

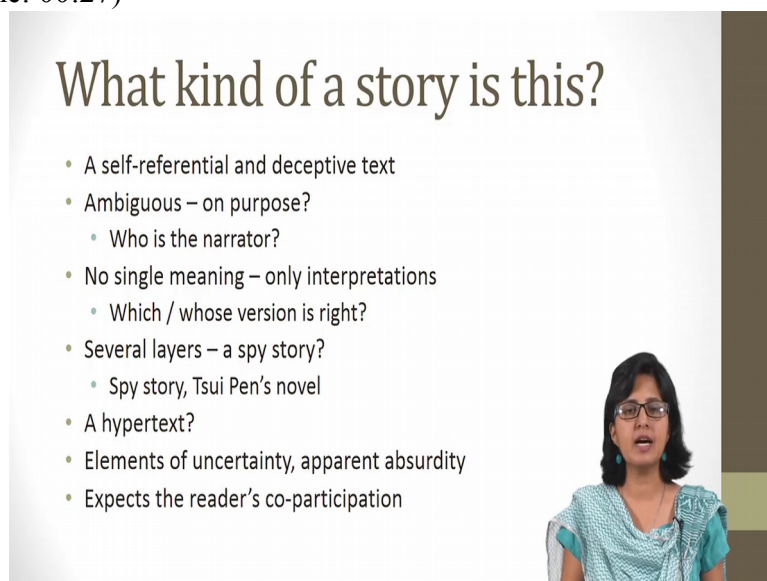
Introduction to World Literature
Professor Doctor Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Studies
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture 07
The Garden of Forking Paths by Borges - Part II

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Hello everyone. Welcome to today's session. Today we are continuing to discuss Borges short story, The Garden of Forking Paths. We had done a close reading of the short story in the previous session. Today we continue to look at some of the other important aspects which have also informed our understanding of the story.

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If you ask what kind of the story this is, it is difficult to find a single straightforward answer. It is at large, a self-referential and deceptive text, the ambiguity which is the part of the text whether it is on purpose or whether it is inbuilt inadvertently is perhaps not easy to decipher.

And the ambiguity rests right from the basic question about who the narrator is? Whether the narrator is the manuscript editor or Yu Tsun or the author figure of Borges, it is difficult for us to know. And how the elements of history and fiction fuse; and how the elements of history and fiction fuse in this story together, that also becomes another source of ambiguity.

And there are no, there is no single meaning that this story gives out. We only have multiple interpretations. Which version is right? Whose story is right? Who is telling the truth and who is not? These are some of the questions that would continue to haunt us even after we finish reading the story.

There are several layers that this story has. There is a straight forward spy story which is a part of it and that could be seen as the outer box or outer layer of the story. There are multiple boxes and layers inside.

So Tsui Pen's novel and the many things which are part of its narration in the beginning, it is the resurrection by Stephen Albert. Those are many, many layers and many, many boxes with which we can find multiple narrative possibilities. And certain personal details that our narrator Yu shares with us about the choice of his profession, and how he is embarking on such a mission.

And towards the end, the, about the infinite penitence and grief that he is facing which is unknown to, the, the rest of the world, those are certain other things which would perhaps give us other layers and other possibilities of looking at the story.

This is also being seen as one of the earliest hypertext kind of narration. And interestingly this is the story which can be easily translated to hypertext version as well.

And we had mentioned in the earlier lecture this is a story which is said to have pre-dated the event of post-modernism. So we do find the number of post-modern elements, there is ambiguity and fragmentation and hypertextual references as part of this narration.

There are number of elements of uncertainty which we find from beginning till the end of the text. There are certain kinds of, certain elements of uncertainty which are built into the story line.

For example the kind of uncertainty that Yu Tsun faces about his life, even when he begins to tell us about, even when he begins to tell us about the series of events that began to follow after his cover as a spy was exposed.

The uncertainty that Yu Tsun feels when he is being pursued by Madden, or the uncertainty that he feels when he is making the choice and after having made the choice, when he is awaiting his death sentence.

There are many ambiguous feelings that he has within him. These are certain uncertain elements which are built-in into the story. And even otherwise there are many uncertain things, many ambiguous things even bordering on to certain absurdity.

For instance the, the ethnicity of Yu Tsun and the fact that he is working for the Germans, there is a certain absurd magic realist things which critics have noticed in this story.

This is the story which expects the reader's co-participation. Without the reader participating in this story as someone who is trying to solve the puzzle or as someone who is trying to make sense the many layers and many boxes which are part of the story this is, the reading of the story is not complete.

This is definitely the kind of story that expects a reader, there is an implied reader who is either participating in the meaning of the story or trying to unravel the mystery that story is. Borges himself had referred to the story as the detective story.

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Conversations

- Borges: I think it's quite good as a detective story, yes.
- Interviewer: I think it's more than a detective story, though.
- Borges: Well, it should be. Because, after all, I had Chesterton behind me and Chesterton knew how to make the most of a detective story

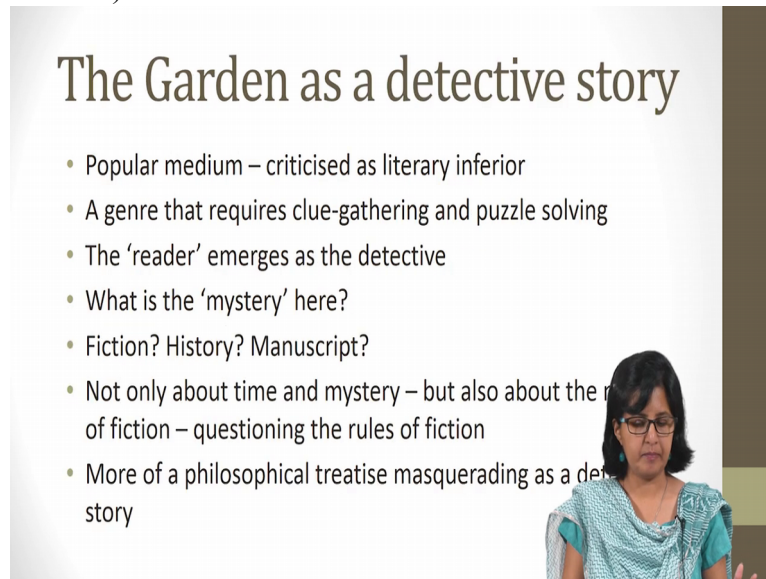
In one of his interviews titled *Conversations* the interviewer asked him about this story of *The Garden of Forking Paths*. And he says I think it is quite good as a detective story. Interviewer says it is more than a detective story, though.

And this is the ambiguous explanation that Borges gives. Well it should be because after all, I had Chesterton behind me and Chesterton knew how to make the most of a detective story.

He sticks to this notion that this is a detective story but just like the interviewer knows, the reader as well as Borges himself knows that there is more to this than a mere detective story.


But this outer layer of a detective story, this outer layer of a spy story makes the mystery all the more profound, may accentuates (()) 0:05:46.0 into it notion of mystery, accentuates the kind of mystery which is part of this story.

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The Garden as a detective story

- Popular medium – criticised as literary inferior
- A genre that requires clue-gathering and puzzle solving
- The 'reader' emerges as the detective
- What is the 'mystery' here?
- Fiction? History? Manuscript?
- Not only about time and mystery – but also about the rules of fiction – questioning the rules of fiction
- More of a philosophical treatise masquerading as a detective story



We had noted earlier that the genre of detective fiction, though it was the popular media, it was often looked down as a literary inferior. It did not have the literary merit or the philosophical profoundness like most other well-known canonical fiction had.

And what made this kind of writing; the genre of detective fiction extremely popular was that hence it was easy to read and it also required the clue gathering and puzzle solving skills. So as a medium, as a genre it was something that challenged the reader.

Here we find Borges making use of this medium, the genre of detective story to narrate a tale which would be challenging for the reader, where the reader is required to gather the clues and solve the puzzle that is part of the story. The reader is the detective here and that is what makes *The Garden of Forking Paths* a different kind of a detective story.

We do not have a detective within the story trying to solve the puzzle or trying to resolve the mystery. Right at the outset when we find this yellow man working as a spy for the Germans and he is currently being pursued by an Irishman in England.

When we are given this setting the reader automatically assumes the position of the detective and the reader goes on to solve the, goes on to solve this puzzle, solve the mystery.

And what is the nature of the mystery over here? When we look at the story as a whole, in totality the way it is presented tells us that there is no mystery over here. It is in the form of a

deposition. It is not in the form, it is not in the conventional form of a detective story where there is a form of suspense which is there hanging in the air right at the outset of the narration.

So we are given to understand by the interventions, by the interventions of manuscript editor or the history writer that this is the story, the solution, the resolution of which we already know of.

