

Notes on theme of the traitor and the hero by jorge luis borges essay sample

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“ That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently astonishing; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable. . . .”

Plot Summary & Historical Background:

Settings - The Narrative is set in Ireland in 1824. However Borges is only using this as an example. He says “ The action takes place in a oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, The Venetian Republic, some South American or Balkan state”. This universalises the story of Kilpatrick and the experience of Ryan showing it has happened everywhere.

It ends with Ryan deciding to keep silent the discovery that his great-grandfather was a traitor to the same cause to which history had deemed him a hero. He wants to preserve his great-grandfather's heroism and keeps the people's passion for the revolutionary cause. In doing so he becomes part of the entire lie himself.

Themes & Main Ideas:

Borges point out that “ Though the narrator is contemporary, his story occurred towards the middle or the beginning of the 19th century”. This shows that even Ryan's story is subject to sceptic scrutiny as is any historical account.

Characters:

- Borges himself - telling of Kilpatrick and establishing the scene
- Ryan - Borges' invented Narrator

- Kilpatrick
- Shakespeare
- Nolan

As typical in all Borges narratives, his characters are barely developed and are only used as simple vehicles to get across his themes.

Language:

Big words

Theme Of The Traitor And The Hero vs. The Shape of the Sword:

Theme Of The Traitor And The Hero and The Shape of the Sword are similar in that they both tell the story of a traitor and what happened to him. The Shape of the Sword equivalent to Kilpatrick is John Vincent Moon. However in Theme of the Traitor and The Hero it finishes with Kilpatrick a hero whereas Moon lives and is isolated and feels guilty for the rest of his life. They are both set in Ireland around the time of the uprising. The protagonist is the antagonist in both stories. The story structures are similar with Borges beginning with a character base and setting then going on to be told the story by a character of the events of a certain period of time.

Theme Of The Traitor And The Hero vs. The Three Versions of Judas:

In Theme Of The Traitor And The Hero and The Three Versions of Judas the person considered the hero is also considered the traitor (again the protagonist is the antagonist). In Theme of the traitor and the hero, Kilpatrick

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is the traitor but dies a Heroic death (or so is seen by the history books) whereas in Three Versions of Judas, Judas had to betray God to become the saviour of mankind.

The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero examines the relationship between History / Literature with the truth and SS examines the relationship between interpretation of the bible and the truth. TTH encourages us not to treat history as truth therefore telling us to be sceptical when reading the bible. Both stories show Borges playing with the idea that a single event in history can be manipulated and contorted into many different interpretations. Though the progression of history, the readings and interpretations of narratives create many different meanings where history, literature and religion turn into stories.

What Borges leaves us with:

Borges makes us think about what we take as truth. In Theme Of The Traitor And The Hero he tells us of the unreliability of history and presents the idea that it is just storytelling. Borges accuses us, his readers, of being guilty too as the community as a whole plays a part in the manipulation of History. Borges show this in saying (p104) " Kilpatrick was killed in a theatre, but the entire city was a theatre aswell". However, by saying, " The things they did and said endure in the history books, in the impassioned memory of Ireland," Borges draws attention to a dangerous aspect in the nature of people, our memory is compared to a history book, one that exaggerates each flaw with every time it is told.

Ryan's daunting decision at the end of the story to keep his findings to himself proves to be more dangerous. He withholds what seems to be the final truth behind the story of Kilpatrick telling us that the truth might well be out there but nobody cares to share with us. According to Borges, however, even Ryan's supposed truth must be examined closely. Ultimately, Ryan is trapped, the spread of either account fails to create anything but another story.