

**Narrative Mode and Fiction**  
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**Lecture - 40**  
**Short Story in the Modern and Post-Modern Era - V**

We are discussing short stories in the modern and postmodern era. And today we are going to talk about another short story by Julio Cortazar it is called axolotl.

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### **'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar**

- 'Axolotl' is a short story by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar (1914-84). The story was published in Cortázar's 1956 collection *End of the Game and Other Stories*. It is narrated by a lonely man who regularly visits the local zoo, where he becomes fascinated by the axolotls in the aquarium. In time, he states that he, too, is an axolotl, and feels he has become one of them.
- Cortázar uses the quiet, isolated and confusing behaviour of the underwater salamander to mirror the narrator's own loneliness and inability to fit in with a world that does not understand him. The narrator's predicament is apparent; however, the truth of his words is something that, under the circumstances of his eccentric nature, open to the reader's interpretation.
- He is very close to these creatures, even sharing qualities with them, because he does not fit in with the human society. As the story progresses he shares more and more of these qualities, and as he appears to become aware of his own true existence, he's gradually losing sight of who he is.

So, Axolotl is a short story by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortazar. The story was published in Cortazar's 1956 collection titled *End of the Game and Other Stories*. It is narrated by a lonely man who is the protagonist. We never know who the protagonist is by the way, we have two characters one is the man who is narrating the story and the other is obviously the axolotl. So, the story like I said is unfolding through the voice of this lonely man who regularly visits the local zoo.

And he becomes fascinated by the axolotls their axolotls of present in the aquarium of the zoo. And in time he states that he too is an absolute human. So, the story is about the narrator studying the axolotls in books in the zoo looking at them staring at them for long when he visits the zoo till, he realizes that a part of him has become axolotl or a part of the axolotl has become him. So, like I said he has become one of them.

Cortazar uses the quiet, isolated and confusing behaviour of this underwater salamander to mirror the narrator's own loneliness and inability to fit into his immediate surrounding world immediate society. And so, we realize that society does not understand him. There is a point where the security guard at the zoo considers him as slightly cracked so there is a possibility of perceiving him as an insane person or a person lacking some degree of sanity.

So, the narrator's predicament is apparent however the truth of his words is something that the reader has to revisit. Because under the circumstances of his eccentric nature it is open to multiple interpretations. So, different readers have their own ways of reading the story and hence it is so striking, it is so remarkable a work by of course he is. The narrator is very close to the actual roles even sharing certain qualities with them.

Their aloofness, their stillness, they are being a little detached from the rest of the world are some of the qualities that the narrator shared with the axolotl. So, just like the narrator the axolotl do not fit in very well in any kind of fixed definitions just like not fit into the immediate society around him. We must understand that those axolotl in the Latin American myth have been also seen as demigods and they are well known for their capacity of growing very fast.

I mean they have a very protein body structure where if one part of the body is cut it grows back very fast. So, that gives him a kind of lack of fixity in terms of their shape. The shape can be something at one point and then something else at another that is the axolotl so. As a story progresses the narrative shares more and more of these qualities of the axolotls. And as he appears to become aware of his own true existence his generally losing side of the perspective of who he is.

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## 'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar

- The narrator of Axolotl brings to question the truthfulness of any of what is written in the story. In the very beginning of the story, the narrator declares "I am an axolotl," (Cortázar) which, considering the narrator is a human boy, can be read as a fabrication.
- By the end of the story the reader is unsure whose body embodies whose identity, or if the author himself has plural identities.

The narrator of axolotl brings to question the truthfulness of any of work is written in the story. So, basically no one knows whether what he writes is true or not if what he writes is true or not. In the very beginning of the story the narrator declares that I am an axolotl which considering that the narrator is a human is still a human can be read as a fabrication. But the end of the story the reader is unsure whose body embodies whose identity. If the author himself has a plural identity multiple identities.

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## 'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar

- In the short story, the narrator's own loneliness and isolation are emphasized through his interactions and similarities with the Axolotl. Cortázar was greatly inspired by Sartre's writings on existentialism so it is possible that the short story "Axolotl" is a way of showing the narrator "discovering the Sartrean notion of existence" (Harris 7) in order to present it to an audience. "Cortázar's short stories could be considered generally existentialist in terms of their protagonist's experiences" (Harris 5).
- The narrator's change is "antecedent to human awareness" (Bennett 61). He delves into a heightened sense of reality as the story progresses, and it becomes apparent that the Axolotls have a strong affect on his mind. These solitary creatures act as a mirror image of the narrator, and the reader can watch idly by as the mirror begins to blur the line between reality.

