

# Jewish & Hispanic Literature: Repetition, Madness, & the Unknown

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## Abstract

In both literary and world history, Jewish and Hispanic cultures frequently interact. However, though the world-historical elements of this interaction (the Spanish inquisition, the migration of European Jews to the Americas, etc.) are well-documented, there is remarkably little scholarship dedicated to its impact on literature. In this paper, I conduct a modest survey of major authors from both Jewish and Hispanic backgrounds, with an emphasis on authors published between the years 1900 and 2000. In light of this survey, I argue (1) that Jewish and Hispanic literatures share a common lineage, which begins with the Old Testament; (2) that Jewish and Hispanic literatures respond to one another, often consciously; and (3) that Jewish and Hispanic literatures share several common features, including repetition, “mad” characters, and challenges to the supremacy of human intellect. Finally, I include a brief discussion of how this research influenced my own creative work.

## Introduction

For as long as there has been a literary canon, both Jewish and Hispanic authors have featured prominently in that canon. The Bible’s Old Testament — a central Jewish text if ever there was one — has inspired a plethora of art, both Jewish and Gentile. Equally influential is Miguel de Cervantes-Saavedra, who is often credited with the invention of the novel, and who the literary critic Harold Bloom considers “the only possible peer of Dante and Shakespeare in the Western Canon” [2]. Both the Old Testament and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* act as models for countless authors, including many cited in this paper. However, though these two books have prestigious and well-established places in literary history, a broader exploration of the interactions between Jewish and Hispanic literatures has yet to take place.

Such an exploration is relevant for three reasons. First, and of great interest to the literary historian, is the flow of ideas back and forth between Jewish and Hispanic culture. Franz Kafka presents a novel reading of *Don Quixote* in his *Parables and Paradoxes*; Jorge Louis Borges explores the possibility of his

own Jewishness in his essay *I, a Jew*; Clarice Lispector blends Latin-American magical realism and Jewish mysticism in her many brilliant short stories. From these examples alone, it becomes obvious that any account of literary history — especially accounts such as Bloom’s, which are primarily concerned with tracing the relationship between texts — must feature not only discussions of Jewish and Hispanic literatures in isolation, but also an account of how the two interact.

Second, and of great interest to the world-historian, is the past century of political developments, especially the rise of a mixed Jewish-Hispanic population in the Americas. Following the rise of fascism — and, later, Stalinism — many European Jews immigrated to both North and South America, establishing large populations in Latin America. This Jewish diaspora in the Americas became both a source of inspiration for many gentile authors (including Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Bolaño), and an adoptive home for many Jewish authors (including Saul Bellow and Clarice Lispector); its impact is visible in many of the best and most influential novels of the 20th century, which in turn make visible many subtle truths about their times and places of origin.

Finally, and of great interest to those of us who are often painted as “threats to” or “subverters of” Western culture, are the ongoing events at the United States’ border with Mexico. These events, like the rhetoric that surrounds them, bear a striking resemblance to the events which drove many to flee Europe in the past. A key claim of fascists (and, just as often, the “moderate” right) is that expelling ethnic and religious minorities (often dog-whistled as “illegals,” “aliens,” etc.) is necessary in order to “defend” or “preserve” Western Culture. However, the opposite is true. Without the substantial and ongoing contributions of Jewish and Hispanic authors — as well as artists, filmmakers, and musicians — Western Culture could not have come to be. By shedding light on these contributions, we can dispel the myth that Jewish and Hispanic influences are “foreign” or “other,” and show instead that Judeo-Hispanic influence is a key ingredient in the richness of the West.

## Lineage

The Book of Job, like many books of the Old Testament, is a frequent subject of reinterpretation and retelling. Though the Book is often summarized as the story of a man who, despite having done nothing wrong, is deprived of his wealth, home, children, and health by God, these events are only those of the prologue. The rest of the Book is dedicated to asking and answering the question of theodicy — a question we might today phrase as: “Why do good things happen to bad people?” Job’s friends attempt to console him, but never satisfactorily answer the questions raised by his suffering. The action is then interrupted by “A Poem on Wisdom,” which contrasts man’s ability to find material goods (gold, silver, glass, etc.) with his inability to find wisdom. The poem concludes:

God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.

For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens.  
When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by measure;  
when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt;  
then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.  
And he said to humankind, “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.” [9]

Following “A Poem on Wisdom” (and several further arguments), God intervenes to have the final word. However, rather than explaining himself, or the suffering he caused Job, God simply contrasts his own greatness with Job’s smallness. Job repents — “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” — and God forgives him, and restores all that was taken away [9]. The Book’s ultimate answer to the question of theodicy is that we are simply too small to understand divine justice; only God can know, and we must take Him at His word.

