

Theme of the Traitor and Hero  
Tema del traidor y del héroe

Guide based on:

Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges*  
Various reference books

**Yeats, William Butler** (1865-1939) An Irish poet, actively involved in Ireland's nationalistic politics. In his poems and plays Yeats strove to create a specifically Irish literature, basing much of his work on themes taken from Celtic mythology, episodes of the Irish insurrection and the lives of eminent patriotic figures like Parnell. [...] Yeats is presented as the prototype of the Irish poet, in opposition to the English Shakespeare, mentioned in the same context. The theme of betrayal and the ensuing desire to confess and make amends are well within the spirit of the lines spoken by Yeats on behalf of the Irish who repudiated Parnell: 'Come, fix upon me that accusing eye. / I thirst for accusation' ('Parnell's Funeral', *A Full Moon in March*). Equally the earlier lines from the same poem, 'Nor did we play a part / Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart', recalls not only the theatrical setting of Fergus Kilpatrick's execution, but also the role-playing theme which runs through 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero'. The epigraph in Aleph 54 (81) is taken from the second part of the poem, 'A Woman Young and Old'. Its title is 'Before the World Was Made' and the full text reads: 'If I make the lashes dark / And the eyes more bright? And the lips more scarlet? Or ask if all be right / From mirror after mirror, / No vanity's displayed: / I'm looking for the face I had / Before the world was made.' Lab. 102 (72) *Ficc.* 137, Aleph 54 (81) *Aleph* 53

**Chesterton, Gilbert Keith** (1874-1936) An English critic and novelist, best known today for five collections of short stories featuring the detective Father Brown. Chesterton was attracted to Catholicism early in life and most of his work is inspired by a deep mystical awareness - an astonishment, as Borges has put it, at the paradox of Christianity's attraction and its boundless improbabilities. Lab. 102 (72): Chesterton's constant perception of the uncanny and mysterious, which he illustrates in terms of detective plots, and the elegance and felicity of his reasoning, were qualities much admired by Borges, who claimed to have learnt from Chesterton how to reduce an argument to a geometrical diagram and the idea that the criminal is the creative artist while the detective is only the critic. Though he first proposes a supernatural explanation for his mysteries, Chesterton always returns for the solution to the rational world. Borges, however, who also exploits the tension of the detective plot to illustrate the concatenation of human events and the anxiety of man's metaphysical search, offers no such comfort. Lab. 102 (72) *Ficc.* 137 Aleph 31 (45) *Ficc.* 35

**Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm** (1646-1716) A German philosopher and mathematician, born and educated at Leipzig, who served as librarian and counsellor at the court of the dukes of Hanover. Leibniz's best-known works are *Theodicy* (1710) and *Monadology* (1714). Lab. 102 (72): in the second book he expands the principle that all substance is made up of an infinite number of spiritual beings, or 'centres of force', known as 'monads'. These are entirely self-contained, in so far as the activity of each excludes that of every other; yet each one mirrors the universe and they are all related

by a 'pre-established harmony'. Although Leibniz's monads 'have no windows by which anything can come in or go out', this pre-established harmony makes it possible to infer from the state of any one substance a corresponding state of any other. Thus each monad, combining matter and form, is the microcosm of the whole. Lab. 32 (7) [...]

"...*Has transpired, we should say*" Kerrigan translates from: "La acción transcurre en un país oprimido y tenaz: Polonia, Irlanda, La república de Venecia, algún estado sudamericano o balcánico... Ha transcurrido, mejor dicho, pues aunque el narrador es contemporáneo, la historia referida por él ocurrió al promediar o al empezar el siglo XIX."

--transcurre: v. pass by, go by, lapse

--mejor dicho: rather, best to say

**Kilpatrick, Fergus** A fictional character in 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' whose name is quintessentially Irish. Fergus is the name of several Irish heroes who figure in early Celtic literature, while Kilpatrick is a town in Scotland said to have been St Patrick's birthplace. Some similarity may be found between Fergus Kilpatrick in the dual role of traitor and hero and Fergus mac Roich in the saga of the *Táin bó Cuailinge* which deals with the war between Ulster and Connaught. Fergus mac Roich was driven into exile by Conchobar, King of Ulster, and found himself fighting for Connaught against Conchobar and his brave son Cuchulain.