In the short story the narrator's own loneliness and isolation are emphasized through his interactions and his similarities with himself. So, Cortazar was inspired by Japol Sartre's (O)

(06:35) writings on existentialism. So, it might be possible that the story is drawing on the existential question too. It is a way of showing how the narrator discovers the Sartreian ((06:52) notion of existence.

So, as a way of presenting it to the audience how the narrator is presenting himself to the audience as a transpersonal entity. Something that is becoming so self that is constantly becoming the other. And the other becoming a part of this self so Cortazar short stories that could be considered as generally existential in terms of their protagonist's experiences. The narrative's change is antecedent to human awareness and he delves into a heightened sense of reality as the story moves forward and gradually.

It becomes apparent that the axolotls have a strong effect on his mind. These solitary creatures act as a mirror image of the narrator himself and the reader can watch idly as the mirror begins to blur the line between the narrator and the axolotl just like the line between reality and fantasy, reality and imagination also begins to disappear.

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### **'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar**

- It becomes less obvious who is observing whom and by the end of it either the narrator has gone completely mad from his isolation, his obsession has left him and embodied itself as an Axolotl, or he really does become an Axolotl. It points to the ambivalence and open-endedness of the narration.
- Paula M. Bruno – The "Axolotl" explores "boundaries both physical and psychological" (Bruno 110) that create a fantastical and magical element to the story, which in turn can help the reader understand the narrator's meaning better. During this whole story, things that seem false or convoluted can be re-evaluated and possibly seen as "magical realism" (Bruno 110).

It becomes less obvious with the progression of the narrative who is observing whom and by the end of the story either the narrator has gone completely mad through his prolonged state of isolation from the society or his obsession has left him and embodied you know his obsession

has embodied itself as an axolotl. So, he had an obsession (O) (08:57) about their (O) (09:00) till he became one of them.

His obsession is transformed into an axolotl that could be a possibility or if he really does become an axolotl like he says like he claims in the story. It points to the ambivalence and it falls to the ambivalence and open-endedness of the narration. Now Paula M. Bruno would note that the axolotl explores boundaries both physical and psychological unquote. Something that creates a fantastical and magical element to the story which in turn can help the reader understand the narrators meaning better the narrator's situation better.

During the course of this whole story things that seem falls or convoluted can be re-evaluated, revisited and possibly they can be understood better through the lens of magical realism.

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### **'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar**

- Paula M. Bruno - in this story, focus is on the boundary between reality and fantasy, or maybe between sanity and insanity. Out in the human world, the narrator lives a dreary life that is normal, boring, and doesn't seem to fit with his own wants. So he delves into a study about axolotls.
- It is hard to judge, however, when the narrator is explaining a fantastical event or when he is just lost in his own fantasies. The Axolotls are protected, or in this case trapped, behind "a glass barrier" (Bruno 111) which in this story serves as a literal boundary.
- Inside the Axolotl's enclosure, the creatures seem to "abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility" as the narrator puts it. Water creates the illusion of timelessness or a slowed down perception of time.

So, Bruno further says that in the story the focus is on the boundary between reality and fantasy or perhaps between sanity and insanity. Out in the human world the narrator lives a dreary life which is normally boring and yet I mean it does not match his wants or his own desire. So, he cocoons himself up and throws himself into a study about the axolotls. So, however it is hard to judge when the narrator is explaining a fantastical event or when he is lost in his own fantasy.

So, it is hard to judge whether the narrator is an onlooker and someone who is trying to make a sense of a fantastical even or if the fantasy inhabits inside his head. The axolotls are protected and almost trapped behind a glass barrier inside the aquarium and this could be literally seen as the boundary line between the onlooker and the axolotls themselves. So, inside the axolotls that close the aquarium the creatures seem to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility.

So, they are very sedentary still it is hard to believe that they are as good as alive and they posit some kind of spacelessness and timelessness through their not to the immobile way of existence and so the water that surrounds the axolotls. The water as a medium creates the illusion of timelessness it accentuates the illusion of timelessness. Further there is a slowed down perception of time throughout the story. A slowed down perception of time that dominates the tone of the entire story.