This inclination *away* from an explanation is a key component of Jewish literature. Whereas Euro-American writing, especially during and after the enlightenment, tends to privilege concrete, materialist knowledge (consider the Naturalist impulse to write characters who are fully determined by their environments, or the ongoing influence of psychology and psychoanalysis on fiction), Jewish literature is often content to let things happen *without* grounding every detail in a larger theory. In lieu of a totalizing explanation, The Book of Job offers a single bit of wisdom: *Know your place*. Many other books of the Bible function similarly, as do collections such as Aesop’s *Fables* and François de La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims*.

Writing which exhibits this preference for wisdom (practical advice) over knowledge (totalizing theory) is often called “wisdom writing.” Harold Bloom situates the work of Cervantes, as well as that of Shakespeare and Montaigne, within the genre of wisdom writing [2] — Western literature, it seems, reaches its highest heights in this form.

The tradition of wisdom writing continues into 20th century, in both Jewish and Hispanic texts. Perhaps the clearest example of this continuation is Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which re-imagines the pious Job as the secular Josef K, and an incomprehensible God as an incomprehensible legal system. The same broad plot — the protagonist is deprived of his wealth, social standing, and personal well-being — remains, but the reasons for this deprivation are quite different. Whereas God refers to Job as a “blameless and upright man” [9], K. is ultimately found guilty, and *The Trial* ends with the words: “it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him” [6]. Furthermore, the novel’s climax introduces yet another piece of wisdom writing: the parable “Before the Law”. In classic Biblical style, K. and a priest argue for two different interpretations of that parable. In K’s opinion, the Law is unfair; in the priest’s, the Law may be *too* fair. It is this exchange, and the wisdom put on display for the reader, which lends the novel its brilliance.

Another more recent wisdom writer is Jorge Luis Borges, whose stories often raise questions about how readers ought to interact with texts. In “The Library of Babel”, for instance, Borges envisions an infinite library which houses every possible book. Most are gibberish; a few house one or two coherent sentences; some librarians believe in a “catalog of catalogs,” which foretells the location of every fully-lucid book. As Borges’ narrator describes the librarians’ various attempts to make sense of their chaotic worlds, the reader is asked to consider various views on how to draw meaning out of a text. The suggestion that a text might be meaningless is deemed “deplorable taste and desperate ignorance,” but what exactly these infinite books *do* mean is unclear [4]. As in the Book of Job and *The Trial*, no single character has all the answers, but there is wisdom on offer for readers who can trace the patterns which emerge when those characters engage in dialogue with one another.

Every other text I surveyed features some central element which situates it in the genre of wisdom literature. Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* rattles off aphorisms such as: “The home the rich and self made merchant makes to hold his family and himself is always like the city where his fortune has been made” [13]; Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* echoes this wisdom when the narrator claims: “Some villages have the smell of misfortune” [10]; J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey* culminates in a discussion about a “fat lady” with a religious air, whose imagined presence in every audience makes an actor’s performance worthwhile [11]; Roberto Bolaño’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas* attempts to understand fascism not by studying any existing fascist texts, but by writing the biographies of fictional, archetypal fascist authors [3]. Each book enters into dialogue with the reader, rather than offering a straightforward explanation, and what little the reader is directly told raises more questions than it answers. We can therefore that both Jewish and Hispanic literatures continue the tradition of wisdom writing.

## Response

Because of their prominence in literature, and because of broader historical movements which led to their continued interaction, Jewish authors have frequently been influenced by Hispanic authors, and vice-versa. Again, the clearest example is Franz Kafka, whose parable “The Truth About Sancho Panza” imagines a *Don Quixote* wherein the titular knight is only a figment of his squire’s imagination [7]. Though this is the clearest mark of Cervantes’ influence on Kafka’s work, it is far from the only one. *The Trial* can likewise be read as a response to *Don Quixote* — both novels feature a protagonist whose sanity is called into question; both novels feature contests about how best to interpret (and act on) the texts which motivate various characters; both novels end with the tragic death of a man whose reading failed to align with that of society-at-large. Kafka’s work, it seems, can only have been written by a man who read Cervantes.