So the nature of mystery itself is challenging and ambiguous over here and towards the end, when a brief suspense, a brief spell of suspense is broken, we are able to together make sense of the many things that Yu Tsun have been feeling or even perhaps question some of the things that Yu Tsun had not tried to share with us.

And how would you classify the different details that you find, find in this story? Is it part of fiction? Is it history? Or is it a manuscript editor? Remember the footnote that we find at the end of the story where there is a brief, there is a kind of corrected information given about the death of a Viktor Runeberg.

Is this tale the form of narration? Is it something else than fiction (())(09:10) to a manuscript? Is it like a research paper? Again there is no single answer to it.

This story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, it is at some level all of these rolled together into one and at another level none of these. When the story is being positioned as a detective story, when multiple elements of suspense and mystery are introduced into it, we are also given to understand this is not just about time and the mystery that is part of the narrative. It is also about making of fiction.

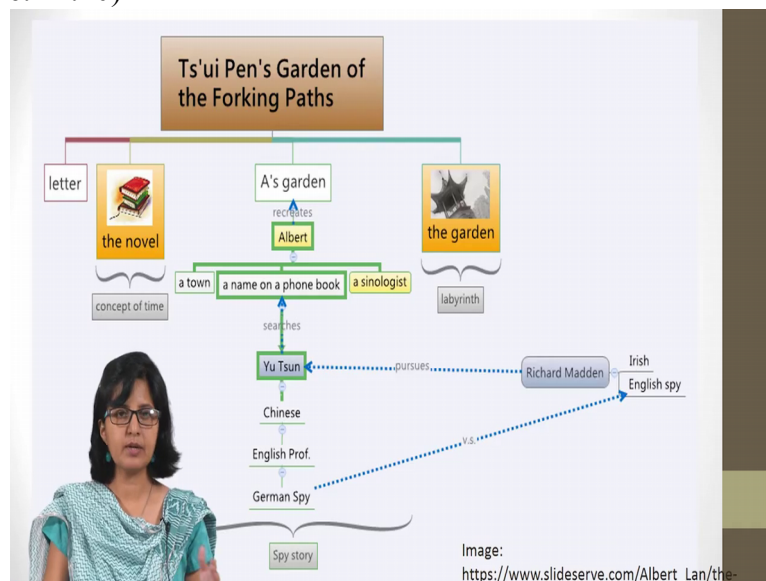
Here in the form of a detective story, within the frameworks of the detective story when Borges is introducing to us certain elements of fiction, some elements of history, some elements of manuscript and some elements of research he is actually questioning the rules of fiction. It is very typically post-modern.

Hey, this is a self-referential text which is consciously questioning the ways in which the stories are written. And deliberately trying to write a story which does not present itself as a story but nevertheless carries a label of detective fiction.

So in terms of this questioning that Borges does it is slightly complicated. And there are critics who even wondered whether this is, this can be seen more like a philosophical treatise masquerading as a detective story, because we do find a lot of discussions about future, about time, about choices, about certain relationships within which men and women are required to make difficult decisions.

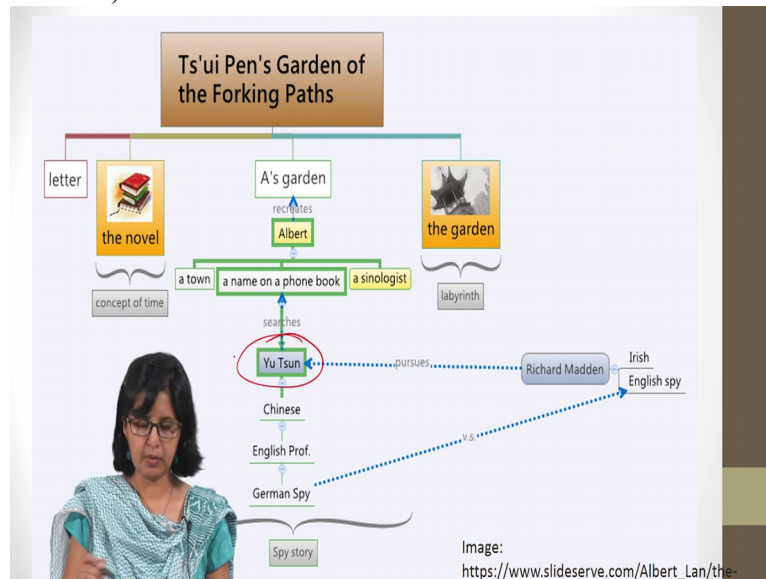
And impossibility of making two different decisions at the same time. And the fictional possibility of occupying or inhabiting different physical spaces and different time slots at the same time. So it is many things rolled into one but for convenience sake, for simplifying the nature of the story perhaps it is also called as a detective story by Borges himself.

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Let us quickly recall the plot line and the main things that we discussed when we read the story closely in the previous session. So we have

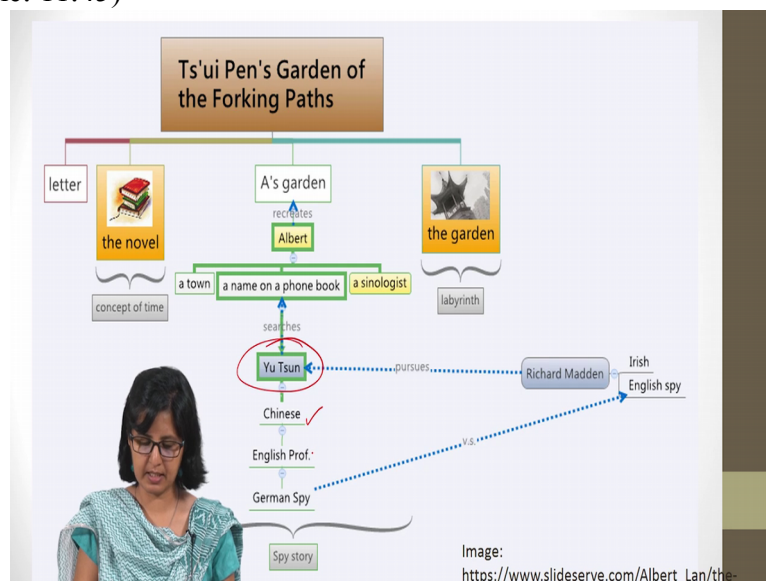
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at the center of our narration, Yu Tsun who can be considered as a narrator and the protagonist of this story.

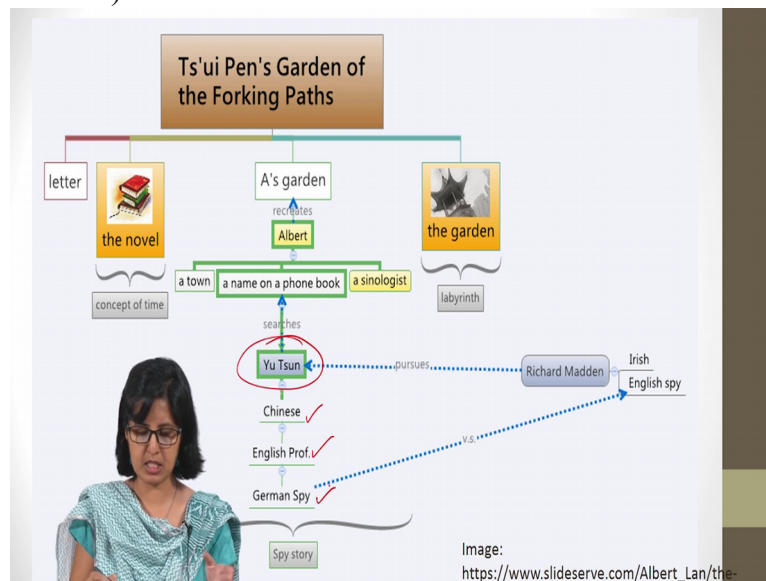
There are multiple identities which he possessed. He is a Chinese,

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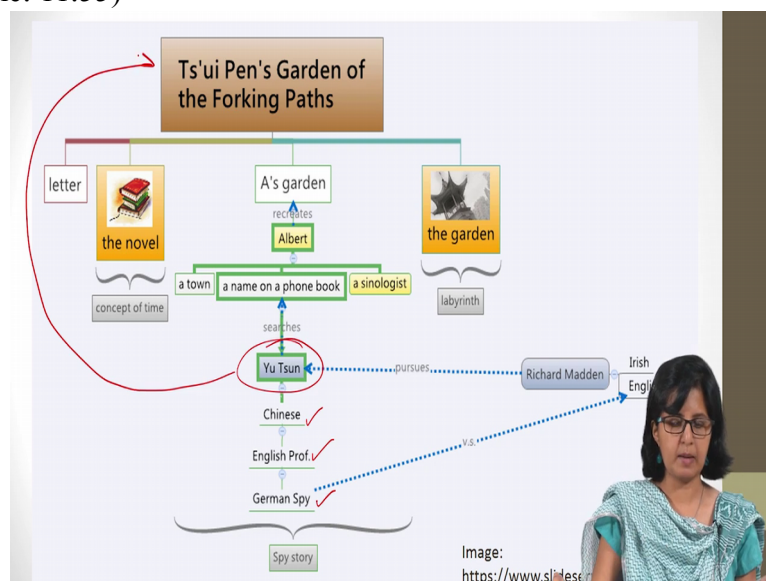
he was an English Professor, he is currently