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### **'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar**

- It is possible that the Axolotls stretch out of the narrator's own time until he loses its linear movement and becomes trapped by their very lack of acting on him, and eventually lose himself to their grasp.
- A story like "Axolotl" is a unique chance for the reader to realize that what is said in a story is not always the truth. People often trust what they read when it sounds reasonable and stop believing it once it goes past realism into fantasy. This short story blurs that line and makes it difficult to tell if we are being lied to or if we are choosing to not trust someone who actually lived through a unique and captivating experience.
- The ambiguity of the story consistently confuses the reader and makes them re-evaluate themselves, and the meaning of their own existence just as the narrator does. In the way that there is a boundary between the human world and the aquarium, there is also a divide between the real world and the written. This parallel can make one lose oneself in the story, and make it even harder to distinguish between truth and lies.

So, it is possible that the axolotl will stretch out of the narrator's own time until he himself loses the linear movement and becomes trapped by their very lack of acting on him. The passivity and inertness on the part of the axolotl slowly engulf the narrator's separate entity and he loses sense of time just like he becomes part of the temporality part of the time space existence that the axolotls are inhabiting the aquarium and eventually we find that the narrator is losing a grasp on himself.

So, eventually the narrator loses grasp onto himself. A story like axolotl is a unique opportunity for the reader to realize that what is said in the story is not always the truth. People often trust what they read when it sounds reasonable and then we stop believing it once it goes past realism into fantasy. So, fantasy is also regarding the resilience of the reader and how far the reader can walk with the fantasy.

Writers walk the journey with the fantasy of how far is the leader willing to give up on the or leave behind the real coordinates the way the society really works and you know undertake this fantastic journey with the fantasy writer. So, this short story blurs this line between the real and the fantastic and it makes it difficult to tell if we are being lied to whether the narrator is blatantly lying and fabricating facts or if we are choosing to not trust someone who actually had lived through a unique and captivating experience.

So, the ambiguity of this entire story by Professor consistently confuses the reader and makes them re-evaluate their own standards of truth and untruth, real and unreal and the meaning of their own existence just as a narrator is constantly testing his own existence. The narrator almost has his own existence, his own measures of believability, his own standards of believability at stake in his process of trying to understand the axolotl better as well as in the process of his trying to write about the axolotls.

So, in the way that there is a boundary between the human world and the aquarium. There is also this divide between the real world and the written world. This parallel can make one lose oneself in this story just like the narrator once again has lost himself to the books that he was earlier reading about the axolotls and then he goes to the aquarium starts visiting them, visiting them more frequently till his own obsession becomes an axolotls stay back in the zoo.

So, he has left a part of himself back there among the axolotls and he is no longer the same person. So, it is very difficult to distinguish between the opposing categories of truth like real fantasy the narrator and the axolotl.

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## 'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar

- Cortazar has an unconventional writing style, which encompasses multiple postmodern traits. An important aspect of postmodernism is metafiction, which has been a crucial element of Cortazar's writing.
- Patricia Waugh – Metafiction is a “term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”
- Waugh notes that metafictional works “explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.”
- Cortazar's story 'Axolotl' has a reference to its being a story when he writes, “...perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls.”

So, Cortazar has an unconventional writing style which encompasses multiple postmodern traits and an important aspect of postmodernism is metafiction which has been a crucial element and it keeps coming back in Cortazar different writings. Patricia Waugh that metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact as something.

That is artificial and man-made in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Waugh notes that metafictional works explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. So, Cortazar stories absolutely has a reference to it being a story when he writes. So, we have mention of the story being written within the frame of the story.

I quote from the text perhaps he is going to write a story about us that believing he is making up a story he is going to write all this about axolotls. So, in the story the narrator sees we do not know who possesses this narrative voice, who this narrator voice belongs to it could be the acts in all likelihood it is axolotl talking about this narrator. It could be the narrator or the author narrator Cortazar who is perhaps going to write a story about them one day. And believing that he is going to make up a story he is going to write all about us axolotls.

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## 'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar

- This statement blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, raising the question of whether the story is real or a simulation created by the author-turned-to-axolotl or axolotl-turned-to-author.
- Jean Baudrillard sees simulation as not an imitation or duplication, but the substitution of the original by a simulated image. Contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been thus replaced by false images.
- In the light of Baudrillard's idea, one can understand that the narrator and the axolotl transpose and transmigrate into each other's identity and become each other's simulacrum, or possibly one becomes both, and this double or fluid transpersonal self talks from within the frame of the story about the story that is to be written in the future.

