# Who Wrote Don Quixote? The Meaning of Art

“A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.” (J.L. Borges, “A Note on Bernard Shaw”)

**Jorge Luis Borges** (1899 to 1986) was a famous Argentinian novelist who often addressed philosophical problems and puzzles in his work. Among philosophers, Borges is famous for his numerous “thought experiments” that seem to show problems with our ordinary ways of thinking about things such as art, reality, language, and other things. In “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” Borges offers one such thought experiment concerning a modern French novelist who manages to recreate a word-by-word copy of (sections of) the 1615 Spanish novel *Don Quixote* (by Miguel de Cervantes)*.* Suffice to say, things get weird…

## So, What Happens in the Story?

It is a revelation to compare Menard’s Don Quixote with Cervantes’. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.” Written in the seventeenth century, written by the ‘lay genius’ Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.”

History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases—exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor —are brazenly pragmatic. (Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote”)

The **narrator** of the story is an anonymous literary critic who is attempting to defend the reputation of the recently dead writer Pierre Menard (a fictional French novelist). He begins by noting that two famous people liked Menard (as it turns, Menard wrote nice things about both of them). He then proceeds to provide a list of what he calls Menard’s “visible work.”Importantly, ALL of Menard’s work directly involves some sort of interaction with *other* work, both his own and other people’s. Menard wrote “symbolist” poems in which readers were supposed to find spiritual meanings, argued for the possibility of creating *new* concepts that had never previously appeared in previous art or language, and wrote commentaries on long-dead philosophers and novelists. He also looked for common themes among dead writers, translated books into new languages, responded to his critics (and argued that these critics didn’t understand their own work), offered reflections on the nature of literary criticism and interpretation, and so on.

The twist comes when the critic begins discussing Menard’s other work: “This work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two.” So, why is this supposed to be impressive? The critic tells us the following:

1. The chapters were word-for-word identical. This was not a translation into French or a modern retelling of the same story.
2. Menard did not simply copy Quixote from Memory, but instead got himself in the correct state of mind that would allow him to write the words of *Don Quixote* in the exact same order as Cervantes had originally done.
3. Importantly, Menard did NOT do this by getting himself into mindset of Quixote’s original author (Cervantes). After, how could he? This would require that he “know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between 1602 and 1918…”. Among other things he would have to forget: that Miguel de Cervantes had ever written a book called *Don Quixote!*
4. Also importantly, Menard chose Quixote because he didn’t feel it was “necessary” for him to write a book in just this way. Instead, he thought that he *could* write something like the Quixote, if he put himself in the right mindset. However, in a different mindset, he might write something very different.
5. What Menard DOES do: he somehow gets himself in the right frame of mind to write some chapters of a novel *from his own perspective* that is word-for-word identical to a novel that Cervantes *from a completely different perspective.* So, Menard *meant something different* when he wrote the words than when Cervantes did.

**Whose novel was better?** As mentioned above, Menard’s version of the Quixote is word-for-word identical to the one written by Cervantes. However, the critic argues that, since Menard and Cervantes meant different things when they wrote the words, we should evaluate them separately. So, for example, both books take place in medieval Spain. However, Cervantes chose presumably chose this setting because at least in part because he lived in Spain, the time he was writing about wasn’t *that* long ago. On the other hand, Menard chose for precisely the *opposite* reason: it had nothing to do with contemporary France at all. The same thing holds for every other aspect of the work. For example, Cervantes writes a serious defense of the military as a former soldier, while Menard writes the exact same passage as a pacifist (and presumably means something much different by it!). The critic concludes that Menard’s version of *Don Quixote* is actually the more subtle of the two.

**And in the end…**The critic says that Menard wrote him a letter that argued that we *don’t* need to turn to past works to learn things, and that instead, “every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand in the future this will be the case.” (After all, we ourselves could recreate the Quixote if we wanted to!). The critic argues that Menard has actually shown us a new reading old texts: we can read them *as if* they were written by a different author, or in a different order, than they actually were.

