The Mark of the Phallus: Homoerotic Desire in Borges’ "La forma de la espada"

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"Envidia.
Envidia siente el cobarde...
Envidia.
Envidia amarga y traidera,
Envidia que grita y llora.
La que causa mas dolor
es la envidia por amor."
(José González Castillo,
"Envidia")

The fiction of Jorge Luis Borges is intriguing and yet, unsettling. These qualities seem to originate in what I consider two principal characteristics of Borges’ work: confounding ambivalence and a clever use of paradox. His work is paradoxical insofar as it is macrocosmic, and yet microcosmic; central, and yet peripheral; collective—it seems to speak with many voices—and yet it is deeply personal and evokes the strongest emotional responses, especially in lyrical passages that reveal the unmistakable presence of Borges himself. It is precise, concise, and straightforward in its expression, and yet there is something ambiguous, nebulous, and absent in its style. These and other contradictory qualities amplify the richness and suggestivity of Borges’ stories and may help explain the extraordinary quantity of criticism devoted to them.

Paradox in Borges’ work is frequently indicated by a mask used to disguise a false identity. As critics such as Emir Rodriguez Monegal (29-32) and Sylvia Molloy (18-25) have noted, Borges’ fascination (and discomfort) for masks, a life-long obsession with paradoxical dualities in which truth is concealed by false appearance, becomes a central organizing principle in Borges’ writings. The craft of fiction for Borges, then, is the unmasking of the reality lying below the surface of the false façade. And this process of revelation is accompanied by the simultaneous sensations of pleasure and uneasiness. In this essay, I will examine how Borges cleverly uses a visible mark as a mask, concealing as well as displaying the truth regarding the main character in the story, "La forma de la espada." The reality that the Borgesian mask both disguises (closets) and reveals (outs) is homoerotic desire.
There is no doubt, in my opinion, that there is something fundamentally queer about Borges' writing. The literary universe that Borges has projected is an essentially homosocial space, populated almost exclusively by men who love each other, hate each other, betray each other, sacrifice for each other; it is a world where no man successfully relates either socially or sexually to any woman; it is also a place where men interact passionately with other men through art and culture, intellectual games, battles and duels. It is, in other words, an imagined location in which men form deep, intimate bonds and relationships with other men in the almost total absence of women. The extent of the homosocial nature of Borges' world becomes immediately apparent when the reader discovers that there are central female characters in only nine stories by Borges (Aheama 381) and that most of them are closely related to themes of "death, violence and often sacrifice" (Magnarelli 142).

A close look at Borges' fictional world reveals relationships between men indicating more than a bond of friendship or a meeting of minds, more than a fusion of identities. In story after story, Borges has made a practice of replacing the traditional image of the union of opposites represented in sexual terms (female and male) by substituting the gender opposites (feminine and masculine) existing within each individual man. Borges does not follow the social and literary custom of men seeking delight and fulfillment in the "opposite sex." Instead, men in the Borgesian universe must join with other men to find wholeness, peace and symmetry. As a result, in Borges' stories the act of union or fusion of two men, physically, spiritually and emotionally manifests graphically the now infamous Borgesian obsession with completeness, totality, and harmony as a release or escape from the tyranny of chaos and fragmentation.

For some critics, it may be a bold or even a shocking project to link the work of such an important canonical writer as Jorge Luis Borges with a gay theme. In their insightful studies on Borges, both Daniel Altamiranda and Daniel Balderston ("Fetal") note that Borges himself found the topic of homosexuality extremely troubling and made strongly negative public statements about it. One frightful example can be found in Borges' 1931 essay called "Nuestras imposibilitades," from the first edition of his collection, Discusión. This essay, removed from later editions, criticizes what Borges believes to be certain unpleasant traits among the citizens of Buenos Aires and includes this condemnation of the cynical admiration for the "active" partner in sodomy among certain portehos: "En todos los países de la tierra, una indiscutible reproducción recae sobre los dos ejecutores del inimaginable contacto. [...] No así entre el malevaje de Buenos Aires, que reclama una especie de veneración para el agente activo—porque lo embromé al compañero" (Discusión 16-17). There can be no doubt that Borges was openly homophobic when confronting the topic directly, but as is usually the case with his writing, things are more complicated than

1The use of the word "queer" remains quite controversial. For some, the original meaning of "strange" or "abnormal" used in a harmful and aggressive way against homosexuals still retains the painful stigma of an insult. For others, including myself, the appropriation of the word by those who had been harmed by it has neutralized its offensive value and has provided a convenient way of expressing a wide array of non-heterosexual sexualities as well as a critical stance that opposes assumptions of monolithic sexual identity.