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working as a German spy. He is also the ancestor/successor and the great grandson of Tsui Pen. That is his connection with Tsui

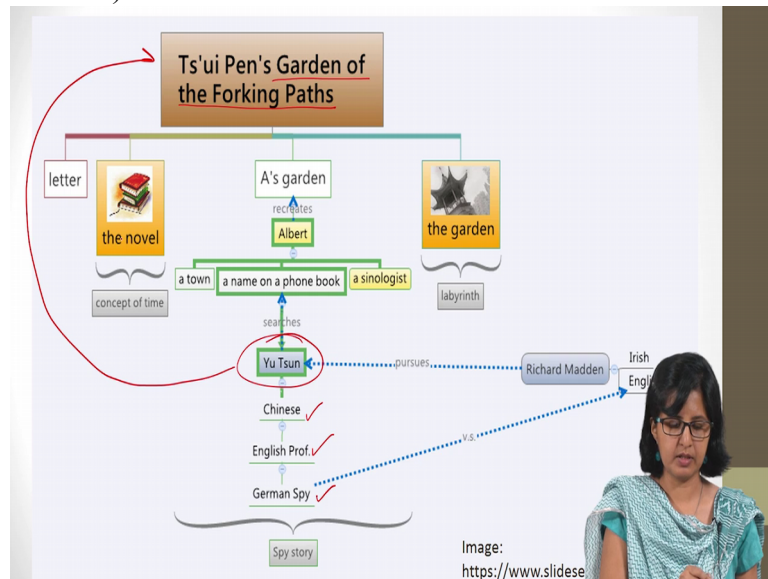
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Pen and The Garden of Forking Paths, the title of the story also.

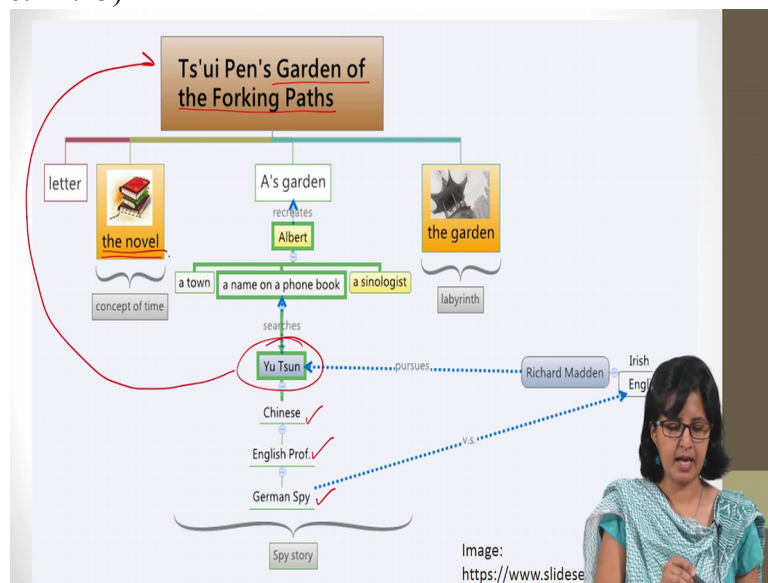
Garden of forking paths, we get to know, it is a novel written by Tsui Pen, so through Yu Tsun we are introduced to Tsui Pen and also The Garden of Forking Paths which is the name of

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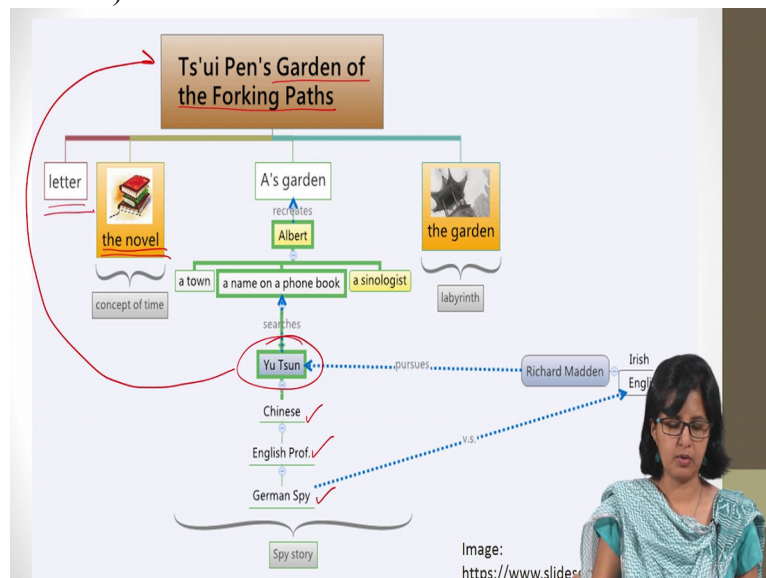
the novel

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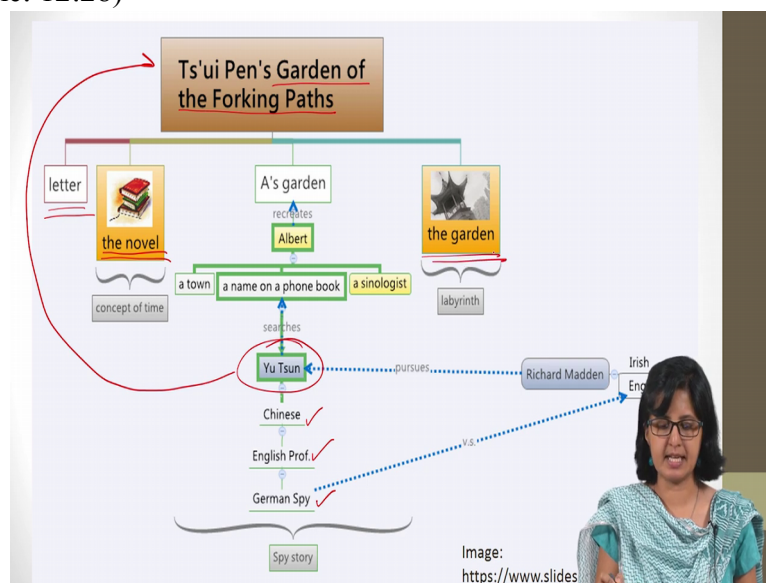
and we are also introduced to a letter

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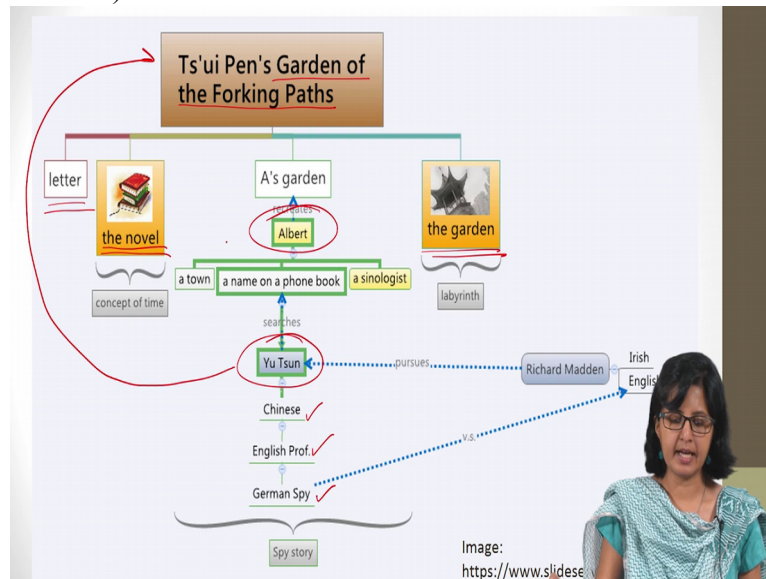
which Albert has, which Doctor Albert has but it is written by Tsui Pen and there is an idea of this garden itself

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which Albert recreates which originally was a brainchild of Tsui Pen.