So, this statement in itself is blurring the boundary between reality and fiction, raising the question of whether the story is real or a simulation created by the author turned to axolotl or the axolotl turned to author. Jean Baudrillard sees simulation as not an imitation or duplication but a substitution of the original by a simulated image. Contemporary world is seen as a simulacrum by postmodern critics such as Baudrillard where reality has been replaced by false images.

And the people have lost the postmodern humans have lost the capacity to distinguish between the real and the simulacrum. So, the real referent is gone forever beyond reconciliation. So, what we make do with is I mean what we can still access is the simulacrum the simulation of the real and not the real so there is no real in the postmodern world, in the postmodern ecosystem or the postmodern way of understanding.

So, in the light of Baudrillard's idea his the way he posits the simulacra and simulation is. So, if we look at story absolutely in the light of Baudrillard's idea of simulation and simulacrum we understand that the narrator and axolotl transpose and transmigrate into each other's identity and they become each other's simulacrum, or possibly one becomes both, and this double identity or fluid transpersonal self is talking from within the frame of the story.

About the story that is to be written in the near future. So, that is very interesting, very late and quite complex.

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## **'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar**

- Postmodernism also overthrows any hierarchy or hegemony. While it has been a time-immemorial practice by humans to occupy a higher position than animals in the Great chain of being, the story begins with the author attempting to humanize the axolotl and anthropomorphize the amphibian, but towards the end the gaze is reversed and the hierarchy breaks down.
- Who writes about whom, who remains trapped inside the aquarium and the very question of entity collapses with the merging of the third person and the first person narration.

So, postmodernism also overthrows any hierarchy or hegemony. While it has been a time immemorial practice by humans to occupy a higher position than animals in the great chain of being, we see in the story the author begins with humanizing the axolotl and in a very traditional sense anthropomorphizing the amphibian. In a very traditional sense anthropomorphizes the amphibian.

But towards the end of the story this gaze is reversed the gaze is not from outside of the aquarium to inside. But from inside of the aquarium the axolotl is staring at the narrator and so in this way the hierarchy between human cosmos and the animal dumb breaks down. So, who is writing about who remains trapped inside the aquarium in the end is it the axolotl. The obsession of the narrative and a part of the axolotl travels with the narrator just like part of his own opposition stays back trapped inside the aquarium.

The very question of a separate entity individual concrete entity which is in isolation from everything else collapses. And this becomes all the more heightened with the merging of the third person and the first person moves of narration. I would like to end our discussion today through reading this excerpt from axolotl by Julio Cortazar and this is from the last part of the story; this is how the story ends.

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## Excerpt: 'Axolotl' by Julio Cortázar

- He returned many times, but he comes less often now. Weeks pass without his showing up. I saw him yesterday, he looked at me for a long time and left briskly. It seemed to me that he was not so much interested in us any more, that he was coming out of habit. Since the only thing I do is think, I could think about him a lot. It occurs to me that at the beginning we continued to communicate, that he felt more than ever one with the mystery which was claiming him. But the bridges were broken between him and me, because what was his obsession is now an axolotl, alien to his human life. I think that at the beginning I was capable of returning to him in a certain way—ah, only in a certain way—and of keeping awake his desire to know us better. I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance. I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he. And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls.

He returned many times, but he comes less often now. Weeks pass without him showing up. I saw him yesterday, he looked at me for a long time and left briskly. It seemed to me that he was not so much interested in us anymore, that he was coming out of habit. Since the only thing I do is think, I could think about him a lot. We see that the person is changing there is a transposition of identity a transmigration.

So, he thinks about us in the next sentence we see that all I do is think so till a point supposedly the axolotl was saying that he looks at us and he thinks about us. He is not much interested in us anymore and then the next sentence we know is all I do is think I could think about him a lot. He talks to me that at the beginning we continued to communicate that he felt more than ever one with the mystery which was claiming him.

But the bridges were broken between him and me, because what was his obsession is now an axolotl, alien to his human life. I think that at the beginning I was capable of returning to him in a certain way only in a certain way and of keeping awake his desire to know us better. I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man, it is only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance.

I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still, he. And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking

that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he is making up a story, he is going to write all this about axolotls and this is how it ends. So, the question of individual entity of individual being is completely mishmashes is completely the being is constantly becoming it is a fusion of double identity there is a merging of I with he, they and that is how identity.

That is only how identity is possible in a postmodern short story such as axolotl written by Julio Cortazar. So, with this I am going to stop today's discussion here and we are going to meet for another round of discussions with another short story in our forthcoming lectures. Thank you.