2Jean Franco, in her excellent 1981 study, points out that many of Borges' stories are based on his obsession with the themes of betrayal and cowardice and that "[t]reachery is thus the rule of human interaction and entropy is the most powerful law of Borges' world; solidarity, on the other hand, becomes an absurd and idealist illusion" (74).
"La forma de la espada" is rare among Borges' stories: it has received decidedly mixed reviews and is, consequently, one of the texts least studied by critics. Of the negative appraisals of the story, probably the most unfavorable is Gene Bell-Villada's in which he calls "La forma de la espada" a "rather slight little tale" and goes so far as to say that it is "marred by its peevish and heavy-handed political judgments" (73). He points out that even Borges himself considered it a mere "trick story" (Burgin 145). But in contrast to these facile dismissals, most critics agree that it is a well written mystery story and that its surprise ending is playfully suggestive of its implications about the nature of human identity and the relationship between self and other.

The story's theme, according to most critics, is perfectly congruent with the traditional list of Borgesian themes established by scholars over the past thirty years: obsession with circularity, pantheism and the double. Donald McGrady, for example, analyzes the circularity inherent in the numerous clues with regard to the identity of the narrator. Helene Weldt, applying Barthes' principles of the five codes as explored in SZ, also explores the textual circularity of the story and concludes that

la técnica que Borges emplea en ["La forma de la espada"]... va más allá de un mero esparcimiento de "pistas". Su creación literaria se construye principalmente a través de esta red de alusiones e interconexiones sutiles que le obligan al lector a que abandone una sola lectura lineal, tradicional, a favor de las múltiples lecturas circulares. (225-26)

Jaime Alazraki examines the question of identity and concludes that in this story, circularity and the "pantheistic notion that one man is all men implies the negation of individual identity, or more exactly, the reduction of all individuals to a general and supreme identity which contains all and at the same time makes all contained in each one. In the stories "The Shape of the Sword" and "Abenjacán the Bajari, Dead in His Labyrinth," this notion functions as a narrative technique" (24). Like McGrady, George McMurray notes that the "most striking element" of the story is its surprise ending and then concurs with Alazraki that the "apparent fusion of opposites also serves to suggest the pantheistic theme that any man can be all men" (94) and that the "compression of time, which parallels the fusion of antithetical identities, reinforces the story's theme of pantheistic unity" (95).

Circularity, interconnectedness, fusion of opposite identities—all within a society of men. Circularity of men, interconnectedness of men, fusion of men. The critics all seem to agree on the basic abstract implications of the story, and once they place the story into the standard Borgesian categories, they stop. They stop before they get to the point where they would have to investigate what all this fusion of men might really suggest.

In the story "La forma de la espada," the main character, John Vincent Moon, acquires a coded sign that marks him, literally and figuratively, as queer. In the frame of the story, a man identified as "Borges" ("Forma" 139) must stay at the ranch of a man called "El Ingles de La Colorada" whose face bears a scar in the shape of a crescent moon beginning at the temple of one side of his head and extending to the cheek of the other side. Borges asks the man to tell how he got the scar. The man reveals his "secret:" he explains that he is really Irish, not English, and that the story begins in Ireland during the wars of independence. "El Ingles" states that during one of the conflicts, he saves the life of a particularly cowardly revolutionary, John Vincent Moon. Moon's terror makes him utterly useless for street fighting, and once superficially wounded, he stays in an old house which was "desmedrado y opaco y abundaba en perplejos corredores y en vanas antedamas" ("Forma" 136-37). The two men remain in the house for nine days—"Eso fue el principio, forman un solo día, salvo el penúltimo" ("Forma" 138)—during which Moon spends the day studying the plans and papers of the revolutionary group while he recuperates. Returning to the house early one day, the narrator discovers Moon in telephone contact with the English, betraying his protector and friend. The narrator of the tale chases Moon through the labyrinthine corridors and passageways of the house and finally corners him. He delivers a slash with a scimitar across Moon's face, leaving a scar that will mark him forever as someone who is cowardly and treacherous—someone duplicitous. Moon collects his "diners de Judas" and sets off for Brazil. The narrator finishes his story by declaring outright what the reader might already suspect: he himself is the betrayer, John Vincent Moon.