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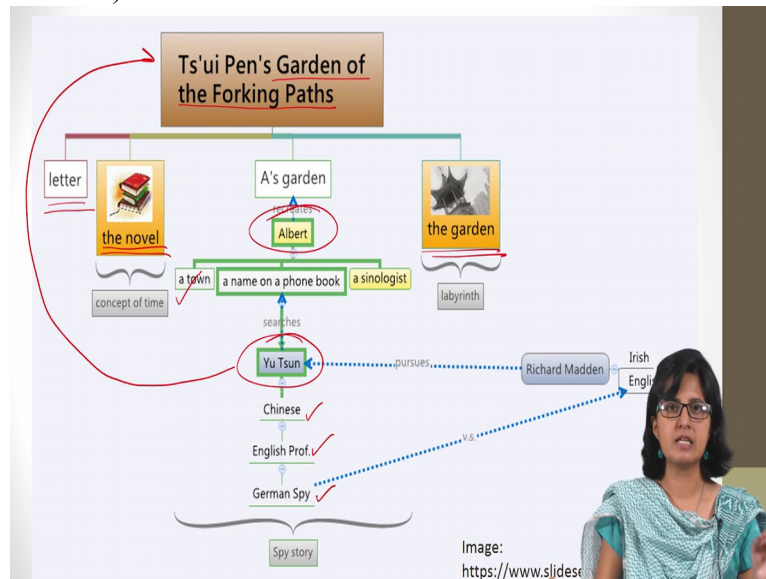
And there is Albert, Albert sort of functions as a mediator between Yu Tsun and Tsui Pen and he serves multiple roles here. One, he is the person who introduces Tsui Pen's ambiguous scheme of things, scheme of this novel and garden to Yu Tsun.

He is the one who demystifies what this garden signifies and at the same time he is chosen, not for any profound reasons but for the simple reason that his name is Albert.

And this is how the story oscillates between very profound, philosophical things and certain simple things which just act as happy accidents or as certain conveniences.

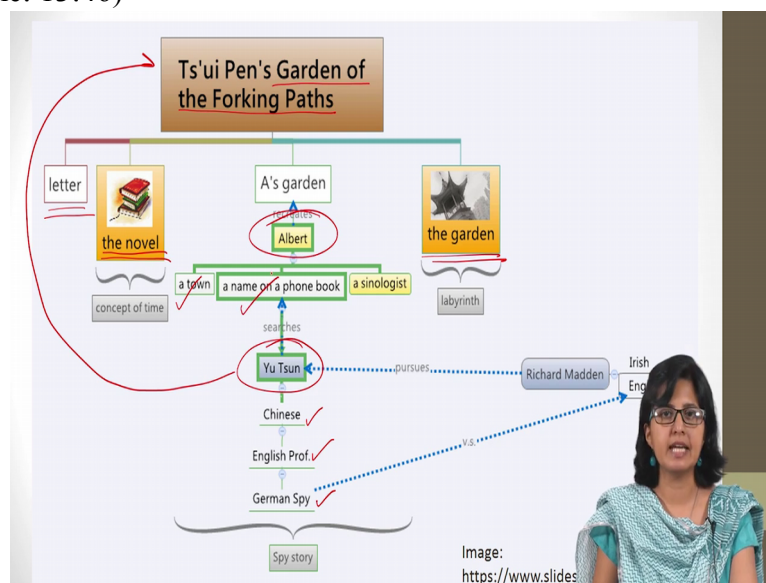
And we talk about Albert, he also has different slots that he occupies. It is a name of the town

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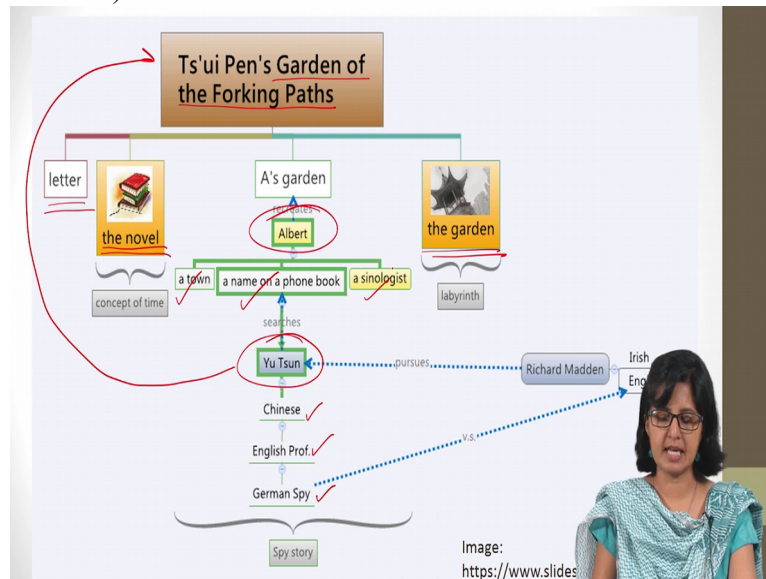
because of which he gets chosen, because Yu Tsun had to convey the name of a town by murdering this man.

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The name Albert makes its appearance first in this story through a name found on a telephone book. He is also

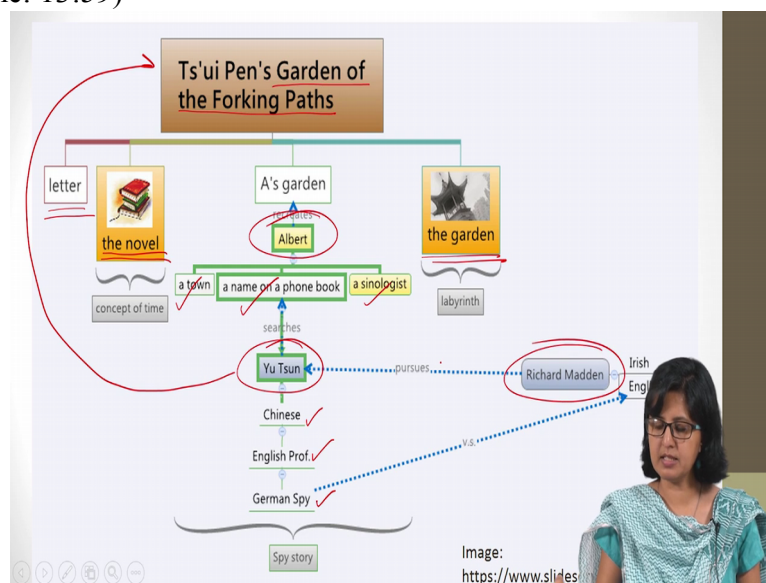
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a Sinologist.

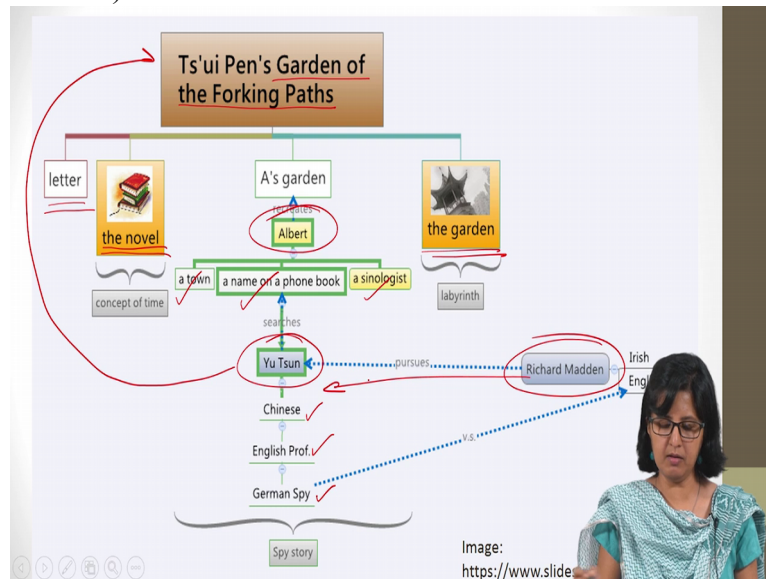
And we have another character Richard Madden

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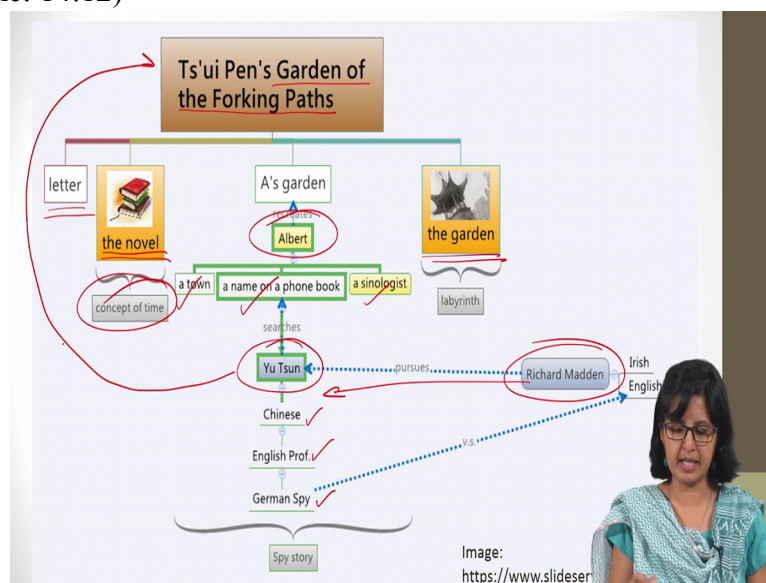
who is Irish. He is an English spy. He is currently pursuing

