

Notes on “The Circular Ruins” by Jorge Luis Borges

SUMMARY

- One man spends all of his time and energy dreaming a son.
- The man teaches his son to worship.
- The man fears his son will realize that he is just a dream.
- The man realizes that he, himself, is but another man’s dream.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- Third person narrator.
- Past tense.
- The narrator remains distant at first, but then begins to add his own commentary.
- Leaps in time range from days to years.
- Linear story structure reveals circular reality.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

- Incremental release of knowledge to the reader.
- Diction (i.e. taciturn)
- The man’s direct thoughts.
- Vagueness adds to dream-like quality.

READER’S EXPERIENCE

- Enjoyed the story.
- Close reading makes it harder to be surprised by the ending, but reveals insight.
- Impatient at the end – the man should have known that he was but a dream.

PARAGRAPH 1

- “No one...no one...no one...”
- “him” – narrator never names the man – this is key
- Past tense.
- “taciturn”
- info about the man’s origins

PARAGRAPH 2

- Time passes – one night
- “they sought his favor, or feared his magic” – little knowledge about the man

PARAGRAPH 3

- The man’s goal is revealed.
- Note that this goal is revealed not at the beginning, but inside the story
- “consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming”

PARAGRAPH 4

- “taciturn students”
- man dreams that he was a teacher in a lecture hall
- dreams at first “chaotic” but then more logical

PARAGRAPH 5

- Time passes – “the ninth or tenth night” → exact time unknown, says that one day is probably insignificant
- narrator reveals the man’s feelings for the first time “(with some bitterness)”
- parenthetical information
- “the accepting... would never emerge as individuals”
- “those who sometimes questioned – had a bit more preexistence”
- does this says that questioning, to think, gives one existence?
- “taciturn” pupil is “at time intractable”

PARAGRAPH 6

- “unbearable lucidity of insomnia harried him, like a hawk”
- the man has lost his ability to sleep and dream
- “tears of anger burned the man’s old eyes”

PARAGRAPH 7

- The man is taking a more controlled approach
- “he sought another way to approach his task”
- “Almost immediately he dreamed a beating heart.”

PARAGRAPH 8

- Begins to build his son from the inside out.
- Unlike his first dreams where he just imagined all of the students immediately.
- “On the fourteenth night, he stroked the pulmonary artery with his forefinger, and then the entire heart, inside and out.”

PARAGRAPH 9

- Cosmogonies = theory of the origin of the universe
- Gnostics = pre-Christian or early Christians holding esoteric knowledge
- Demiurges = one that is an autonomous creative force or decisive power
- “(He’d have been better off if he had.)”
- Narrator speaks to reader and gives opinion, foreshadowing
- Fire
- Prays to statue in his dreams
- “In the dreaming man’s dream, the dreamed man awoke.” – describing circles

PARAGRAPH 10

- Narrator’s parenthetical words to reader
- “two full years” → timeline
- “*Now I will be with my son...*” give us the man’s direct thoughts for the first time

PARAGRAPH 11

- “(so that the son would never know that he was a phantasm...)”
- “...years of education” → timeline

PARAGRAPH 12

- “performed identical rituals in other circular ruins, downstream.” → circles
- “His life’s goal had been accomplished.”
- “(...some tellers of the story choose to compute in years, others in decades)” → timeline

PARAGRAPH 13

- “Fire was the only one who knew that his son was a phantasm.”
- “He feared that his son...discover that he was a mere simulacrum.”
- “projection of another man’s dreams”
- “every parent feels”
- “through a thousand and one secret nights” → timeline

PARAGRAPH 14

- “for that which had occurred hundreds of years ago was being repeated now.” → Circles
- “ruins of the sanctuary of the god of Fire were destroyed by fire”
- “he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him”
clinch → circles