**Browning, Robert** (1812-1889)

An English poet and dramatist who dwells on the personality and problems of man, upholding spiritual values and human conduct based on the committed pursuit of an ideal. Browning's most famous work, considered by Borges his greatest, is *The Ring and the Book*, which was published in four volumes between 1868 and 1869. It describes the events of a seventeenth-century murder trial in Rome. Lab. 102 (72): though the assertion that Fergus Kilpatrick's name illustrates Browning's verses cannot be confirmed, Browning was interested in themes related to patriotism, especially in his early work (e.g. 'The Italian in England' and 'The Patriot'). He was also interested in the psychology and redeeming features of wicked men (e.g. *Mr. Sludge the Medium*, discussed by G.K.Chesterton in his *Robert Browning*, which may have been known to Borges). In Browning's works the passage that may be most relevant to the story of Fergus Kilpatrick is the end of *Sordello* (1840). Sordello, who has been a supporter of the progressive party, the Guelphs, is offered the leadership of the repressive party, the Ghibellines. He eventually rejects the offer and dies of his own conflicting feelings. Lab. 102(72) Ficc.137

**Hugo, Victor Marie** (1802-1885) A French poet, author of poetic dramas and novels and one of the leaders of the French Romantic movement. Hugo was also involved in politics. He was a member of the Assembly in 1848 and was exiled for almost twenty years, but finally became a senator of the Third Republic. As a poet Hugo contributed to the innovation of French verse by introducing new themes and diction and new harmonic effects in the use of the stanza. His theatrical work is often based on historical events to which legendary elements are added, as in *Hernani* (1830). His patriotic sentiments are shown in his famous novels *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862), as is the pursuit of social and political justice and the theme of moral redemption. Lab. 102 (72): though Hugo's characters are often

seen to strive for redemption, thus displaying an affinity with Borges's Fergus Kilpatrick, no reference to the latter has been found in Hugo's poetry. Lab. 102(72) *Ficc.137*

**"Other phases of the enigma inquiet Ryan. These facets are..."** Translated by Kerrigan from: "Otras facetas del enigma inquietan a Ryan. Son de carácter cíclico: parecen repetir o combinar hechos de remotas regiones, de remotas edades."  
--hechos: fact, thing; event, occurrence

**Julius Caesar (Julio César)** (100-44 BC) A Roman general, politician and man of letters, who defeated Pompey at the battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC, was appointed Dictator by the Senate and was murdered four years later. [...] During his dictatorship Caesar held total power in the city and the provinces. On 15 March 44 BC a group of republicans, including sixteen senators, knifed him to death in the Senate, before the statue of Pompey. Most but not all of the historical data given in Borges's story tally with the details of Shakespeare's play, based mainly on Plutarch. In *Julius Caesar*, on the morning of Caesar's death his wife Calpurnia entreats him not to go into the Senate because of ominous rumours she has heard of graves opening to release the bodies of dead warriors. She has dreamed of his statue spouting blood like a fountain, and of the Romans washing their hands in it. Caesar is at first persuaded, but Decius Brutus mocks him and spurs him on to going, and Calpurnia's warnings go unheeded. Equally the petition presented by Artemidorus which denounces the members of the plot remains unread.

**Kilgarvan** A small Irish town in County Kerry, Munster. [...] Round towers are a feature of the Irish landscape; as an emblem of Ireland, they figured in the Irish national flag during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No round tower is recorded in Kilgarvan. Lab. 103(73) *Ficc.138*

**Condorcet, Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de** (1743-1794) A French philosopher and mathematician, a supporter of Voltaire and the Enlightenment. During the Revolution Condorcet became an active member of the Girondist faction. He was imprisoned on 7 April 1794 and found dead the next day. Condorcet wrote various essays on probability, but his most interesting work is his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (translated into English in 1955). Lab. 103: Condorcet's sketch develops the theory that humanity has reached the ninth stage in its sociological progress, starting from a condition of total savagery and moving towards complete enlightenment which will be fully achieved in the tenth stage. Condorcet specifies that throughout these stages certain characteristics will reappear. Lab. 103 (73) *Ficc. 138/9*

**Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich** (1770-1831) A German philosopher, one of the foremost representatives of nineteenth-century idealism. According to Hegel's definition of reality, individual facts are not rational in themselves but only if viewed as aspects of the whole. The whole is called the 'absolute'; it is spiritual, and can only be reached by a process of logic. Lab. 173 (141): this process, known as 'dialectics', is composed of a triadic movement of *thesis*, the original statement, *antithesis*, its counterpart, to which the first gives rise, and *synthesis*, the unification of the two. This synthesis then becomes the new thesis in the next stage of the movement. Lab. 103 (73): Hegel's dialectical system of knowledge also operates in his vision of history.

