

JOHNNY

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Johnny (In Julio Cortazar, *The Pursuer* Passionate)

Overview Julio Cortazar (1914-1984) was born in Brussels, child of Argentine diplomatic parents, and after the War, in 1919, returned to live in his native Argentina. His father left the family home when Julio was six, and he was raised by his mother in a suburb of Buenos Aires. (He says he spent most of his childhood time in bed, reading.) In his late teens he obtained a teaching certificate, and went on to teach French in Argentinian highschools, and to work both as a translator and for UNESCO in France. Three times involved in deep romantic relationships, he was a fervent supporter of Castro's Marxist Cuba. He died leaving behind a rich body of novels, stories and essays, and figures as one of the decisive creators of the Latin American literary Boom.

Character Johnny Carter, the bebop musician at the center of the narration of *The Pursuer*, is a volatile and brilliant improvisational sax player, living in Paris at the time of the story, and to all appearance modeled after the jazz genius, Charlie Parker. We know Johnny through the accounts of his biographer, a modest academic type who filters to us our understanding of this startling and unpredictable genius, whom the narrator visits frequently. Johnny is especially brilliant when he explains the mindset of the jazz musician when inside the creative process; Johnny collapses time around him, freely expressing his need for stimulants, and lurching from one affection to another. He is passionate enough to be self-destructive.

Parallels The heart of this novel is the fascination felt by the narrator for the brilliance and pathos of a great musician. One finds this kind of friendship-admiration in Biblical figures like David and Jonathan, (Book of Samuel, 630-540 B.C.), or in the admiration of Pylades for Orestes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 B.C.). Admiration for the genius is built into the modern temper, for all its faith in 'democracy.' Hegel, in his *Encyclopedia* (1817), sees the 'great man'—Napoleon preoccupied him—as part of the meaning-structure of unfolding human history; Thomas Carlyle, in *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), argues for the importance of 'great men' as leaders in history.

Illustrative moments

1 Depressed We first meet Johnny on a visit from the narrator—to the musician's pretty squalid apartment in downtown Paris. It is a bad moment for Johnny, because he has some well-paying gigs just ahead, but has lost his sax, stored it between his legs on the metro, then got off without remembering it. His girlfriend is pissed off big time, and Johnny is depressed. Johnny is 'wrapped up in a blanket, and squeezed into a raunchy chair that's shedding yellowed hunks of old burlap all over the place.' A single unshaded light bulb diffuses an ugly glow over the wood floor.

2 Distracted Johnny is both absorbed by the loss of his horn, and distracted by the fancy of considering the nature of the time that separates him from his gig. (He is full of profound but fleeting insights into the nature of time.) Almost anything, especially including stimulants, can undercut even his interest in time: 'I'd feel a lot better if I could forget about time and have something hot to drink.' At this the narrator pulls out a bottle of rum from his overcoat! Cigarettes, rum, and Nescafe set fire to the dreary room.

3 Brilliant Johnny expounds on the reasons why time interests him so much. (He is interested especially in the compression of extensive lived time into the pregnant units of that other time, musical expression.) His childhood home was full of conflict, 'from one fistfight to another, almost not stopping for meals.' But 'music got me out of time,' or, more carefully put, 'music put me *into* time.' The time he got

into, in a freeing way, was the compressed and fragmented time his genius-compacting experience in music guaranteed him. In that musical time he was immune to the background of family conflict.

4 Egoless The distinctive character of Johnny's genius is that he is without ego. Because he is more profound than his musical peers, he feels no desire to assert that depth or his own genius. He ascribes no thoughts to himself, believes that he has a totally empty head, and above all that thoughts, such as they are, do not belong to individuals. 'How's it funny to realize that you've thought of something? Because it's all the same thing whether you think, or someone else. I am not I, me. I just use what I think, but always afterwards, and that's what I can't stand...'

5 Spontaneous Johnny's preoccupation with time appears to batten on his sense of what his own music is. 'I'm playing that tomorrow,' a phrase Johnny warms to, 'suddenly fills me with a very clear sense of it, because Johnny is always blowing tomorrow, and the rest of them are chasing his tail in this today he just jumps over, effortlessly, with the first notes of his music.' Johnny's spontaneity and antic good humor spring from the native genius he gives vent to best, unfortunately, when he has a good jolt of cognac or heroin to work from.

Discussion questions

Does the narrator feel both admiration and concern for the musician? What steps does he take to care for the guy?

What was the role of jazz in the musician's life? Had jazz saved his life?

Is the narrator, in this novel, identical with the author? Or is the narrator a character separate from the author, with whom the author may or may not agree?

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