

“Axolotl” by Julio Cortázar

Which of these terms would you say describes the boy in “Axolotl”?

Fascination (Dictionary)

The state of being intensely interested (as by awe or terror)

Obsession (Dictionary)

1: an irrational motive for performing trivial or repetitive actions against your will [syn: compulsion] 2: an unhealthy and compulsive preoccupation with something or someone [syn: fixation]

Empathy (Wikipedia)

Empathy is the experience of awareness of the thoughts, emotions or concerns of others. Empathy is often characterized as the ability to put oneself into another person's “place.” Humans experience empathy or feel *empathic* many times when they see another person or animal during a positive or negative experience. One must be careful not to confuse empathy with sympathy which is characterized as the experience of similar emotions to another person.

Most psychologists and researchers believe empathy is an acquired trait which you begin to learn at a young age until late adolescence. Other theories state that empathy is innate in higher mammals as shown in tests performed on infant children...

Closely related concepts are *compassion* and *sympathy*.

The empathy reflex is exploited to a certain extent in all kinds of fiction; we may identify deeply with characters appearing in a text or on a screen. It is also possible to identify with a person of the other sex or an animal. Empathy is thought to be a driving psychological force behind the animal rights movement.

Some students of animal behavior claim that empathy is not restricted to humans as the definition implies. Examples include dolphins saving humans from drowning or from shark attacks, and a multitude of behaviors observed in primates, both in captivity and in the wild.

Empathy may be painful: seeing the pain of others ...

Related to the topic of empathy is the concept of “emotional intelligence.” You can research this concept at Wikipedia.org (which provides a useful overview) and see how you would characterize the boy's emotional intelligence.

How does the boy become fascinated by the axolotl in the first place?

- He's alone, on his bike, looking for something to do ..friendless? It seems so, since we never see him with a friend
- Out of boredom? Loneliness?
- Out of dissatisfaction with his ordinary routine—he's usually attracted to the more popular animals, the lions and the panthers (see the Rilke poem, “The Panther”) but this day they are disappointing. The lions are “sad and ugly” and the panther is “asleep.” So he goes into the “dark, humid aquarium” and “unexpectedly” he “hits it off” with the axolotls.

What is the boy's initial reaction to the axolotls?

- They seem to capture his imagination, fascinate him. He reads the card, and later he goes to the library to find out even more about them, but ultimately it's not information from a book that he's seeking. These factual details aren't exactly what interest him. If you look at those details, they're the normal kinds of things that you'd find in an encyclopedia or dictionary about a particular animal: They're a species of Mexican salamander (but he already knows this from looking at their "little pink Aztec faces"); they can live on land or water; they're edible; their oil was used like cod-liver oil. But the problem with these facts is that they really tell him next to nothing about what it's like to be an axolotl. They treat these animals, these living, breathing creatures that have captured the boy's imagination, like inanimate objects. Empathy tells him they are far from inanimate. When we turn a human being into an object to be exploited, we call that "dehumanization." What do we call it when we turn animals into objects? But we find it acceptable (for the most part) to turn animals into objects, unless they are our pets, forgetting that they are living, breathing creatures like us. This boy isn't looking for facts; he's looking for an experience. And he gets it.

What do these little details tell you about this particular boy?

- He's sensitive; he's open to new experiences. He's imaginative. He's independent.
- He may be lonely but even if he is, he makes very rich use of his solitude.

What's the nature of his fascination?

- His fascination leads to a growing empathy, which leads to feelings of guilt (for the creature's imprisonment, it seems). At first, watching them sit there motionless, he thought he understood "their secret will, to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility." But the boy later realizes that there is no romantic "secret will" and that their immobility has nothing to do with abolishing space and time; he realizes that captivity is a horrible burden, an oppressive nightmare; they want to be free like any creature, swimming freely, not sitting immobile in a cage.
- Early on and throughout he associates the axolotl with Aztecs, the native Mexicans who were vanquished by the Europeans, the Spanish ...the axolotls have "eyes of gold" (Aztec gold); they are "silent and immobile" like ancient statues that serve as reminders of the civilization and the people who were brutally conquered. These eyes, like the eyes of statues may "lack any life, but they are looking"—they see into us and we try to see into them. He directly likens the axolotl to a "statuette corroded by time" (425). He explains that it's the eyes which fascinate ("obsess") him the most. They represent "another way of seeing" that is now a mystery he wants to penetrate. "The golden eyes continued burning with their soft, terrible light; they continued looking at me from an unfathomable depth which made me dizzy" (426).
- He begins to identify with the axolotls. He knows they look nothing like human beings, like monkeys do, but he sees the "humanity" in them nevertheless." When he claims the axolotls were "not *animals*" (426) what do you think he's driving at?
- Once he takes the step of recognizing their "humanity" (we don't have a word for what he wants to describe!) he begins to imagine them aware as a human being is aware. He imagines they are conscious of their condition, as we are. The plaintive cry he imagines is "Save us, save us." It doesn't get more empathetic than that. On another level, the axolotls may be "Aztecs" (who were also considered subhuman "savages") and who also might still be "saved." Once he hears this plea, he begins to feel ashamed, ignoble. Something is taking shape from the larval stage (axolotls never leave their larval stage) that he fears. Some retribution for the cruelty of this imprisonment maybe? He ends up imprisoned along with them in the end. His empathy is so complete that he can't entirely leave them even when he stops visiting.

- His conscience goes on overdrive: they are “devouring me slowly with their eyes, in a cannibalism of gold” (427). Just thinking of them places him beside the cage. The eyes never close; they are always with him. He can’t escape his feelings of empathy.
- Finally he acknowledges that the axolotls are suffering, that they are “lying in wait for something, a remote dominion destroyed, an age of liberty when the world had been that of the axolotls” (427). They are lying in wait for their freedom, and meanwhile they are in “liquid hell.” This realization is what allows him to penetrate finally into their world, because it is the “truth.” (How do we know it’s the truth? We can only empathize.)
- From that point on, the identity of the boy is confused; is he now an axolotl or a boy? Does empathy always involve a kind of split, a kind of fracturing of identity? Double vision? He feels “trapped.” In what way is empathy a kind of painful trap? Should we avoid it? (Not everyone has it or wants to have it.) Do you think the story warns against empathy or encourages it?

What does the story “mean”?

We can justify thematic statements like:

- Empathy is painful.
- It’s possible for humans and animals to experience a “meeting of the minds.”
- Like the axolotl imprisoned in its cage, the soul is trapped inside the body.

But those kinds of summary meanings, while they may be justified, seem so inadequate.

Let’s leave that question open and answer it with a quote from commentator Susan Nayel: “The nightmare of being trapped inside the body of a beast is the human’s experience, and the panic of being abandoned by the man is the axolotl’s final cry. The only hope, as noted by the axolotl, is the creation of art where the writer can become another and communicate on behalf of all creatures — expressing the feelings of all creatures so that none may feel the terror of isolation and imprisonment.”