

“The Circular Ruins”
(a short story by Jorge Luis Borges)

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TOPIC

The circle of life.

SUMMARY

A man disembarks from his canoe and drags himself to a circular enclosure. This place is an ancient ruin of a Fire God's temple. The man was injured, but something supernatural about this place heals him. He immediately wills himself to sleep, not because he is tired, but because he intends to create another human being in his dreams. This is his only goal. He is glad that the native peasants attend to his basic needs so that he can concentrate on sleeping and dreaming. In the beginning, he has trouble focusing in his dreams. With more experience, he dreamed of teaching an amphitheatre full of students, whose faces he could see clearly. In the crowd, he was looking for a student he thought would be worthy to be brought into the world of reality. He did not accept those who simply accepted his teachings, but was more interested in those who could put up an argument. Eventually, the man only kept one student, whose features were like his teacher's. The student progressed rapidly, but it was too good to be true. This student was lost when the dreamer was struck with insomnia. The man decided to take a new approach to create his son. Rather than picking a pre-made “phantom” out of a crowd, he began by visualizing the beating heart. For fourteen nights, the man perfected the heart, and then began seeing other organs. When the boy was fully created, but not yet alive and awake, the dreamer prayed to the god of the circular temple. The god revealed that he was Fire, and that he would give the sleeping son life in such a way that only Fire and the dreamer would know that he was not born

of flesh and blood. The condition the dreamer agreed to meet was to instruct his son to go downstream to other temples and teach the people there to give glory to the god. When the child awakens, the dreamer teaches him and gradually prepares him to enter reality. Just before sending him off to the next temple, the father erases all the boy's memories so that he will not discover that he is just the product of a dream. After sending the child away, the dreamer feels that his life's purpose is complete, and he is happy. Then, one night he is awakened by two boatmen who tell him of a "magic man in a temple of the North who could walk upon fire and not be burned." Upon hearing this, the man is fearful that his son would figure out that he is not a man, but just a phantom dreamed up by another. He feared that the child would be humiliated and confused. In the end, a fire is overtaking the man's temple. He figured that Death had finally come for him. He willingly walks into the flame, only to discover that he is immune to the heat. At that moment, he realized that he too, was a "mere appearance, dreamt by another."

SUPPORT

This short story illustrates how we are caught up in the circle of life. Each generation is another repetition of the cycle and goes through the same basic experiences that every generation before them has. In the story, we see the creation of the newest generation. The dreamer carefully molds this youth into existence through a process of trial and error. For the youth to awaken, the father must agree to send him away. The Fire god has commanded this so that the cycle will begin again. When the dreamer discovers that he is immune to fire, and thus must also be a "mere image" "dreamt by another", he is humiliated. There is no doubt that the dreamer's son will also go through these same experiences, as well as all the generations after him. We are all doomed to become our parents.

STYLE

There is a lot of symbolism used in this story to represent the cycle of life. For instance, the ruins are circular shaped. The sleep cycle is also part of the story, as the dreamer sleeps, awakens, and sleeps some more. The temples are also going through a cycle. At times they are in ruins, and at others, they are revived by the latest generation of dreamers. All of these cycles are never-ending, just as the circle of life is never-ending. Borges keeps the story very tight with these symbols, and thus has created a tale that blatantly recapitulates and thus reinforces his theme.

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Borges is from Buenos Aires, Argentina. It may be that the belief in pagan elemental gods, such as Fire, is a part of this region's ancestral culture.

REASONS FOR GREATNESS

This story has greatness because it illustrates a universal truth in a truly original way. Borges effectively shows us how we are all experiencing much of the same things that our ancestors all went through and that our children will undoubtedly continue the cycle.