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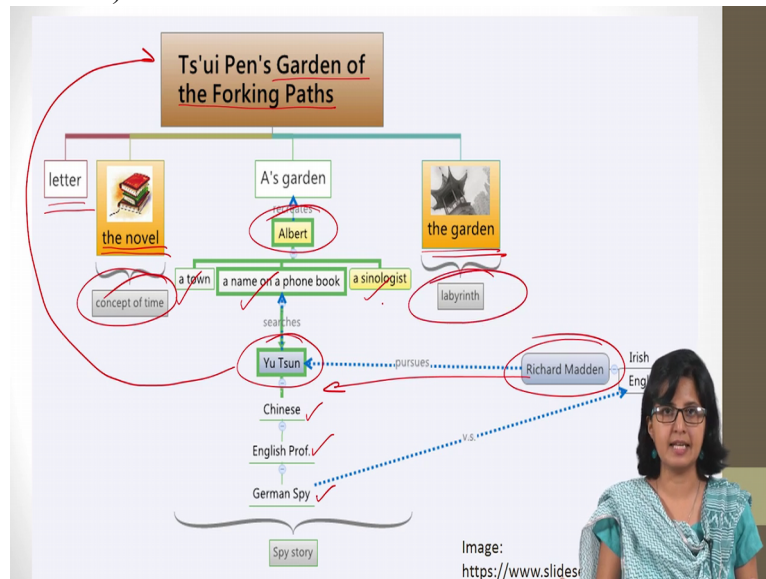
Yu Tsun. And in this complicated scheme of things we are introduced to certain other notions of the concept of time,

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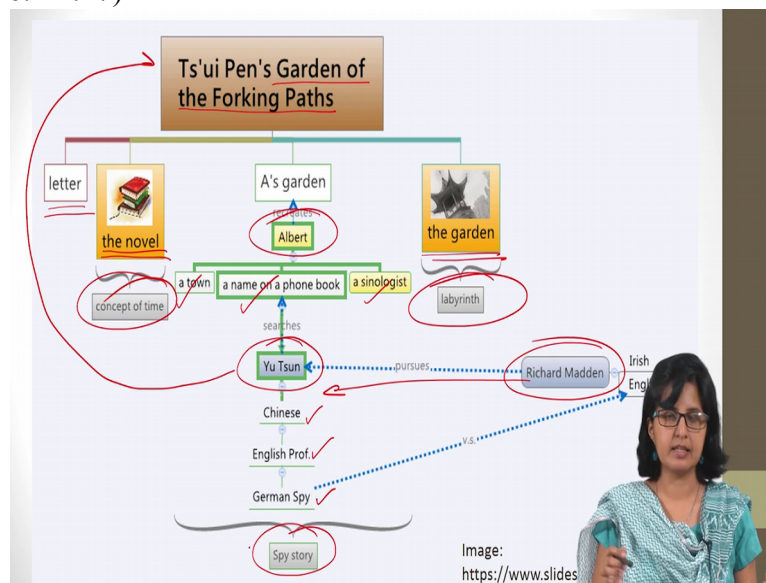
the

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idea of the labyrinths and

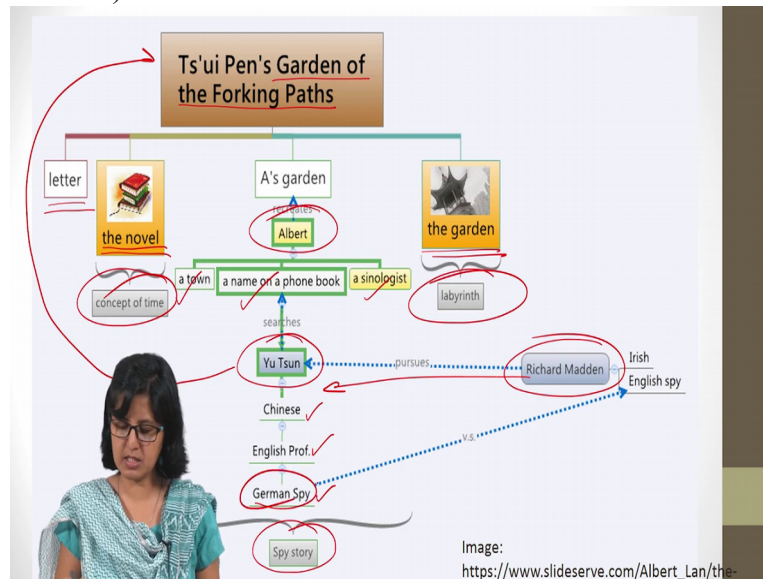
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this framework of this being a spy story.

And to make things more complicated and complex we also have these rivalries between German spy

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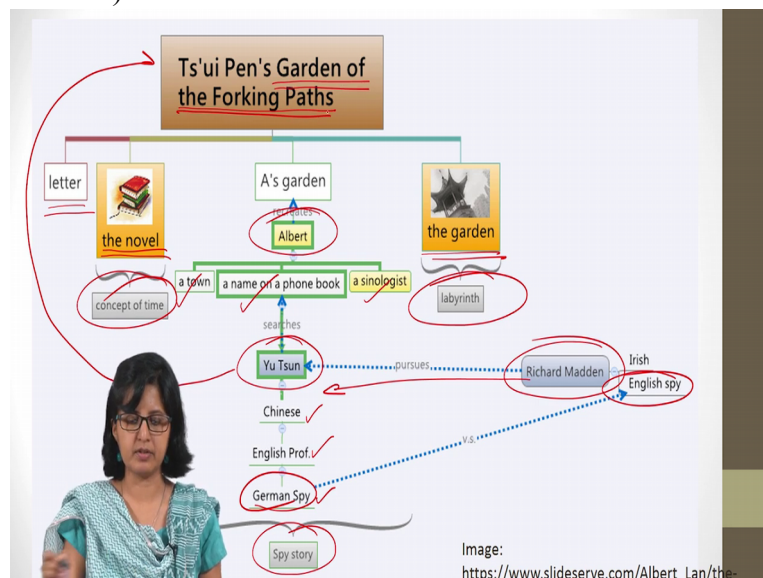


and English spy and also about the idea of betrayal, the idea of choice, the idea of loyalties to particular nations and how nations become more significant than individuals and humans.

These are many, many possible and complicated things which this story introduces to us. We have already taken a detailed look at the story. I do hope that these references make a lot of sense for you.

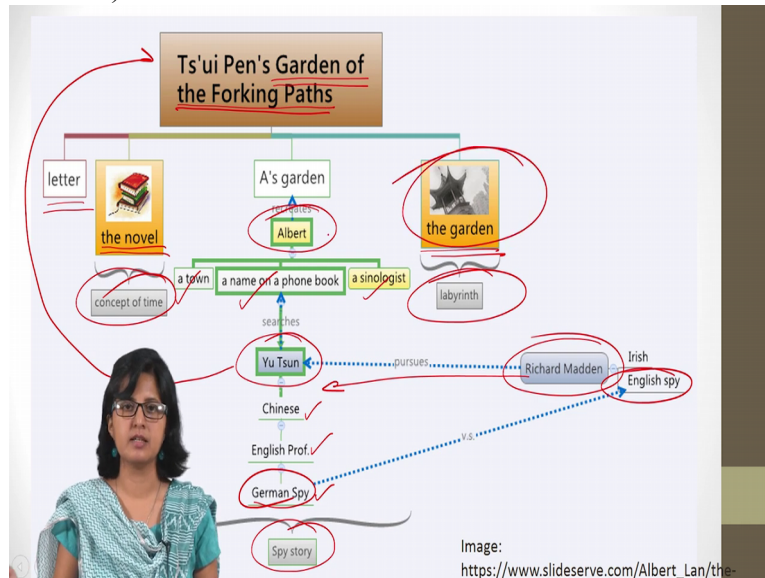
Coming back to the title of this work,

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Garden of Forking Paths, it is a title of the short story. It is the title of this novel that Tsui Pen wrote and Albert recreated. There is also this real garden

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which Tsui Pen aspired to create.

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On Imaginary Books

- The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent. I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books.