The clearest example of a Hispanic response to Jewish literature lies in the

work of Jorge Luis Borges. His work bears obvious Biblical influence (the Library of Babel is named after the Tower of Babel, an episode in the Book of Genesis), and his aforementioned essay “I, a Jew” was written both as a rebuke of antisemitism and as an earnest exploration of a culture he found fascinating. Furthermore, Borges scholars have recently begun highlighting the influences of Jewish literature — including the Kabbalah, the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, and the aforementioned Franz Kafka — on his full body of work. “[Borges] spent his whole life wishing,” writes Ilan Stavans in the *Jewish Review of Books*, “or, at least imagining through his fiction, that he was Jewish” [12]; clearly, Borges’ work is deeply influenced by Jewish literature.

Though Kafka and Borges both exhibit a unidirectional (and purely textual) influence, other authors write in response not only to Jewish or Hispanic literature, but also to the cultural and historical events that took place following Jewish exile to the Americas. Clarice Lispector, for instance, was born to a Jewish family in Ukraine; her family emigrated to Brazil when she was still a baby. Her work addresses a multitude of themes — motherhood, sexuality, the nature of authorship, the fine line between tasteful art and vulgar pornography — but perhaps the most pervasive is a sense of foreignness. This foreignness is almost never explicitly religious or racial, and only occasionally caused by class differences (as in the story “He Soaked Me Up,” which details, among other things, a young man’s inability to eat shellfish elegantly, and his subsequent embarrassment [8]); rather, Lispector’s sense of foreignness is transcendental. Her protagonists navigate labyrinths both literal (as in “In Search of Dignity”) and figurative (as in “A Complicated Case”) — labyrinths which mirror a pre-existing sense of isolation [8]. Though one might attribute these features to the influence of Borges and Kafka, one might also understand them as rooted in the conflict between Lispector’s Jewish and Brazilian identities.

Another figure who was influenced not only by Judeo-Hispanic texts, but also by the Jewish migration to the Americas, is Roberto Bolaño. Much of Bolaño’s work is concerned with the aftermath of the second World War, as well as the possibility of a “Fourth Reich” in South America. In the fictionalized biographies which make up *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, Bolaño imagines the cultural forces which may lead to such a Reich taking shape — one of his fascist poets sees “men in armor, ‘Merovingians from another planet,’ walking down endless wooden corridors; he sees blond women sleeping in the open beside putrid streams; he sees machines whose functions he dimly intuits as they move through dark nights, their headlights shining ‘like the diadems of canine teeth’” [3]. Bolaño’s disdain for antisemitism comes across in the frightening imagery that his fascist characters find beautiful, and his fear for the fates of Jewish-Americans is not unwarranted. Even today, fascism continues to haunt American letters, and American politics.

## Commonalities

In the course of our discussion, we have already touched on several features common to both Jewish and Hispanic literatures. Both continue the tradition known as “wisdom writing,” wherein fragmented understanding is elevated over more complete theories; both re-imagine the acts of reading and writing in order to challenge or habitual ways of interpreting literature; both interrupt larger narratives with flashes of insight from the author or narrator. However, there are three more commonalities I am particularly interested in: repetition, madness, and the unknown. In this section, I sketch these three commonalities, drawing again on the authors I’ve surveyed.

The first of these commonalities — repetition — is perhaps the easiest to show. Repetition is a key feature of many Biblical passages, including Job’s “Curse of the Day of His Birth,” which begins as follows:

Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, “A man-child is conceived.”  
Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.  
Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.  
That night — let thick darkness seize it! let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months.  
Yes, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it.  
Let those curse it who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.  
Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none; may it not see the eyelids of the morning —  
because it did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb, and hide trouble from my eyes. [9]

The repetition of “let,” which begins the first three lines of the lament, and remains a key verb throughout, drives home the sorrow Job feels after having lost all he once had. Furthermore, this repetition imbues Job with a sort of eloquence, and establishes him as a thoughtful and pious person. Another literary lament — Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* — features a subtler version of this Biblical repetition, when the nameless narrator pines repeatedly for his “Susana” [10]. And just as the Bible uses repetition to drive home key bits of wisdom, so too does Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*. Stein’s narrator uses the phrase “there are many kinds of men” nineteen times verbatim [13]; in the following passage, she waxes philosophical on the diversity of the human species:

There are many kinds of men, there are many kinds of women there are many kinds of ways of mixing them in the children that come out of them. There are many kinds of men and many millions made of each kind of them. Some kinds of them have more in all of them

of individual being than there is in some of the other kinds of men. In each kind of men, in the many millions of each kind of them there are always among them some with much, some with less, and some with little, and some with almost not any individual feeling in them some of such of them need other men around them to give the man an individual feeling in them, some men have in them so much individual feeling in them that they make their way through everything around them, some of them have it so much in them that they feel themselves as big as all the world around them.

