

# *The Importance of Borges's Early Poetry in His Literary Career*

Sixiao, Liu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xiamen University, No.422, Siming South Road,  
Xiamen, China

a. kiana@stu.xmu.edu.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Jorge Luis Borges, a worldwide renowned literary master, left a profound legacy in the history of global literature with his brilliantly conceived works, extensive knowledge and advanced literary concepts. The worldwide trend of reading and studying Borges is still flourishing today. Among the vast amount of research, there are few studies on Borges's early poetry. In the process of exploring Borges's literary philosophy and personality, the investigation of his early poetry is crucial. This paper is divided into three main modules. The first section analyzes the uniqueness of early poetry through its temporal definition, preservation of emotion, and multiple purely physical elements. The second section explains that early poetry witnessed the emergence of literary concepts and archetypal imagery. The third section explores the dialecticism of passion and loneliness coexisting in early poetry and the function of early poetry in improving the portrait of the author's personality. In general, this paper analyzes the importance of Borges's early poetry in his entire literary career by sorting out two important clues: the important role of early poetry in the writer's professional career and in enriching and completing the writer's image and character.

**Keywords:** Borges, early poetry, archetypal imagery, poetic aesthetics, personality portrait

## 1. Introduction

Jorge Luis Borges is internationally known as an Argentine poet and writer. A lifelong lover of reading and writing, his works cover a wide range of literary genres, including fiction and poetry, leaving countless spiritual treasures to the world. His books have been well received not only in Hispanic countries but also among literature lovers worldwide.

Borges was awarded the Formentor Literature Prize by the International Publishers Association in 1961. Then the study of the writer has also grown worldwide at an astonishing rate, with a proliferation of reviews, biographies, and interviews, and these studies continue to thrive even today.

The complexity of Borges's literature leads to the richness of its research. The research results are broadly divided into three categories: the first is about the author himself, represented by Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* and Emir Rodríguez Monegal's *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*; the second is on his works and philosophy of writing, such as Arturo Echevarría's *Borges's Language and Literature*. The third belongs to comparative studies; in the literary field,

Borges is often compared with his contemporaries, such as Kafka and Joyce. In cross-disciplinary studies, it involves medicine, psychology, and numerous other areas.

However, reviewing the findings of scholars around the world, it is obvious that the current research focuses on Borges's fiction, while the width and depth of the exploration and investigation of his poetry still need to be further broadened. In particular, the uniqueness of Borges's poetry in his early years is evident, but little study has been carried out on it. There is much potential development in both the study of the text and its vital status.

In this regard, the present paper will proceed on two key lines of inquiry to explore the unique and vital position of early poetry. One is the significance of early poetry in Borges's writing career. Second, the important role of early poetry in enriching and completing the writer's image and personality. It will also combine the original texts of the poems, relevant biographies, interviews, and some classic literary criticism theories for a comprehensive analysis, which will help to reveal the whole picture of the writer's literary work and personality.

## **2. The Uniqueness of Early Poetry**

Early poetry has some distinctive and unique characteristics.

### **2.1. Temporal Definition of The Writing Career**

This paper considers three stages of Borges's production.

The first stage is the 1920s, the period when Borges was a youth, which was also the time of his early poetry. Moreover, those poems are full of youthful romance and domesticity.

The second stage was from the 1930s to the 1950s, when Borges turned to fiction, and it was these ingenious and philosophical novels that established Borges's position in world literature.

The third stage was from the late 1950s to the 1970s. In the late 1950s, total blindness caused a dramatic change in Borges's life and work, forcing him to rely more on others [1]. With the help of his mother and close friends, Borges organized and published some of his previously completed works. However, he was unable to write any more complex new pieces, so he turned once again to poetry. Borges recalled: "In fact, blindness made me start writing poems again. Since sketching was no longer possible, I had to rely on my memory. Obviously, it was easier to memorize poems than prose" [1].

### **2.2. Early Poetry Preserves More Personal Will and Emotion of The Author**

Borges's works are known for their unexpected conceptions and fantastical imaginations, and it is this innovative, creative strategy that has attracted the interest of many scholars. This characteristic is fully reflected in his fiction and later poetic works. The writer's personality seems to be deliberately hidden in those writings, leaving readers with an illusory world of literary labyrinths.