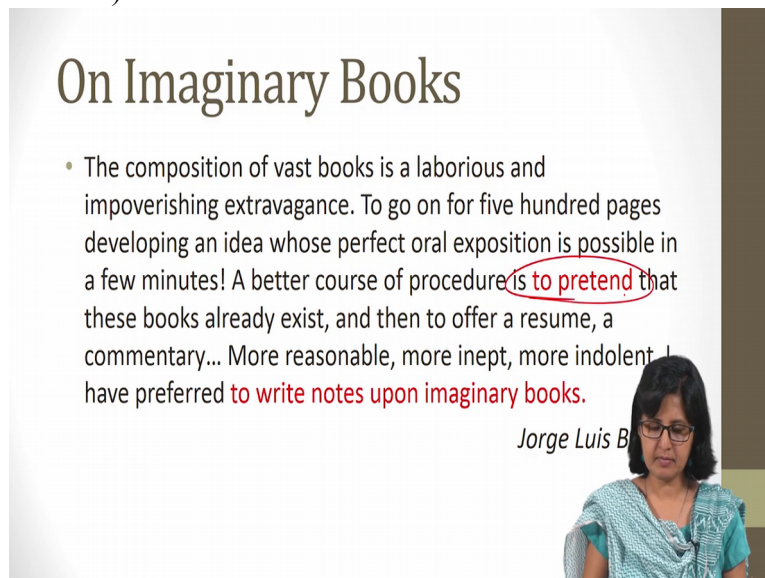
Jorge Luis Borges



This reference to this imaginary book written by Tsui Pen, that is a narrative trope that we find Borges using in many of his literary exercises. And he has spoken at length about this idea of imaginary books that he uses.

In Borges' own words, the composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend

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The image shows a video frame of a presentation. On the left, there is a slide with the title "On Imaginary Books" in a large, dark serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list. The first bullet point reads: "The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent. I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books." The words "to pretend" are circled in red, and "to write notes upon imaginary books" is underlined in red. In the bottom right corner of the video frame, a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a light blue patterned top, is visible from the chest up, looking towards the slide.

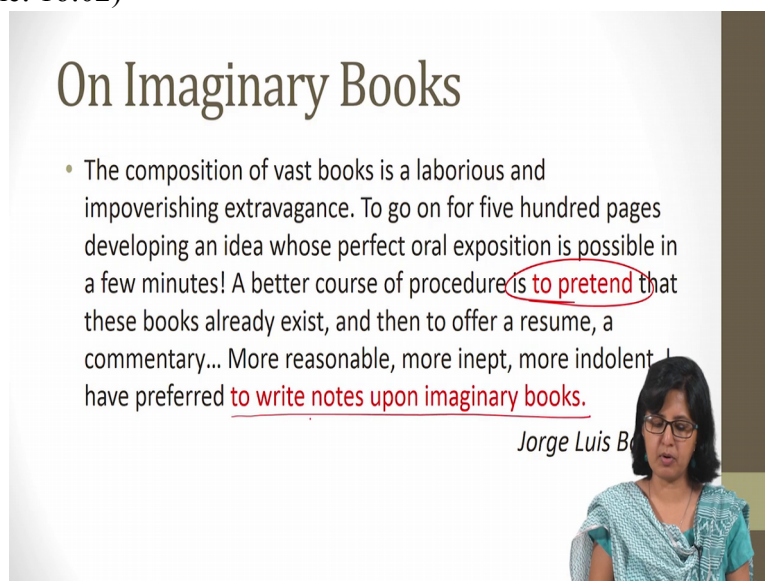
On Imaginary Books

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Jorge Luis B

that those books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent. I have preferred to write notes

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This image is identical to the one above, showing the same presentation slide and speaker. The slide content, including the title "On Imaginary Books" and the bulleted text, remains the same. The speaker, a woman with dark hair and glasses, is still visible in the bottom right corner of the video frame.

On Imaginary Books

- The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a resume, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent. I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books.

Jorge Luis B

upon imaginary books.

This is what Borges is doing in this story. He presents this as a convenient technique, a convenient fictional trope that he is using. He is talking about this imaginary book written by Tsui Pen and recreated by Doctor Albert and Borges uses his power as the author to give notes on these imaginary creations.

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Labyrinths

- A recurrent image in Borges' stories
 - *Labyrinth* (1962) – stories and essays
- Forking paths in Ts'ui Pen's novel
- Forking paths leading to Dr. Albert
- An imaginary setting – 'encompassing past and future and extending to the stars'
- Labyrinth as an allegory for Time?
- The story itself as a labyrinth – many narratives diverging converging



And about the idea of the labyrinth, it is a recurrent imagined most of Borges stories. He has written an entire collection stories and essays titled *Labyrinth* published in

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1962. In this story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, which of these elements best constitute, best represent an idea of a labyrinth?

Is it the forking paths in Tsui

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Pen's novel? Or the forking paths leading to

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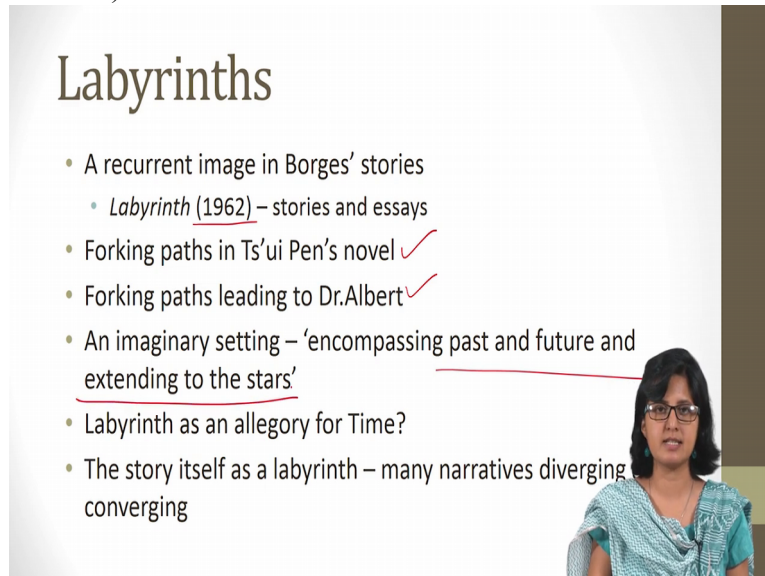


Doctor Albert? All of them are labyrinths. Once you get caught in this like Yu Tsun does, it is difficult to find one's way out.

And there is only one way out. And these different forking paths, depending on which path you take, it will take you to different end points and different destinations. In reality the choices that Tsui Pen made or Doctor Albert made or Yu Tsun made, there is only one possible choice and one possible destination.

But in imaginary setting which labyrinth offers the possibility of talking about, it encompasses past and future extending

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The slide is titled "Labyrinths" in a large, brown, serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list of points. The first point is "A recurrent image in Borges' stories", with a sub-bullet "Labyrinth (1962) – stories and essays". The second point is "Forking paths in Ts'ui Pen's novel" with a red checkmark. The third point is "Forking paths leading to Dr. Albert" with a red checkmark. The fourth point is "An imaginary setting – 'encompassing past and future and extending to the stars'" with a red underline. The fifth point is "Labyrinth as an allegory for Time?". The sixth point is "The story itself as a labyrinth – many narratives diverging converging". In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue patterned top, speaking.

- A recurrent image in Borges' stories
 - *Labyrinth* (1962) – stories and essays
- Forking paths in Ts'ui Pen's novel ✓
- Forking paths leading to Dr. Albert ✓
- An imaginary setting – 'encompassing past and future and extending to the stars'
- Labyrinth as an allegory for Time?
- The story itself as a labyrinth – many narratives diverging converging

to the stars. That is what the story tells us.

Labyrinth in this story, it can be possibly inferred that it stands as an allegory for time. And Borges is talking about the possibility of occupying the different time slots, the possibility of having different futures at the same time.

The story itself can also be seen as a labyrinth where there are many narratives diverging and converging and can be read in different ways which is why it is also easily translatable as a hypertext fiction.

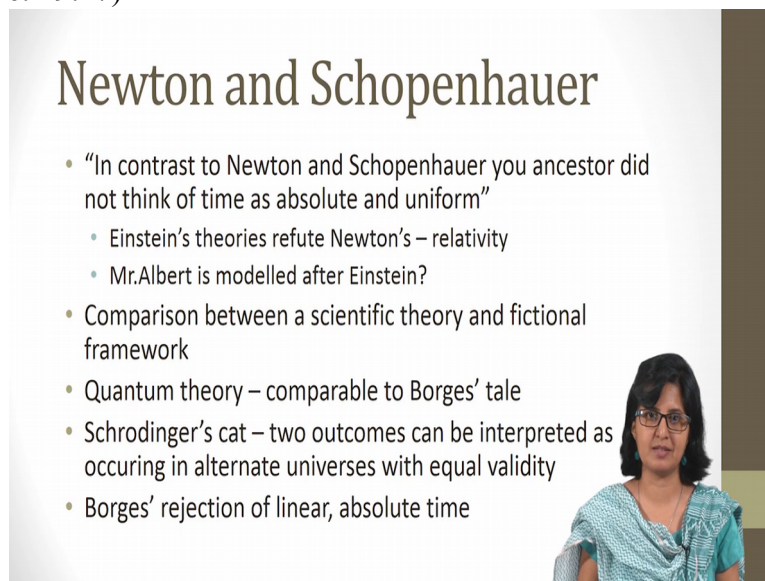
When you look at the story as a labyrinth and place Yu Tsun at the center we realize there are different choices for him. For example, right from the beginning, he can choose to surrender, or go on to execute his mission very well knowing that he is anyway going to be caught.