Some of the details of this story do not seem to make sense; there are a number of unexplained elements that, at first glance, are troubling. For example, although the courageous and experienced revolutionary saves Moon from certain death in the streets by taking his arm and pulling him to safety, Moon is only superficially wounded as a direct consequence of his own weakness and cowardice. Considering that the wound is not life-threatening, why do the two men hide out in an empty house rather than rejoining their comrades? Why does the courageous young revolutionary not only nurse the wound, but also insist on tending personally to Moon and keeping him there alone with him? Why do the two men remain together, side by side, night after night for nine days, in a strange old house, secluded and isolated from their companions? Could one or both of the men have engineered their seclusion in response to intense homoerotic desires?

I find that the answer to these questions lies in the highly codified figure of John Vincent Moon. He is described from the very beginning as a very queer sort of fellow—he seems to be many different things all at once. "El Ingles" states that Moon "era flaco y fofo a la vez; daba la incomoda impresión de ser invertebrado" ("Forma" 135). As McGrady indicates, the "contradictory condition of being at the same time "flaco y fofo" suggests not a neutral Janus-like duality of temperament, but—because of the negative connotations of the two adjectives—devious duplicity" (143). These gender-charged words used to describe Moon as skinny and soft, weak and spineless ("invertebrate") all indicate that Moon is not at all the brave and masculine warrior who courageously battles for the honor, either personal or national, that every "real" man is traditionally obliged to defend. Rather, the description of Moon specifically paints him as unmanly, effeminate and vulnerable. The image of Moon described here typifies the "misplaced femininity" with its resultant duplicity that heteropatriarchal societies attribute to any man who does not display typically "macho" qualities.

In addition to the physically feminine elements that characterize John Vincent Moon, a very important character trait plainly defines him as unmanly: his paralyzing fear and cowardice in the face of danger: "la pasión del miedo lo invalidaba." Not only is Moon rendered useless in the skirmish, but he also whimpers and cries: after he was wounded, "[él] prorrumpió en un débil sollozo" ("Forma" 136). Moon's humiliating inability to confront the hazards of fighting becomes even more apparent when the man who saved him suggests that they leave the house and join their comrades. After getting his gun he finds Moon "tendido en el sofá, con los ojos cerrados. Conjeturó que tenía fiebre; invocó un doloroso espasmo en el hombro" ("Forma" 137). Moon's need to pretend that he is too hurt to leave the house focuses attention on the fact that Moon is terrified by what is traditionally perceived of as an archetypally masculine activity, combat. This image of Moon, lying on his back in a traditionally passive, feminine posture, connects the characterization of Moon as both unencouraged as well as feminine, creating a link in the reader's mind between his unwillingness to fight and his weak, passive, unmanliness. Cowards are made "effeminate" and effeminate men are made cowardly because cultural norms have defined bravery as a masculine and heterosexual trait, while cowardice is fixed as feminine and homosexual.
men makes them not only appear womanly, but even causes them to think like women. It is this feminine thinking that is so pernicious and menacing.

In Argentine culture, as in the work of Borges, the overtly expressed admiration and even veneration of the concept of masculine power is manifested through military authority. As a result, Borges, in this story, makes the link between a threat to masculine gender and the threat to military strength by collapsing the perceived menace in the figure of an effeminate traitor who betrays the masculine fighter. As a soldier in the fight for Irish independence, Moon actually becomes more dangerous than the English enemy because he represents the "subversive" element that threatens other soldiers from within their own camp.

Moon is incapable of any type of direct action that characterizes his brave protector and it is precisely this passivity that is accentuated by a description of his thoroughly intellectual and abstract approach to war: "[m]i compañero me esperaba en el primer piso: la herida no le permitía descender a la planta baja. Lo rememoró con algún libro de estrategia en la mano..." ("Forma" 138). The contrast between the two men is made explicit: the admirable, honorable, manly aspects of the hero find their opposition in the despicable, disgraceful, and feminine elements of the traitor. As a result, there can be no mistake about the description of Moon: he appears to be the very picture of the stereotypical weak, soft, and passive "sissy." The result of such unmistakable feminine characteristics present in a male are not only disturbing ("incomoda impresion"), but also, as the ending reveals, dangerous.