Even the writer himself once exclaimed: "My stories are, in a sense, outside of me. I dream them, shape them, and set them down; after that, once sent out into the world, they belong to others. All that is personal to me, all that my friends good-naturedly tolerate in me—my likes and dislikes, my hobbies, my habits—are to be found in my verse. In the long run, perhaps, I shall stand or fall by my poems" [2].

Nevertheless, Borges's early poetry did not follow a metaphysical framework, and he placed considerable emphasis on the role that poetry could play in conveying emotion and empathy. In 1921, Borges even stated his poetic intentions directly in a press article [1]. He asserted that his concern was with sensation itself but not with the depiction of contextual, temporal and spatial premises. The art he desired had to be able to convey pure emotion without additional elements such as superficiality, self-centeredness, and sarcasm [1]. In Borges's opinion, some people hold a

superstitious attitude toward the genre. In contrast, they are indifferent to the conviction and passion of the text itself. They seek superficial techniques of writing, such as the splendor of adjectives and the harmony of syllables. The superstition of the genre has spread so widely that the pure “readers” will gradually disappear, and only potential critics remain [3].

### **2.3. The Preference for Physical Elements in Early Poetry**

Borges’s poetry is inseparable from his extensive reading and life experiences.

All physical presence in Buenos Aires, impressive childhood memories, family past and honor, all serve as inspiration for him. The frequent appearance in the early poetry of sunset in the suburbs, the beautiful and vivid roses, the brave soldiers, and the endless meadows of Pampas is an indication of the preference for physical elements in Borges’s poems during this period.

It is clear that the early poems contain fewer metaphysical, mystical, or religious elements than those in the later poems. When translating Borges’s collected poems years earlier, one translator had written: “Blindness keeps him from focusing on the surrounding, visible world. Then he moves from the streets of Buenos Aires to distant, inaccessible lands. His meditations range from what he remembers to what he has forgotten and from what he has forgotten to what he has lost. Finally, he begins to sing in a voice without regard to remoteness or nearness. He sings not of the world itself, but only of its outlines: life, death, fantasy” [4].

## **3. Early Poetry and The Poems: The Importance of Early Poetry in The Writer’s Writing Career**

The formation and development of Borges’s writing concept are closely related to his early experiences.

### **3.1. The Emergence of The Philosophy of Literary Creation**

Borges was born in Buenos Aires in a family of lawyers with ancient English and Argentinean roots [5]. Influenced by his English grandmother and his literature-loving father, Borges studied English at an early age and was exposed to numerous European and American literary masterpieces. In his youth, he studied and began to write poetry in Geneva, and then he traveled around Western Europe with his family, deepening his knowledge of the languages and literature of France, Germany, and other countries, as well as furthering his exposure to European expressionist literature [5].

Upon his return to Argentina, Borges began to publicize his literary philosophy [1]. First, to compress poetic writing into its basic element: metaphor. Second, to eliminate connectives and superfluous adjectives. Third, to remove decorative devices and deliberate ambiguity. Fourth, to combine two and more imagery into one in order to stimulate the imagination.

At that time, Borges already believed that the poet should write the essential poem, which breaks the limits of time and space, free from the local flavor and contemporary circumstances. It is an absolute art, which does not depend on the inconstant prestige of vocabulary, but survives in the eternal language as a belief in beauty [1].

### **3.2. The Appearance of Archetypal Imagery**

The term “archetypal imagery” was proposed by the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye [6]. A typical or frequently found imagery in literature is called “archetypal imagery”. Rather than subordinate to a particular work in isolation, such imagery has a communicative character that connects work to other works, thereby unifying and integrating all literary experiences [6].

This technique is quite common in Borges's work and contributes to the intriguing nature of his work. In the early poems, some typical archetypal images already appear, which are used quite frequently in all his works. The archetypal images are selected and shaped by Borges in his carefully considered creation process. These imageries are the very code words for solving Borges's literary enigma, the hidden things in these early poems that are the key to understanding the rest of his work [7].

Borges's poem *What Can I Hold You With*, which was written in 1934, is a remarkably typical example [8]. In this poem, several archetypal imageries such as sunset, moon, and rose have appeared.

