

*A Gothic Bridge between the Past and the Future*

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities (ACAH2019)  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This paper is a postcolonial reading of Nick Joaquin's *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*. It explores the implicit references to historical events that have had a decisive impact on the history of the Philippines. It argues that historical events hidden in the story point to the destructive effect of American colonialism in the Philippines.

Keywords: Postcolonial reading, Colonial history, *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*

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## **Introduction**

The postcolonial theory was born out of the cultural hegemony of the West. Young (2001) believes that the postcolonialism has roots in the history, and tries to trace it through a dialectical process of the conflict between the "imperial appropriation of the world" and "the anti-colonial liberation movements."

It seems that the characteristics of the Gothic not only are linked to the colonial qualities but also are adequate to justify the violence carried out by the colonizers.

Patrick Brantlinger in his book *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (1988), links the literary genres of the Victorian period to imperialist ideology; a bridge between the Gothic and postcolonial literature. He discloses how the Gothic is "typically linked to the foreign," exemplified most notably in Victor Frankenstein's European travels and Ann Radcliffe's Italy. (Bondhus, 2010, p. 2)

Postcolonial Gothic refers to the body of works written by the authors from the former colonized countries and reflects the social, cultural, and political problems remained from the colonial period. It focuses on the repressed past and its destructive effects on the present time.

The Postcolonial Gothic's mission is to show how the colonizers suppressed the culture of colonized people and forced them to obey. It also focuses on the chaos resulted from the colonized past and challenges the dominant history, selected and written by colonizers.

The history of Manila begins with colonialism. Before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors under the leadership of Miguel López de Legazpi, Manila was a walled Muslim settlement on the banks of the Pasig River near the mouth of Manila Bay. Legazpi and his soldiers destroyed the tribal settlement and founded a new citadel city of 'Intramuros' which means 'within the walls.' Manila as the capital of the new colony has been the main ground of several devastating wars.

From 1898 to 1945, Manila was destroyed twice by US troops; the first time to expel the Spaniards, and the second time, American forces tended to liberate it from Japanese forces in World War II. In January 1942, Manila was occupied by Japanese forces. As Salita points out "the city suffered little damage during the Japanese invasion but was leveled to the ground during the fight for its recapture by U.S. forces in 1945." (2017)

## **Hidden Past as the Gothic**

The Mass of St. Sylvestre takes place in 1945 in Manila, the days after WWII. Joaquin applies a set of historical milestones in this story. However, he wraps them up with a mythical anecdote of St. Sylvestre.

In fact, a bitter period of Manila's history is hidden in this story. By discovering this point, the reader will get a better understanding of the story.

On April 22, 1898, United States Consul E. Spencer Pratt met the leader of the Philippine Revolutionary Army, Emilio Famy Aguinaldo in Singapore to encourage

him to work with American forces in order to drive out Spaniards from the Philippines. He promised that after the Spaniards were expelled, the United States would recognize the independence of the Philippines, a promise that was never fulfilled. The Spanish-American War began on April 21 and ended with the Treaty of Paris signed on December 10, 1898. "The Spanish fleet was defeated at Manila Bay on May 1, 1898, and on August 13 the city surrendered to U.S. forces. It subsequently became the headquarters for the U.S. administration of the Philippines." (Salita, 2017) The fact that the Treaty of Paris did not recognize the independence of the Philippines triggered a war between the United States and the Philippine Revolutionary Army. Filipinos remember the Treaty as a betrayal of the Americans.

Quennie Ann J. Palafox (2012) in her article, *Betrayal of Trust-The San Juan Del Monte Bridge Incident* writes: "Without any single doubt, the Filipino-American War is one of the most unforgettable events in our history because in just one day, the fate of the nation was changed and its impacts are still felt to date and will persist down to the future generation."