To reinforce and emphasize Moon's femininity and passivity as well as his inconsistency, Borges has selected a curiously symbolic surname. As Juan-Eduardo Cirlot indicates, the relationship between the moon, feminine sexuality and changeability is ancient and runs across a variety of cultures: "[e]l hombre percibía, de antiguo, la relación existente entre la luna y las mareas; la conexión más extraña aún entre el ciclo lunar y el ciclo fisiológico de la mujer" (283); "[p]or su carácter pasivo, al recibir la luz solar, es asimilada al principio del dos y de la pasividad o lo femenino" (284). As a scholar on symbolism and metaphor in both the Eastern and Western traditions, and as an author who was playful in his use of symbolic names, it is probable that Borges chose the name "Moon" for its specific symbolic connotations. Certainly Borges was fully aware of the link between the feminine and the lunar. Julio Wsobobiniok, for example, correctly indicates that "[n]o podemos dejar de mencionar que Luna es una metáfora muy frecuente en Borges para decir acerca de la mujer" (154).

In addition to the feminine qualities of the moon, Cirlot indicates another very important symbolic quality of moon: it constantly varies and transforms itself, yet it remains a single entity. "[P]or encima de todo, es el ser que no permanece siempre idéntico a sí mismo, sino que experimenta modificaciones 'dolorosas' en forma de círculo claro y continuamente observable" (283). The phases of the moon from new to crescent to full, all characterize the ever-changing identity of John Vincent Moon. The fact that Moon appears to embody a multiplicity of seemingly opposing attributes is underscored, again, by his name. He may appear to be many different things, but he is, despite all the disguises, one person. Wsobobiniok perceptively points out that "...Borges hace referencia a la palabra LUNA y la comenta con MOON, su designación en inglés. Le place MOON "porque obliga la voz a demorarse". Palabras sugerentes: a Borges no le pasó

3Borges' conservative political ideology and esteem for Argentine military heritage are well known. See Benedetti and Orgambide for rather negative assessments of Borges' position. It must be said, however, that at the end of his life, when confronted with the horrors of the "Dirty War" conducted by the Argentine military, Borges repudiated his earlier views.
advertedo, que luna tiene involucrada una y que moon, fonéticamente (mun), también encierra un" (154). John Vincent Moon is the physical embodiment of the unification of opposites, the conjunction of paradoxical dualities: feminine and masculine; unity and duality; love and betrayal.

The emphasis placed on Moon’s feminine inconstancy serves to make Moon’s treachery appear more understandable and consistent with his character. But this linking of femininity within the confines of a male body with the heinous crime of betrayal also serves to reinforce and strengthen the stereotypes that Western heteropatriarchal societies have utilized in order to demonize homosexuals. As a result, Borges’ characterization of John Vincent Moon amplifies the infamy of gay men by conjuring same-sex desire with deceitfulness. Since “El Inglés” never explains the reasons underlying Moon’s decision to betray his comrade, the reader is left with the impression that the action was unmotivated, and therefore, simply to be expected in a man like Moon: Moon exposes his inherently treacherous nature when he repays his protector and savior with disloyalty for what seems like no good reason. As will be shown later in this study, money alone does not and cannot account for the betrayal: there are no textual indications that would suggest that Moon was in desperate need of money, or was particularly greedy. In fact, the references to Moon’s marxist political affiliation effectively negate the love of money as a motivating force in his actions.

The narrator’s depiction of Moon (i.e. himself) in homophobic terms taps into the commonly held belief that homosexuals are condemned to commit ignoble actions: “[g]ays are viewed first and foremost simply as morally lesser beings, like animals, children, or dirt, not as failed full moral agents. . . . Such acts as gays are thought to perform—whether sexual, gestural, or social—are viewed socially as the expected or even necessary efflorescence of gays’ lesser moral state, of their status as lesser beings...” (Mahr 245-46).

John Vincent Moon lacks the nobility of character embodied in the masculine hero figure: courage and bravery, physical strength, constant devotion to the ideal. Although Moon’s betrayal of the young republic can be understood as the vile, but inevitable, action directly resulting from his status as a spiritually degenerate pervert, the critical motivation underlying his action becomes clear at the moment when he is explicitly connected to the archetype of the treacherous and envious traitor: Judas. Moon arranges the betrayal of his companion by informing the British soldiers that they can arrest him as he crosses through a garden, and then, after the horrible deed is done, Moon “[...]bró los dioros de Judas y huyó al Brasil” (“Forma” 139). The Judas archetype is a very powerful one and its potency lies in the fact that, as Carl Jung puts it, “...envy does not let mankind sleep in peace” (31).