And when he is going to Stephen Albert's house again he has got two different choices, either to kill Albert and convey the message to his Chief in Berlin or not to kill Albert, enjoy his new found relationship and go into custody, go on to work on to his death sentence feeling good about how well he behaved with Stephen Albert.

But here we find him making this difficult choice of being loyal to the nation than being loyal to this one man whom he considers greater than Goethe who had resurrected the work and life of his ancestor, his great grandfather.


And even at the end he has two different choices available. Before use either to tell us the truth in the deposition, tell us the truth or not to tell us the truth. The beauty of this narration is that we have no way of knowing whether Yu Tsun is actually telling us the truth or recreating another fictional story based on his figment of imagination.

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Newton and Schopenhauer

- “In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer your ancestor did not think of time as absolute and uniform”
 - Einstein’s theories refute Newton’s – relativity
 - Mr. Albert is modelled after Einstein?
- Comparison between a scientific theory and fictional framework
- Quantum theory – comparable to Borges’ tale
- Schrodinger’s cat – two outcomes can be interpreted as occurring in alternate universes with equal validity
- Borges’ rejection of linear, absolute time




We find the reference to Newton and Schopenhauer in this story. There is a statement. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer your ancestor did not think of time as absolute and uniform. His ancestor is Tsui

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Newton and Schopenhauer

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- Borges’ rejection of linear, absolute time



Pen, the one who wrote this imaginary novel. The reference is to Einstein's theories refuting Newton's theories of time.

Borges was infinitely fascinated by the idea of relativity which Einstein proposed and it is said that Mister Albert is a character modeled after Einstein. You will find Borges making a comparison between scientific theory and fictional framework and presenting it as if it is a most commonplace thing to do.

People have, critics have remarked that there is a way in which you can compare Quantum Theory to Borges tale and also there have been multiple references to Schrodinger's cat where it was a thought experiment as most of you know.

It talks about how two outcomes can be interpreted as occurring in alternate universe with equal validity. The question is whether the cat is alive or dead, and both the possibilities, both outcomes have equal validity and equal possibility of occurring in alternate universes.

And Borges we find rejecting linear or absolute time and again we find him trying to fit this fictional framework within the many things which are happening in terms of science and new inventions and discoveries of those times.


And this is again a post-modern possibility which Borges begins to explore from the 1940s onwards; much, much before the post-structuralism and post-modernism came

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The footnote

- Borges wants to place the story within a nonfiction report?
- Drawing our attention to the 'narrator' – who is standing right behind Yu Tsun – edit, excise, add, modify
- Borges himself as the writer – standing right behind the narrator – manipulating and formulating plot, character and setting
- Narration inside the narration – footnote inside the inner narration
- Confusing the 'fiction' of the story

Yu Tsun's account may be trustworthy?



into vogue and practice.

A small footnote which is given at the end of the story which also offers a certain corrected information about the death of a Viktor Runeberg, one of the other spies who was also working for Germany along with Yu Tsun, this footnote has a significant role to play here.


It makes us wonder whether Borges wants to place this to give it a non-fiction report.

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Yu Tsun's account may be trustworthy?

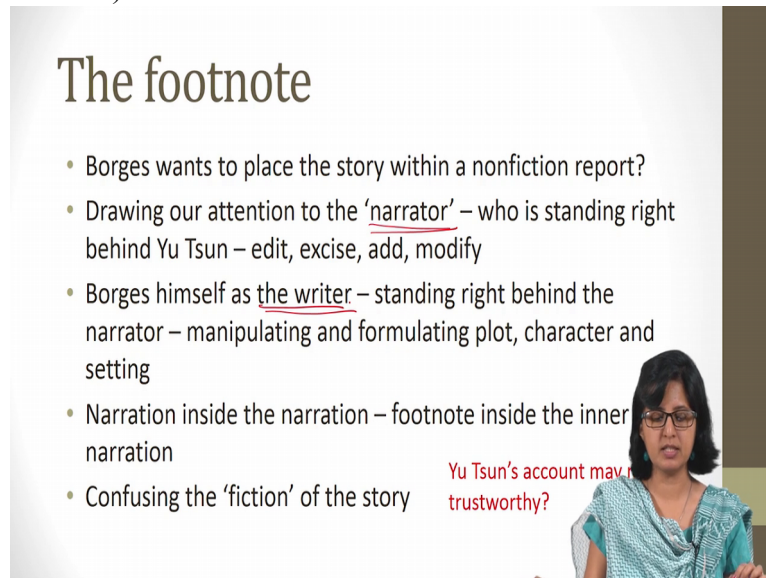


It also draws our attention to the narrator who in this case is the manuscript editor and he is standing right behind Yu Tsun, editing, excising, adding, modifying. So we really have no

way of knowing whether this is really Yu Tsun's version or whether this has been modified for whatever reason.

And we also find Borges himself emerging here


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as a writer and he is standing right the narrator or the manuscript editor. And he is the one who is manipulating and formulating the plot, introducing characters, making them make certain decisions or not letting them to do certain things. He is the one who is influencing the setting.

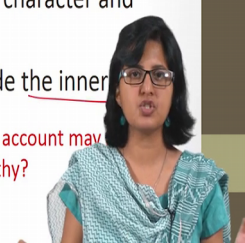
So there is a narration inside the narration and the footnote can be seen as an inner narration.

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The footnote

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Yu Tsun's account may be trustworthy?



It is drawing our attention to many non-fictional elements within something which is presented to us as a fiction.

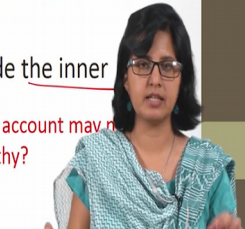
So ultimately this act

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The footnote

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of introducing the footnote, the manuscript editor and these historical references and corrected information, all of this amounts to confusing the fiction of the story which is what Borges perhaps tries to do.

And again the question that

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The footnote

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we begin to wonder about. Even Yu Tsun's account may not be trustworthy. He is a spy. He can manipulate things and he is used to living convincing lies under cover. And at this turning point where, if we had to believe this story, the ultimate mission that he lets out is to convey the name of the city to his Chief in Berlin.

The story tells us that his ultimate loyalty rests with his occupation as a spy. It is all about conveying the right kind of information to the one who had commissioned him. So even if we begin to wonder whether his accounts are trustworthy it could not be entirely refuted.

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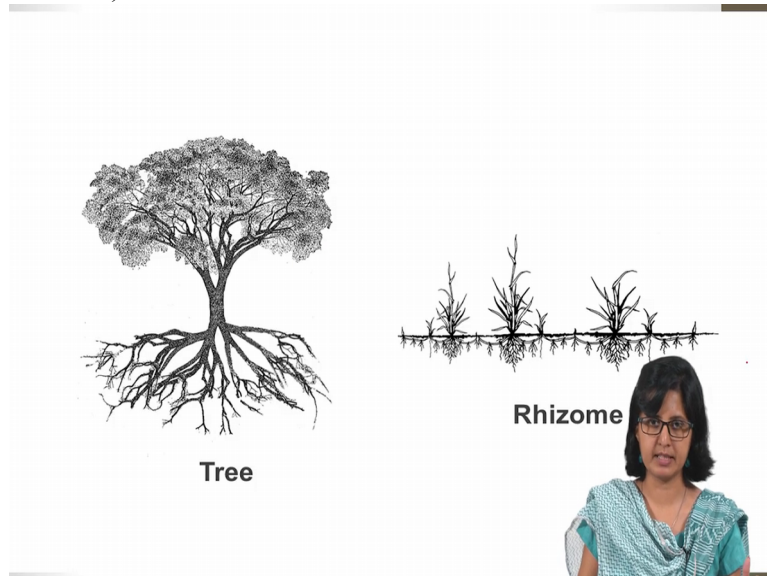
Rhizomes

- Deleuze and Guattari
- Multiple entry and exit points
- No hierarchies and binaries
- Postmodern, decentralized and kinetic worlds



Before we wind up this lecture I want you to be familiar with one of the ways in which this story can be read in the post-modernist framework. Deleuze and Guattari spoke about the idea of rhizomes. And rhizomes

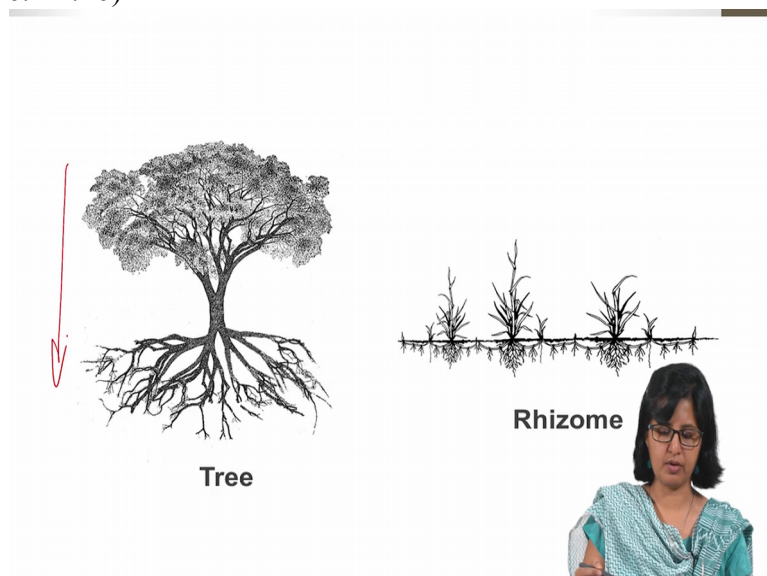
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can be explained like this.

