in.

Although "The Purloined Letter" and "Death and the Compass" are two separate short stories by two different authors, both have likenesses and differences in the labyrinths that each possess. Both labyrinths puzzle the main protagonist initially whether it be due to misunderstandings or because of a misinterpretation of key elements. For example, in "The Purloined Letter" the Prefect misunderstood how to go about finding the lost letter which left him bewildered about its whereabouts since the Minister had "...his person searched rigidly under..." the Prefect's "...inspection" (Poe 211). In addition, in "Death and the Compass" Lonnröt is caught up trying to discover how all the murders are connected and ultimately thinking he was "...on point of solving the mystery" (Borges 83), but he fails to realize that the fourth and final murder is himself; "...Erik Lonnröt" (Borges 84). Again, both short stories reflect the entrapment inside labyrinths one depicting a physical, ever looping, imprisonment and the other a mind prison. However, where the two stories differ is how the characters come about escaping the said labyrinths. It is important for the reader to notice that in "Death and the Compass" that Lonnröt's rival, Red Scharlach, is the constructor of the labyrinth thus making escape implausible. Whereas, the escape from the

whirlwind of “...microscopes and measurements...” (Pops 94) in “ The Purloined Letter” is feasible with reasoning.

Overall, it may be said that Poe and Borges’ interpretations of labyrinths may be completely different. However, similarities are present in the introduction of them into the short stories. Furthermore, the characters are completely opposites in the way they approach escaping their respective labyrinths. A labyrinth of the mind is not similar to a physical labyrinth, the characters experience different circumstances which makes one easier than the other to escape. In addition, Poe and Borges’ do an incredible job at tying their labyrinths into their specific stories; the labyrinths are not just randomly placed entities included into the text, they are specific as only the right labyrinth connects to the story at hand. Ostensibly, both authors have varying ideals in their construction. Poe relies on the psychological aspect of it as the characters trapped don’t see the limits or bearings of the maze leading to the unraveling of oneself. However, Borges chooses the physical aspects and he also plays with the idea that life exists beyond death causing an eternal loop.