"I offer you lean streets, desperate sunsets, the moon of the jagged suburbs." Sunset frequently appears in his poetry, and it usually implies a sense of sorrow. On the one hand, Borges's romantic experience was quite tortuous, and the sadness of the sunset is an abstraction and a condensation of his regrettable love affairs [9]. On the other hand, a more important reason is his family's genetic disease of blindness. Borges's eyesight gradually became worse from his youth until he became completely blind in his fifties. The blurring ambiguity and the dimness of the sunset are just like the world in Borges's gradually blind eyes.

"I offer you the bitterness of a man who has looked long and long at the lonely moon." The moon in this sentence refers to the reflections of himself in this relationship and also reflects the loneliness of the author, who is in love but unable to get it. The moon in this sentence is a metaphor for the author's reflection on himself in this relationship and also reflects the writer's loneliness of untouchable love. The moon is a metaphor for the mirror in Borges's works. The appearance of the moon usually indicates the author's deep reflection on his existence and his awareness of the inner depths of his heart and flawed soul. It suggests the sober solitude of Borges.

"I offer you the memory of a yellow rose seen at sunset years before you were born." The yellow rose in this sentence signifies the existence of a wonderful and fresh life. The rose imagery in Borges's poems often signifies the beautiful and fragile essence of life, which is opposed to death, showing Borges's profound admiration and attachment to life and existence. In some poems, the rose also directly refers to love, and its vivid presence is as indelible as the writer's thoughts of his lover.

### 3.3. Reflection of Poetic Aesthetics

"First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader, then as a poet, then as a prose writer" [2]. Borges's poetry has always followed a strict aesthetic pursuit.

In the process of composing poems, he constantly places himself in the shoes of a reader, scrutinizing the words and phrases from the perspective of a spectator. Therefore, the results of Borges's poetic production can reflect his poetic aesthetic pursuit. In other words, by referencing Borges's poetic works, the reader can get a certain degree of information about how the author himself would read poetry.

Early poetry emphasizes the preservation of emotion, a characteristic that corresponds to the author's pursuit of tasting poems. He believes that readers feel the beauty of the poem before they begin to think about its meaning [10]. Borges valued the importance of appreciating the author's emotions and grasping the beauty of the words themselves in poems [4]. He argues that poetry lies in the encounter between the verse and the reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the page. What is fundamental is the aesthetic action, the tremor, and the emotion belonging to the flesh that comes with each reading [4].

The use of archetypal imagery in the early poems already demonstrates another of Borges's poetic aesthetic pursuits. That is the reader's sense of trust in the author [10]. This sense of trust is reflected in the practice of reading: the reader reads the writer's poetry by first trusting it. It is not

necessary to worry about whether the imagery resembles the original or not. What really matters is to get connected to the emotions that the writer wants to express through these imageries [10]. This is both Borges's philosophy of reading poems and his conception of composition

#### **4. Early Poetry and the Author: The Importance of Early Poetry for the Perspective Portrait of Borges's Image**

The dialecticism in Borges's early poetry provides a new path for readers to obtain a fuller understanding of the writer.

##### **4.1. Dialecticism in Early Poetry: The Paradox of Passion and Loneliness**

This dialecticism refers to the coexistence of expression and restraint of lust in the writer's early poems, where the enthusiasm for love and the loneliness in humanity are interwoven in every line [11].

"I trust that I have always been in love all my life." Borges once said it. Love has been an inspiration for the poet and the clue for many writings [12]. In his poems, he implicitly recounts the lost love of his youth and the shadowy image of his lovers. As in the poem, *What Can I Hold You With*, "I offer you the bitterness of a man who has looked long and long at the lonely moon" [10].

According to Edwin Williamson's speculation, this poem was written in order to redeem his beloved Nora by Borges [5]. Unlike other love poems, the fantasy of romance and beauty is replaced by Borges with a depressing and realistic sigh. From the atmosphere created by the verses, readers can imagine Borges's unrequited attachment to this love. His yearning followed him everywhere like a mist, even to the extent that some parts of his life were burned by this thought. However, the lonely moon also seems to remind the reader that the author's passion is rational and that he learns comfort and relief in his thoughts and illusions while gazing at the moonlight again and again.