Aguinaldo describes his meeting in his book *True version of the Philippine revolution* (1899):

"Between 10 or 12 in the forenoon of the next day the conference was renewed and Mr. Pratt then informed me that the Admiral had sent him a telegram in reply to the wish I had expressed for an agreement in writing. He said the Admiral replied that the United States would at least recognize the Independence of the Philippines under the protection of the United States Navy. The Consul added that there was no necessity for entering into a formal written agreement because the word of the Admiral and of the United States Consul were in fact equivalent to the most solemn pledge that their verbal promises and assurance would be fulfilled to the letter and were not to be classed with Spanish promises or Spanish ideas of a man's word of honour." (Aguinaldo, 1899, p. 10)

### **From Spanish Colonialism to American Imperialism**

By expelling Spaniards from the Philippines, contrary to expectations, independence was not achieved in the Philippines. The American trick left a devastating effect on the national spirit of Filipinos. According to Tan (2008), what the political and military presence of the United States brought to the archipelago was "the establishment of a kind of system that was imperialistic in nature. As a distinguished form of colonialism, imperialism had a broader and subtle method of continuing the colony in all aspects of development." (p.65)

The ensuing Philippine – American war lasted three years until 1902. More than 20 thousand Filipino combatants died, and more than 200 thousand Filipino civilians lost their lives from the disaster caused by war.

"Kill everyone over ten," is one of the most shameful orders in history issued by General Jacob H. Smith during the war:

"I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms in actual hostilities against the United States." General Jacob H. Smith said.

Since it was a popular belief among the Americans serving in the Philippines that native males were born with bolos in their hands, Major Littleton "Tony" Waller asked, "I would like to know the limit of age to respect, sir?"

"Ten years," General Jacob H. Smith said.

Nonetheless, President William McKinley defends his decision to keep the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, and according to General James Rusling (1903), McKinley believed that the USA educated the Filipinos and civilized them.

"The truth is I did not want the Philippines, and when they came to us, as a gift from the gods, I did not know what to do with them... When I next realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them. I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way—I don't know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France and Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died."

Joaquin as a historian was totally aware of the catastrophic results of the wars with or against the USA. If President McKinley counted the Philippines as a gift from the gods for the United States, the military and political presence of the USA brought several terrible disasters to Filipinos.

Intramuros as the setting in Joaquin's short story *The Mass of St. Sylvestre* was the main battle ground of the Battle of Manila in 1899 and in 1945.

Joaquin challenges the official narratives of what we call history. According to Joaquin in *History and Culture* (2017), "... history, when not just news of the world or march of time but a key sequence of events, is culture in its pure meaning – that is, a creating, a producing, a husbandry, a drawing forth, an opening." (p.203)

Joaquin believes that history is created by a minority. Success is what turns it into the history of the majority of the people. He claims for instance:

“There were, or so ‘tis said, more American fighting against Washington than with him, but because the American Revolution succeeded we now say that it was the Revolution of the American people. If it had failed, we would be saying that a small group of dissidents led by Washington attempted a revolt in a few of the English colonies in America.” (p.204)

Similarly, if Americans had failed to win the battle of Manila against the Japanese Army, today we would be facing a different narrative about the American Army and its policies. The USA won the battle, but at what cost for Filipinos?

The official narratives of the war are available in official history, but Joaquin, in his short story, highlights the unseen parts of the history. According to Wisker, the repressed patches of culture problematize the imposed values and interpretations of history and of the colonizers’ worldviews.

*The Mass of St. Sylvestre* is a seven-page short story narrated by a first-person omniscient narrator. The beginning paragraph looks like an article about the Filipino culture, and a religious ceremony of New Year's Eve.

Within the first lines, the narrator tells how the Roman god, Janus, as the patron of doors and of beginnings, gave up his role to St. Sylvestre in Christianity. Then, there is a detailed description of the New Year’s Eve and its ritual related to St. Sylvestre in Manila as a cathedral city.