Deeply religious, Hegel viewed the universe as a manifestation of God, the absolute, who arrives at final self-knowledge through the history of finite beings. The human mind, rising from mere consciousness, passes through various stages, culminating in religion and perfect knowledge. Hegel further expands this principle by observing the various dialectic and cyclical stages of human progress in the realisation of God's purpose. Lab. 103 (73) *Ficc.* 139, Lab. 173 (141) *Aleph* 81

**Spengler, Oswald** (1880-1936) A German philosopher of history, best known for his pessimistic work *The Decline of the West* (1918). Lab. 103 (73): Spengler argues against a linear interpretation of history, which he sees as consisting of aimless cycles of cultural configurations, of which western European civilisation is only one and already in decline. Lab. 174 (142): Spengler expresses the passing of cultures in terms of seasons, at times Apollonian, at times Faustian. By the latter term he means everything that is dynamic and speculative, a romantic longing for the unattainable. An ardent nationalist, he believed in the need for an aristocratic elite; today he is accused of laying the intellectual foundations of fascism. His concept of Faust became the symbol of German dynamism at the time of the Third Reich. Lab. 103 (73) *Ficc.* 139, Lab. 174 (142) *Aleph*

**Vico, Giambattista** (1668-1744)

Italian philosopher of cultural history and law, who is recognized today as a forerunner of cultural anthropology, or ethnology[...]  
[from: Encyclopedia Britannica]

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An Italian philosopher and historian who propounded a cyclical theory of the history of mankind. In *Scienza Nuova* (1725), he envisages human societies as passing through periods of growth and decay: from the age of the beasts to the age of the Gods, from the age of heroes to that of men. Lab. 103 (73): in Vico's 'morphology' certain dominant constants of the human mind reappear both in the origin and in the regeneration of societies; they relate to religious customs and to the ambivalence between the animal and the angelic aspects of human nature. Goethe, who was greatly influenced by Vico, visualised the process of man's spiritual evolution in the light of his prophetic insight. Lab. 148 (118): Vico set out his ideas on the 'Homeric question' in 'The Discovery of the True Homer' in the third book of *Scienza Nuova* (para. 803/90). [...] 'The Greek people were... Homer,' concludes Vico. 'Lost in the crowds of Greek peoples', he 'is justified for having made men of Gods and Gods of men.'  
[from: Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes, A Dictionary of Borges]

**Hesiod (Hesíodo)** (fl. 700 BC) A Greek epic poet, a near-contemporary of Homer and author of the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. The *Theogony* details the history of the gods from their emergence from chaos to the moment when Pandora, the first woman, is entrusted by Zeus with a jar containing all the evils which she will let loose on humanity. Lab. 103 (73), *Aleph* 14 (18): in the *Works and Days* Hesiod combines the moral teachings of the *Theogony* with rural precepts: continuing the story of Pandora, he traces the decline of mankind from the golden age through the silver and bronze ages down to the present iron age. The later part describes the various tasks which face the farmer and the appropriate times of year in which to perform them, harmonising the rhythm of nature with that of human life. Lab. 103 (73) *Ficc.* 139, *Aleph* 14 (18) *Aleph* 154

**Celtic literature (Letras célticas)** Literature written in Gaelic and the ancient languages of Wales, Ireland and Brittany. Lab. 103: this literature includes many elements of the culture of the Druids, such as their belief in the transmigration of souls. The two cycles of Irish epics, composed originally in the seventh and eighth centuries and transcribed in the tenth century, are part of the tradition. [...]

**Druids (Druidas)** The title given by the ancient Celts of Gaul and Britain to the learned men who presided over religious ceremonies, judged legal disputes and recited the verses that form the bulk of Celtic literature. Lab. 103 (73): in Caesar's *Commentaries*, perhaps the best source of information we possess on the Druids, they are said to believe in the transmigration of souls (*De Bello Gallico* 4.18). Lab. 103(73) *Ficc.*

**"From these circular labyrinths he is saved by a curious species of proof..."** translated by Kerrigan from: "De esos laberintos circulares lo salva una curiosa comprobación, una comprobación que luego lo abisma en otros laberintos más inextricables y heterogéneos: ciertas palabras de un mendigo que conversó con Fergus Kilpatrick en día de su muerte, fueron prefiguradas por Shakespeare, en la tragedia de *Macbeth*"

--comprobación: testing, verification, proving

**Macbeth** Lab. 103 (73): in the context of the assassination of Fergus Kilpatrick, the allusion to *Macbeth*, as well as to *Julius Caesar*, emphasises the literary quality of the 'scheme conceived' by the character Nolan and its predetermined nature. Warnings of death dominate the plots of both plays, unheeded by Caesar and misunderstood by Macbeth. See Julius Caesar. Lab. 103(73) *Ficc.*139

**"At the end of some tenacious caviling..."** translated by Kerrigan from: "Al cabo de tenaces cavilaciones, resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento. Publica un libro dedicado a la gloria del héroe; también eso, tal vez, estaba previsto."

--tal vez: perhaps