Borges's work always gives a glimpse of daily life, and even his concerns about the mortal world are rarely revealed. As the famous Chilean academic Luis Harss has commented, Borges's abstract thinking in most of his works is the outcome of his caution [7]. He had contained all the pain of his lonely mind, which was too conscious of its deficiencies. At the same time, he was very sensitive and took care to disguise his sentiments in his compositions [7]. In the passionate words of his early poems, the reader is allowed some insight into the depths of Borges's mind.

##### **4.2. Early Poetry's Enrichment of Personality Portraits: Borges under the Stage**

Borges stands out on the world literary stage as a writer who has won numerous awards and gained fame across the globe. While people praised his literary success, Borges himself considered glory as one of the forms of forgetting [7].

One comment suggests that there is no doubt that Borges was a poet, and only a poet, writing the same book of poetry all his life and that the rest was just a mask and a fiction that he used to perform another person. [4] It seems to be true according to the end of the classic essay "Borges and I" [13]. The author mentions again the Borges who manipulated the game of time and space in mythology, and even the author himself is not sure which Borges wrote the essay.

As a result, the early poems are one of the few "physical evidence" for a deeper investigation of Borges's personality portrait. In his later years, Borges often expressed his frustration with his early poetic works and even wanted to destroy them. Through these facts, it is not difficult to detect that Borges acted, on purpose or not, as an actor [7]. He is obsessed with concealing himself, and he is quite adept at hiding in the depths of his work to prevent readers from recognizing his true nature.

In Borges's own words, his early poems were written more like a narrator than a chanter [7]. Nevertheless, it is these distinctive early poems that expose the secret chapters of Borges's spiritual diary, and they strike a chord with the author's genuine emotions, outlined in a strong, serene lyrical language.

## 5. Conclusion

The present paper captures the absence in the field of research on the importance of Borges's early poetry by tracing the great accomplishments of Borges in literary history and historical research findings.

By focusing on the complementarity between early poetry and the writer's conception of literary composition, as well as on early poetry as a vivid example of enriching and completing Borges's deep image, the article has profoundly analyzed the importance of early poetry in Borges's entire literary career. Furthermore, it has broadened the study of the field of Borges's poetry to a certain degree. This secretive poet has kept a great deal of treasure hidden in his writings. Each result of Borges research is a new entry. In his literature, in his poems, there are more unresolved mysteries for the world to explore and savor.

## 6. References

- [1] Monegal, E. R. (1988). *Jorge Luis Borges: A literary biography*. Paragon House.
- [2] Borges, J. L. (1972). *Selected poems 1923-1967*. edited, with an introduction and notes, by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni. (N. T. D. Giovanni, Ed.). Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
- [3] Borges, J. L. (1995). *The writer of writers: Borges on writing*. (H. Ni, Trans.). Yunnan people's Publishing House.
- [4] Borges, J. L. (2003). *Selected poems of Borges*. (D. Chen, Trans.). Hebei Education Press.
- [5] Williamson, E. (2016). *Borges: A life*. (Z. Deng & J. Hua, Trans.). Eastern China Normal University Press.
- [6] Frye, N. (1971). *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays*. Princeton University Press.
- [7] Harss, L., & Sheng, L. (2001). *Jorge Luis Borges: A Philosophical Comfort*. *World Literature*, 3, 137–177.
- [8] Borges, J. L. (1999). *Jorge Luis Borges Obras Completas*. (Y. Wang & H. Xu, Trans.). Zhejiang Literature & Art Publishing House.
- [9] Manguel, A. (2007). *Into the Looking-Glass Wood*. (H. Wang, Trans.). East China Normal University Press.
- [10] Borges, J. L. (2001). *This craft of verse*. (C. A. Mihailescu, Ed.). Harvard University Press.
- [11] Liu, J. (2005). *Passion and loneliness under the Avant-garde experience—The early poems of Borges*. *Beauty and Times: Aesthetics*, 12, 82–83. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-2592-B.2005.12.040>
- [12] Boeges, J. L., & Ferrari, O. (2018). *The last Interview*. (D. Chen, Trans.). New Star Press.
- [13] Borges, J. L. (2007). *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*. (J. E. Irby, Trans.). New Directions Publishing Corp.