## So, What Gives Works of Art Their Meanings?

Borges’ story causes problems for a number of ideas about how/why works of art acquire their significance, and even what it means for something to be a “single work of art” in the first place (so, for example, what it makes it the case that an MP3 and a CD might actually have be instances of the same musical album?):

* Ideas such as **Formalism** and the **New Criticism** argues that a work’s meaning and significance are entirely dependent on the *work itself:* we don’t need know anything about the author/musician/painter, the intended audience, or anything else. To understand a work, we simply need to look closely at its *form,* or *structure.* We listen to the song, read the book, or whatever, However, Borges’ two different Quixotes plausibly provides a counterexample to this, since both works are *formally identical* but they have *different meanings.*
* **Historical** schools of criticism tend to think that art receives its significance and meaning by the processes by which an author (given his or her cultural background, artistic influences, and so on) produces the work in the question. So, we can understand a work by studying history, the life of the author, and so on. However, Borges’ story also raises at least some problems for this, since Menard quite deliberately destroys *all evidence of his process or motivation.* We have literally *no information* on what Menard was thinking when he wrote various passages, or how this might have differed from what Cervantes was thinking. We do know that it was different than Cervantes, of course, but very little else.
* **Reader Response Criticism** says that works of art receive their meaning/significance by *their effects on their audiences.* This means, for example, that the same text/song might literally be a “different work of art” depending on who happened to be reading or listening to it. It will all depend on what this particular reader happens to bring to the work of art. The critic in Borges story seems to have something like this in mind. But does this really work? The story also provides some evidence to the contrary, since it suggests that readers can be *incorrect* in their understanding of a work (for example, they might incorrectly think that the passages by Menard and Cervantes had the same meaning!).

To summarize: works of art (somehow) receive their meaning from some combination of form (the sounds, words, and colors), their history, and the reaction of their audiences. But Borges’ story makes it pretty difficult for us to say how this happens.

## Activity: What Counts as the Same?

Suppose you have an old vinyl record with a live performance of one of your favorite songs, “Disco Fever”. Which of these would you count as instances of the *same* song? Why (this is the most important part…)?

1. An MP3 or CD of Disco Fever made from the same master tape.
2. An MP3, CD, or a record based on the same performance of Disco Fever, but recorded separately (maybe there were two different people recording the performance).
3. A recording of Disco Fever from a different live performance.
4. A well-done, karaoke performance of Disco Fever.
5. A karaoke performance of Disco Fever in which the singer gets half the lyrics wrong, and even the music is off.
6. A different band’s cover of Disco Fever.
7. A Spanish-language version of Disco Fever, with the same music.
8. A “remix” of Disco Fever which changes the order/frequency/pitch/etc. of the music and lyrics.
9. A new radio hit called “Disco Fever” which heavily samples the original, but which rearranges the music/lyrics, AND adds new music and lyrics.
10. A radio transmission from a non-English speaking alien planet, which sounds *exactly like* Disco Fever, but which the aliens actually use to communicate information about physics. (You can assume the aliens don’t know anything about Earth Music, or what Disco Fever means to humans.)
11. A trillion monkeys hit random buttons on synthesizers for a trillion years. One day, the group of monkey produce something that sounds just like Disco Fever. (Based on Borges’s “Library of Babel” thought experiment).

## Discussion Questions

1. Based on the activity above, what would *you* say the criteria are for determining whether or not two things are actually instances of “the same work of art.” Can your idea handle Borges’s Quixote problem? Why or why not?
2. Choose a favorite song, book, or movie, and say a little bit about what you think it *means.* Now, consider how your explanation of its meaning relates to the ideas discussed above. For example, how much did you consider the author’s/musician’s intent? The social context? The pure “form”? Your personal response (which was presumably informed by your previous experience)?