Then the omniscient narrator tells the story of Mateo the Maestro who lived in Manila during the early part of the 18th century and was feared by many as a sorcerer. He tried to be a witness of the Mass. He hid in the cathedral and watched the ritual. In the end, Mateo the Maestro had turned into stone; however, "... every New Year's Eve, at midnight, he returns to life. His flesh unfreezes, his blood liquefies, his bones unlock, and he descends from the retablo to join the procession to the Puerta Postigo, sees the New Year come in; hears the Mass of St. Sylvestre, and at the stroke of one o'clock turns into stone again. And so it will be with him until he has seen a thousand New Years." (p. 36)

Up to this point, the narrator is the omniscient first person, and despite the knowledge he has about Mateo the Maestro and what the sorcerer has done, the narrator has a passive role and has nothing to fulfill as a character in the story.

Hereafter, a couple of things change in the atmosphere of the story. First, there is a cinematic jump cut in the setting. The setting from the early 18th century shifts to the 20th century in the 40s and the days after the liberation of Manila by liberation forces. Then, for the first time, the narrator tends to carry out a mission: “And just as soon as the liberation forces opened the Walled City to the public, I went to see what war had left us of our heritage from four centuries.”

The narrator as the protagonist takes part to figure out into what city would St. Sylvestre make his annual entry? In what cathedral would he say his Mass? The retablo of the Pastoral Adoration has been smashed into pieces and dispersed into dust. Does that release Mateo the Maestro from his enchantment- or must he still, on

New Year eve, reassemble a living body from stone fragments to fulfill his penance of a thousand years? (p. 37)

Looking for answers, he learned by friends that one member of liberation forces, Francis Xavier Zhdolajczyk, who while stationed in the Walled City, had actually witnessed the annual entry and Mass of St. Sylvestre on New Year's Eve 1945. But unfortunately, he had gone home to the States.

Through correspondence, Francis describes how he had witnessed the ritual and its details. Even though the Walled City was leveled to the ground, the Mass of St. Sylvestre becomes visible in Xavier's eyes.

"There was the Walled City, and it wasn't smashed up at all. The walls were whole all the way and I could even see some kind of knights in armor moving on top of them. Behind the walls I could clearly see a lot of rooftops and church towers and they were none of them smashed up at all." (p.38)

However, he lost the last part of the ceremony -to pick up his camera from the camp and finally he could not take a picture: "I got my camera and raced back. When I reached the cathedral I could see that the Mass was ending. I aimed for a nice view – but right when I was going to snap the shutter the bells stopped ringing and –just like that- it all disappeared." (p. 38)

A postcolonial narrative, by nature, is a confrontation of the past and present time. And this is what war has left for the present time:

“The bright light was only moonlight and the music was only the wind. There was no crowd and no bishops and no altar and no cathedral. I was standing on a stack of ruins and there was nothing but ruins around. Just blocks and blocks of ruins stretching all around me in the silent moonlight...”.

## **Conclusion**

We cannot neglect the fact that time and place are determinant dimensions of a text. The temporal structure of the Mass of St. Sylvestre, with a shift from the past to present and vice versa, indicates a nostalgic desire to restore the forgotten past as well as a rejection of a decadent present. The narrative style and the way that the events are juxtaposed, bring the forgotten glory of the Walled city to mind. This story has also concealed a protest to the destruction caused by the American colonialism.

In February 18, 1995 (many years after the publishing date of this story), the 'Memorare-Manila 1945 Foundation' dedicated a memorial called the Memorare Manila Monument to honor the memory of the over 100,000 civilians killed in the battle, in the Walled City, Joaquin's beloved city. The monument is located at Plaza de Santa Isabel in Intramuros. The inscription declares that:

"This memorial is dedicated to all those innocent victims of war, many of whom went nameless and unknown to a common grave or even

never knew a grave at all, their bodies having been consumed by fire or crushed to dust beneath the rubble of ruins.

Let this monument be the gravestone for each and every one of the over 100,000 men, women, children and infants killed in Manila during its battle of liberation, February 3 - March 3, 1945. We have not forgotten them, nor shall we ever forget.

May they rest in peace as part now of the sacred ground of this city: the Manila of our affections."

It helps us to get a better idea of the story if we know that the inscription for the memorial was penned by Nick Joaquin.

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