Envy is one of the central and defining features of Moon’s character: a weak and feminine man feels an unbridled envy for the attractive, desirable qualities of a friend and this envy leads to murder. In the process, the murderer is permanently marked. The homosexual, a freakish woman imprisoned in a male body, must possess the worst imaginable "feminine" impulses. At this point, it might help to recall that since Borges’ father was a professor of psychology, it is therefore possible, if not very likely, that Borges, due to his remarkably wide reading interests, language abilities, and access to his father’s exceptional library, had come across the work of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and his formulation of sexual "inversion" as a "woman’s soul trapped in a man’s body" ("anima multiebris virili corpore inclusa") and that it was this and other Victorian concepts that formed his understanding of same-sex desire. In his study of the Argentine theorization of homosexuality at the turn of the century, Daniel Bao notes that the traditional negative stereotypes of women were, in fact, transferred over to "inverts" because of their supposed female
was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less a habitual sin than as a singular nature. (43; emphasis added)

Edelman further stresses the "textuality" and "readability" of the queer body insofar as "homosexuals themselves have been seen as producing—and, by some medical 'experts', as being produced by—bodies that bore a distinct, and therefore legible, anatomical code. . . . Homosexuals, in other words, were not only conceptualized in terms of a radically potent, if negatively charged, relation to signifying practices, but also subjected to a cultural imperative that viewed them as inherently textual—as bodies that might well bear a 'hallmark' that could, and must, be read" (5-6). Given this social context, it becomes clear why the young hero, once he discovers Moon's act of betrayal, does not use his gun and simply shoot Moon dead, but rather chases him through a dark and somewhat unfamiliar house with, of all things, a scimitar; Moon's desires for men and his betrayal of them must be made visible to society in such a way that he is instantly identifiable. John Vincent Moon, with the crescent moon-shaped scar running across his face, forever bears the mark of the man who has desired and deceived another man and, lest he escape imperceptibly to love and betray again, he is permanently branded by an object (a sword) that symbolizes what he most desires (the phallus). The proscribed desire of one man for another that comes from a presumed inferior moral status is given tangible form: "[i]n el caso de los moralmente inferiores [homo] (Forma' 133). By betraying his friend, Moon (as "El Inglés") ultimately earns the respect of others; by acting fearfully, Moon is eventually feared by others. But those who respect and fear him do not know the ugly secret of "El Inglés": he is a mere imitation, a simulacrum, a fake. What we find in Borges, then, is a conflict between the truly courageous hero and those who, out of a desire to be (like) them, possess them, usurp their position of honor by putting on the mask of masculinity and imitating them. In Borges, the portrayal of the hero can be quite contradictory. Lanín Gyrko has noted: "[t]he cult of the Macho, of the man who affirms his virility through a violent public display of courage and prowess, is viewed ambivalently by Borges in his short stories. [...] The caricaturing of the [machismo] cult and the debunking of the hero are seen in many of Borges' stories, which depict persons who are publicly accepted as champions but who are really bragglights, incompetents, cowards and liars" (128). Perhaps part of Borges' contempt for certain macho heroes comes from his suspicion that in addition to being cowards and liars, beneath the mask of the tough guy there may also be hiding a cowardly queer. In a 1977 interview with Milton Formaro, for example, Borges draws a very clear distinction between the brave fighter, worthy of admiration, and the sexually questionable cowards and "rufanés":

Del cuchillero, lo que yo admiro es la idea de un individuo que, como decía Carriego, es cultor del coraje, que tiene el culto del coraje. [...] El cuchillero es un hombre desinteresado. El cuchillero desprecia al ruñán. El ruñán era una persona muy despreciada entre el malevaje, y el cobarde también. El ruñán sí, porque el ruñán es una persona que vive de las mujeres, era casi peor que ser maricón. No se le veía como nadie admirable. (113)

Like his creation, Moon, Borges admires the courageous macho man. In fact, Moon and Borges have a great deal in common. Considering the relentlessly negative characterization of Moon, it is odd that Borges would make the character so much like himself. For example, the desire for the virile qualities that led Moon to adopt the identity of his dead companion represents the very same yearning that Borges expressed so often with respect to his own heroic ancestors. Borges spoke frequently and passionately about the esteem and regard he held for his noble and courageous forefathers, while in contrast to them, he speaks of himself in these terms:
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I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action. Throughout my boyhood, I thought that to be loved would have amounted to an injustice. I did not feel I deserved any particular love, and I remember my birthdays filled me with shame, because everyone heaped gifts on me when I thought that I had done nothing to deserve them—that I was a kind of fake. ("Autobiographical Essay" 208-209; emphasis added)