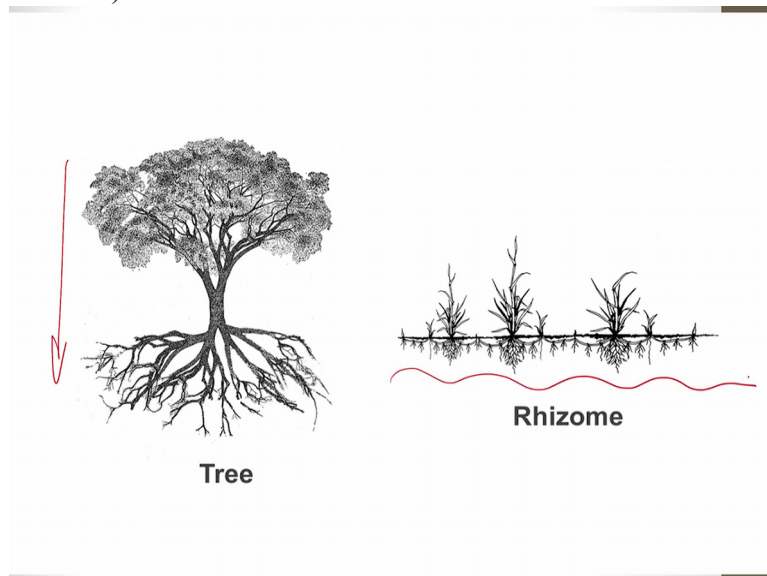
Unlike a top-down structure of a

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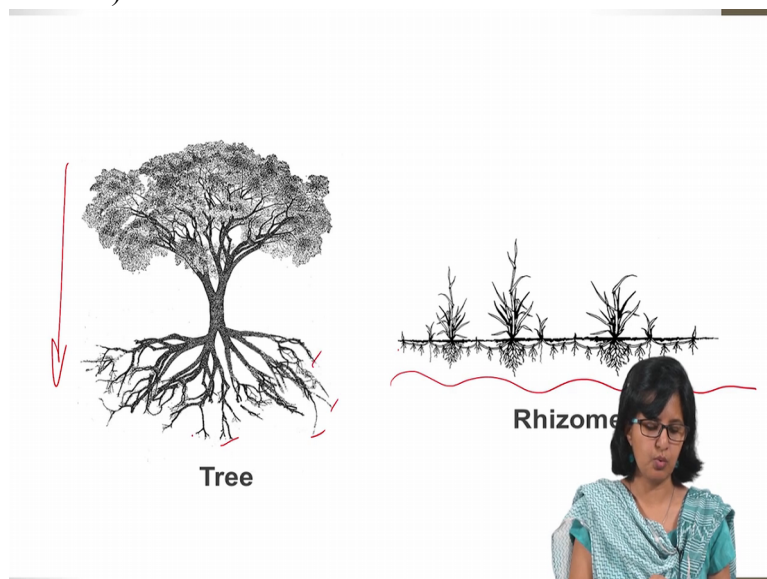
tree, rhizomes have fairly organic

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kind of growth and existence. It is difficult to find where it has a starting point and where it ends, unlike the tree where there are these definite roots

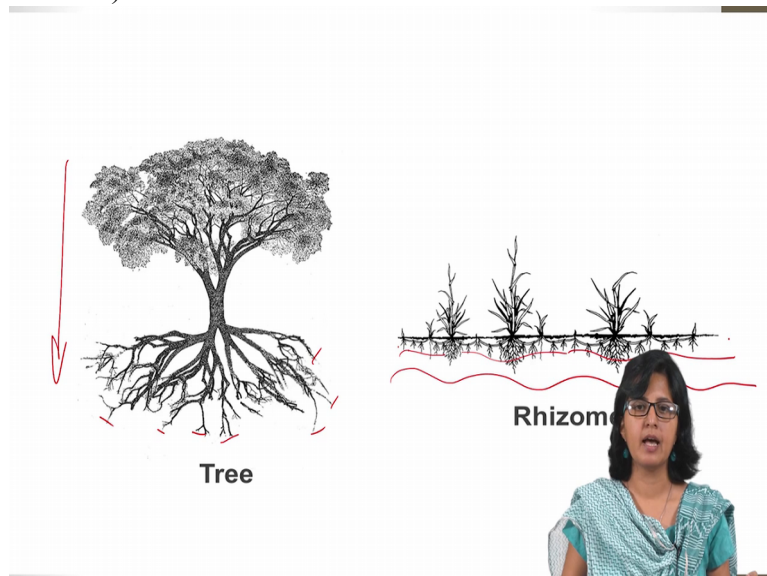
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that you can identify.

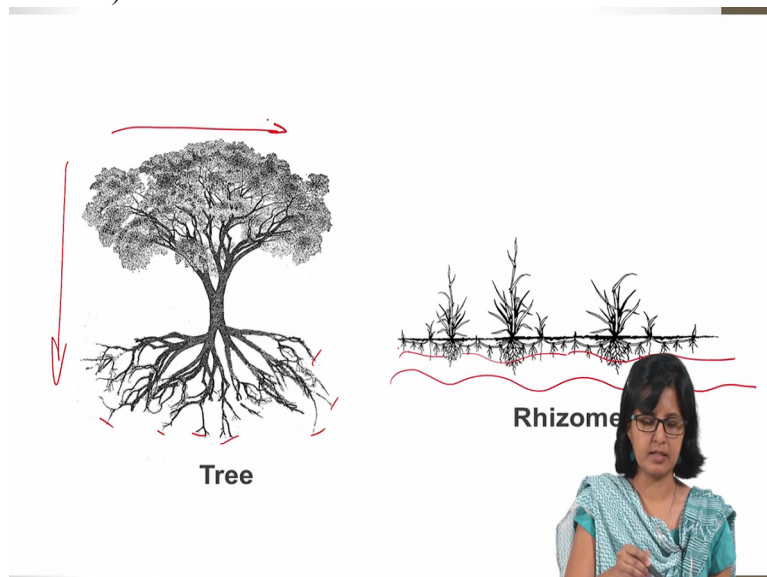
Here we find that it is an extension, and there are no

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entry or exit points. And there is no way in which we can say this is the limit.

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The dimensions cannot really be predictive or be framed.

Rhizomes have a kind of organic existence where one thing leads to the other. So this is a theoretical

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framework which Deleuze and Guattari introduced and rhizomes were used to talk about many post-modern elements and the possibilities.

This story also in that sense has multiple entry and exit points. There are no hierarchic, hierarchies or binaries. It is difficult to say whether for instance, Yu Tsun's character is superior to Albert. Or Madden's character is inferior to Yu Tsun.

And again with this intervention of the manuscript editor, we even begin to suspect whether Yu Tsun is telling us the right thing about Viktor Runeberg, whether we are being forced to look at Madden from a different light because this story is being told to us through the eyes of Yu Tsun.

So there are no hierarchies or binaries. There are no single entry points or exit points. There are multiple ways which can enter the story, different kinds of interpretations and then we can look at them in whichever way we want and exit from whichever point we want.

So the idea of the rhizome which can be used as we talk about this story, it talks about its post-modern, decentralized and kinetic worlds. And that is, and the story is being seen as one of the perfect examples of these post-modern decentralized and kinetic worlds which were introduced within the framework of fiction.

As remarked earlier, this is a story which is, which offers multiple interpreted possibilities so there could be other ways of looking at this work. There could be other frameworks which could be used to analyze this. I leave you with those possibilities. I thank you for listening and look forward to see you in the next session.