Here, as in Biblical verse, the reader is meant to pay particular attention to the wisdom on offer. However, in other Judeo-Hispanic literature, repetition is used for comic, rather than pedagogical, purposes. In the first chapter of *Don Quixote*, for example, repetitious passages such as “the reason of the unreason with which my reason is afflicted so weakens my reason that with reason I murmur at your beauty;” or again, “the high heavens, that of your divinity divinely fortify you with the stars, render you deserving of the desert your greatness deserves” cause the novel’s hero to lose his wits, and “lie awake striving to understand them and worm the meaning out of them” [5]. Saul Bellow echoes this suspicion of literary authority when he begins *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* with the following repetitious passage:

You had to be a crank to insist on being right. Being right was largely a matter of explanation. Fathers to children, wives to husbands, lecturers to listeners, experts to laymen, colleagues to colleagues, doctors to patients, man to his own soul, explained. The roots of this, the causes of the other, the source of events, the history, the structure, the reasons why. For the most part, in one ear and out the other.

Perhaps the most layered use of repetition occurs in J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, when the inarticulate Zooey Glass says:

“I don’t think I ever tried to *stop* you from saying [the Jesus Prayer]. At least, I don’t think I did. I don’t know. I don’t know *what* the hell was going on in my mind. There’s one thing I *do* know for sure, though. I have no goddam authority to be speaking up like a *seer* the way I have been. We’ve had enough goddam seers in this family.”

Here, repetition serves not only to underscore a point the author may want to drive home, but also to add a layer of realism to the dialogue (in day-to-day conversation, we tend to speak in repetitious fragments, rather than in verse), and to add both humor and tragedy to the apology Zooey makes to his sister, Franny. Though he spends nearly the whole novel berating her for an alleged inability to communicate, it is ultimately *he* who lacks lucidity.

Each of these instances of repetition serves a different purpose — to heighten a sense of loss, to underscore a flash of wisdom, to make the reader laugh or cry — but they are united in their Biblical roots, as well as their beauty, and they mark a key commonality between Jewish and Hispanic writing.

Another such Judeo-Hispanic commonality is the inclusion of one or more *mad* characters. Perhaps the most famous instance of literary madness is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which features a protagonist whose brains are “dry,” whose wits are “quite gone,” and whose imagination is given over to “enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense” [5]. As mentioned earlier, Kafka's protagonists follow in this tradition, as do Bellow's.

Still another character in the Quixotic tradition is Roberto Bolaño's “Luis Fontaine Da Souza,” who obsessively argues against the great thinkers of the enlightenment (Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, etc.) while moving in and out of mental hospitals [3]. Da Souza is a sort of dark reflection of Don Quixote — both are obsessive readers, both stand in opposition to secularization and social atomization, and both are driven insane for those very reasons. However, where Quixote's madness is almost ennobling, Da Souza's is purely embittering; where Quixote is surprisingly egalitarian, Da Souza is unmistakably antisemitic. These contrasting forms of madness invite us to read both Cervantes and Bolaño with greater depth.

I found perhaps the richest form of madness in my survey, however, in Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Though the novel begins with a seemingly sane figure — Franny's boyfriend, Lane — it eventually focuses on Franny herself (a hopeless romantic, stricken with anxiety), and her brother, Zooey (an actor and profound narcissist). Though neither is overtly described as “mad,” or “crazy,” the reader is nevertheless given the sense that something is wrong — either with the Glass siblings, or with the world in which they live. The question of where exactly this madness lies is a key theme of both *Franny and Zooey* and its predecessors, and recurs again and again throughout Judeo-Hispanic literature.

The last, and most pervasive, feature common to the Jewish and Hispanic literatures is a tendency to challenge the supremacy of the human intellect. This feature exists in — or, at least, lurks in the subtext of — all wisdom literature, but it is often made explicit in the works of Borges and Kafka, as well as the Book of Job. After reciting many scholarly opinions on the parable “Before the Law,” Kafka's priest says: “You mustn't pay too much attention to opinions. The text is immutable, and the opinions are often only an expression of despair over it” [6]. This echoes God's speech to Job, and foresees the concerns raised by Borges' Library of Babel.

The unknowable also takes subtler, more interpersonal forms. Bellow's Mr. Sammler, in spite of many years of scholarship, is unable to understand the thoughts and actions of the young people who inherit his family name [1]; Lpector's narrator, after encountering a strange poet outside her apartment, says: “How can I be a mother to this man? I ask myself, and there is no answer. There is no answer to anything. I went to bed. I had died.” [8] And Salinger's Franny and Zooey struggle for nearly one hundred pages to understand other.