The self-deprecating phrases he uses for himself, the fact that he did not feel worthy of love because of his lack of manly activity, and his believing himself to be a "fake" are all elements suggesting a close affinity between Moon and Borges. Although by nature neither Moon nor Borges participate in virile pursuits, they both admire and delight in them and feel ashamed for that lack of "masculinity" in themselves. It is clear that Borges, like Moon, is envious of those men who embody masculine virtues. Furthermore, both of them share a pronounced intellectual bent. As "El Inglés" says of Moon, "[p]ara mostrar que le era indiferente ser un cobarde físico, magnificaba su soberbia mental" ("Forma" 138). In the end, it appears that the figure of John Vincent Moon represents those characteristics of Borges that he most despised in himself: the cowardice, the passivity, the envy—all those despicable feminine attributes that may have caused Borges to question his own sexuality.

Given the cultural context in which Borges grew up, it is unfortunate, although not surprising, that he would link same-sex desire with fear and loathing. So just when Moon might have gotten away with his monstrous secret, he is confronted by the character Borges on his ranch and, on the specific condition that Borges "no matigará ningún oprobio, ninguna circunstancia de infamia" ("Forma" 134-35), Moon both explains the origin and cause of the scar, and in the process "out"s himself to the reader by revealing his true identity as a coward, a betrayer, and a homosexual. Moon's confession of his "secreto" reinforces the misconception that homoerotic desire cannot have positive results and that it ultimately leads to tragedy and death. He is living proof that gays must be immediately identifiable. The mark or brand will serve to keep society safe from the dangers that queers present if they are permitted to roam freely, to "pass" undetected among us. John Vincent Moon, the Judas who kisses and then betrays the men he most admires and desires, disfigured forever, serves as the example of what horrors same-sex desires bring. Moon's final words to Borges, the final words of the story, summarize the lesson that society has been piling into homosexuals' heads for centuries: now that you know who and what I am, "[a]hora Jesprécieme" ("Forma" 140).

Works Cited


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Body and Voice: The Dialogue of Marriage in the Short Stories of Mario Benedetti

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The Uruguayan Mario Benedetti, writer of novels, plays, poetry, and essays, is perhaps best known for his short stories, such as Montevideanos. Recognized for his mastery of this form (Rufinelli 108; Fernández 284; and Mathieu 12), he is regarded as an intensely nationalistic artist, who portrays the myths and foibles of Montevideo’s middle class, and at the same time a more universal writer, who probes the problems of contemporary man (Rufinelli 109; Mathieu 14-15, 17ff, 97). Rodriguez Monegal calls him a “testigo implicado” (58) of a world beset by a moral crisis, which he describes with a clear critical and ironic vision. Mathieu (16, 99), Rufinelli (113), Alegría (172), Fernández (290), and Zeitz (173-75), among others, praise him for the precision of his style and for his innovative techniques and narrative approaches.

In the world of Uruguayan petite bourgeoisie, marriage is part of the everyday reality which is reflected in Benedetti’s writings. Of his roughly 140 stories, written between 1948 and 1989, 22 explore facets of marriage. In some of these relationships, plagued by hypocrisy, egoism, and lack of communication, the marital bond becomes an obligatory association so that boredom and routine lead to frequent adultery. Mathieu points to this dark side and sees it as a consequence of a sick society from which only sick relationships can emerge (51-52). In other stories, even if there is a strong emotional tie between the partners, conjugal happiness is possible for only a short time because of the death of one of the partners. Yet there are some positive examples that do not necessarily end in a breakdown or loss. Marriage is not always the central theme in the stories but may serve as only the locus or backdrop for the development of the author’s other concerns. The couples come from the lower middle class. The men are office, government, or blue collar workers, and the women usually play the traditional role of housewives although some do have a job ("Idilio") or want to continue the profession they had before their wedding ("Triángulo isóscele").

Since experimentation with points of view is one of the characteristics of Benedetti’s prose (Mathieu 75, 99), there is a great variety of narrative voices in these stories. There are those told by a first, second, or third person, or from a multiple point of view; there are male, female, or child narrators, and one story is even presented through the eyes of a dog.

This paper proposes to study the different perspectives of marriage in Benedetti’s short stories and to explore the role of both verbal and body language in the context of the marital relationship through an analysis of the dialogic aspects of the texts, using the theories of M. M. Bakhtin that provide significant insights into Benedetti’s texts. Especially helpful were his views on the social and dialogical nature of human existence and literature, on heteroglossia and the polyphonic novel, and on the notions of the other and the fundamental nature of communication. As he