This seemingly small unknown — how best to relate to a mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister — is handled with the same delicacy and significance one would use when handling the question of theodicy.

To conclude our discussion of this final commonality, we must address the most significant Hispanic literary movement in recent memory: magical realism. In *Pedro Páramo*, Juan Rulfo portrays a Mexican ghost town, populated largely by literal ghosts. However, rather than question his own sanity, Rulfo's nameless protagonist accepts the presence of spirits from the moment he first sees one, already well-aware that certain things are simply beyond his understanding [10]. Though writers in other traditions may feel compelled to explain the wandering souls, or at least dedicate some time to a failed or partial explanation, Rulfo instead leaves these questions entirely to the reader. It may be that the protagonist is mad; it may be that he really does see all he claims to; both may be true or false simultaneously. But again, rather than linger on such questions, the novel moves heedlessly forward, more interested in the human drama than the supernatural elements which surround it. Much magical realist fiction does the same.

## Creative Work

I now turn to the question of how my research influenced my creative work. The creative component of this project — a 60,000-word novel — began with three central influences: Kafka, Borges, and Salinger. All three embody the themes hitherto explored; all three write small central casts; all three present readings and re-readings within their texts. It became my goal, then, to tell a story which would feature these favorite elements of mine. I started work on the project during the summer of 2018, and completed my first draft on February 2nd, 2019. This draft was rough, to put it mildly; in my hurry to incorporate the fancier, formal elements of composition, I'd neglected many basic necessities of any good story. Muddled characterization, predictability, and a sense of formula marred the work. I thank Professors Anton and Rooney for pushing me to do better.

As I revised, I found myself returning again and again to Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. Unlike the three authors who initially inspired the project, Rulfo is not one of Bellow's "explainers." Rather than use characters to explore fantastical scenarios, Rulfo uses fantasy to explore his characters. The spirits which roam Comala exist not to confront the reader with questions, but rather to give her a sense of the town's history, and to show the impact Don Pedro's power has on those who attempt to live alongside him. Given this realization (and continued prompting from the aforementioned Professors), I knew exactly how my first draft could best be built upon. I had to create a sense of history.

This need for history was driven home as I read Roberto Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas* for the first time. In only a few pages, Bolaño can present the reader with holistic portraits of the men and women he makes the object of his study; in only a few sentences, he can inspire tears. This talent

lies primarily in his eye for detail — he knows exactly which images are most striking, and which idiosyncrasies tell us most about his characters. Like Rulfo, Bolaño showed me something vital about storytelling: it is vital to leave certain things *unwritten*.

Over the final six weeks of the thesis quarter, I made substantial cuts to my first draft, and wrote new segments which enabled me to fill in my characters' history. This not only enabled me to lend them the motivation and depth which they'd lacked, but also forced me to reconsider exactly who they were. Some became substantially less innocent; others, more cynical; still more, less interested in romance than I'd expected them to be. Though I was not proud of my first draft, I am certainly proud of the second, and I expect the third (which I will work on independently in the coming months) to be better still.

## Conclusion

Though my remarks on the creative process may be of some interest, I'd like the reader to focus for now on the research I've done, and the theses set forth by this paper. As I remarked in the introduction, there has long been a need to explore the relationship between Jewish and Hispanic literatures, and this need is especially pressing in our current social/political climate. As long as Jewish and Hispanic people are described as foreign influences on Western culture, rather than contributors to it, it will be the responsibility of scholars to document and highlight Judeo-Hispanic contributions to the West. Likewise, once the myth of Jewish and Hispanic "foreignness" is dispelled, the scholarly work of integrating our understanding of Jewish and Hispanic literatures into a broader understanding of Western literature can begin.

In this paper, I have taken a few first steps towards such an understanding. I have highlighted some key interactions between the major texts and authors of Judeo-Hispanic literature, as well as offered a discussion of three themes — repetition, madness, and the unknown — which appear frequently in the work I've surveyed. However, much work remains to be done. My survey spans less than one-twentieth of the history I'm attempting to understand, and only encompasses a handful of books. Given more time, I'd have liked to read more from each of the authors surveyed, and include many more authors (especially Laura Esquivel, María Lugones, Sholem Aleichem, and William H. Gass). Perhaps future scholars will approach both broader time-frames and broader reading lists.

There remains much work to be done.

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