



A SEMIOTIC READING OF NICK JOAQUIN'S MAY DAY EVE [A SHORT STORY IN THE MIDDLE PERIOD OF PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH]

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This paper is an attempt to interpret a short story in Philippine Literature in English employing the processes of literary semiotics in reconstructing the meaning of the text. Victor Shklovsky's Theory of Prose was used as the basis for this study and Umberto Eco's Process in Reading an Open Text was used as the framework or model in analyzing the text. His seminal work on "Open Text" posits that texts can not only be freely interpreted but also cooperatively generated by the reader [addressee]. Thus, this short story of one of Philippines' finest writers in English, Nick Joaquin, was chosen as the text for semiotic reading since his writing is known to have subliminal messages or meanings that are hiding in the texts. Words (or texts) as signs are the objects of study in this critical paper. Therefore, words, phrases, and sentences as well as its structure are the primary concerns of this paper since they represent important information that will help in interpreting the texts. Consequently, this semiotic reading of Nick Joaquin's May Day Eve poses four points:

1. *That incestuous marriage did exist between Badoy Montiya and Agueda (they are cousins)*
2. *That oppression among women was grievously manifested in the circumstances that Agueda was involved in (confrontation in the dark hall; she was forced to marry Badoy)*
3. *That corruption (sexually) among youth was explicitly demonstrated (Badoy was a lot older than Agueda)*
4. *That objectification of women was rampant (Badoy desired for Agueda that turned him to be deliriously "in love" with her")*

Keywords: Linguistics, Literary Semiotics, Philippine Literature, Model Reader, Open Text

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I. A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON SEMIOTIC LITERARY INTERPRETATION AND THE MIDDLE PERIOD OF PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Literary semiotics can be seen as a branch of the general science of signs that studies a particular group of text within the verbal texts in general. Although the task of literary semiotics is to describe what is the characteristics of literary texts or discourse, it is founded on the same principles and analytical procedures as the semiotics of verbal discourse. Roman Jakobson in “On Realism in Art” quoted by Peron (1997) states that “of focusing not on literature but on *literariness*, which is to say, on the pertinent features of literary texts that distinguish them from other discourse.” Victor Shklovsky’s Theory of Prose made great progress in analyzing the short story and the novel when he linked processes and related the variable and permanent aspects of the artistic form of a work with other works; thereby setting out the possibilities for a history of forms one that still remains to be written. Other fundamental concepts such as motivation, basically concerned with plot construction (circular construction; composition by steps, or the breaking down of action into episodes, frame, and the rhetorical procedures that are built into this parallelism; enumeration; oxymoron), led to the distinction between elements in the construction of a work (subject) and those that make up its material (fable).

Since this literary criticism centers on the semiotic reading of a short story in Philippine literature in English, it is interesting to note how Filipino writers were able to write in the second language (which is English). They began by mastering vocabulary, learning the mechanics of grammar, and imitating established Western writers. (Croghan, 1975) “This was the most productive of distinctive work in the half

century of Filipino writing in English.” In his short stories, Nick Joaquin included allegories of cultural and moral situations in the present. Set during the Spanish colonization, *May Day Eve*, Nick Joaquin illustrates Filipino way of life with his very long and vivid narrative of the “time” where men were given more privileges than women such as being sent to Europe for studies while women were left to take the role of a housekeeper/home maker or wife and mother to her children. Certain rights of women that were violated during that time were also explicated in a very artistic manner through his well-knitted words that were arranged structurally to amuse readers who have eyes for creative narratives through language.

II. A THEORY OF SEMIOTIC APPLIED IN READING NICK JOAQUIN’S MAY DAY EVE

Umberto Eco (2021) posited that an interpretation of a work of literature from a semiotic point of view focuses on the significance of signs and sign systems. A sign need not to be a sign in any literal sense, although it may be. Any object can be a sign and can represent something important to the interpretation of a work. It can be easy to take semiotics too far, however, as Freud once said, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

In the opening of his book, *The Role of the Reader*, Eco highlighted the flexibility of “the text” characterizing it to be “open” or that can be freely interpreted by the reader. Eco’s *The Poetics of the Open Text* explicated the idea of an unlimited semiosis (flexible system of signification) which he borrowed from “the Theory” of Charles Sanders Peirce or [Peircian Semiotics or the Semiotic Triad]. Eco further described “the Open Text” as a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantico-pragmatic



device whose foreseen interpretation is a part of this generative process.

The seminal work of Umberto Eco on *The Poetics of the Open Work* in 1965 (Robey, 1989) invited structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson to challenge his proposition. Strauss found this perspective to be unacceptable, while Jakobson tried it by interpreting the work using structuralist approach. Apparently, in Jakobson's theory of the function of language, it revealed that even from a structuralist point of view, such categories as sender, addressee, and context are indispensable to the understanding of every act of communication.

Therefore, the earlier premise that the very existence of texts can not only be freely interpreted but also cooperatively generated by the addressee (the reader). The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from these of the sender), and the initiative displayed by the addressee in making a message into a content of the expression to which various possible senses can be attributed are maintained in Eco's standard Communication Model.

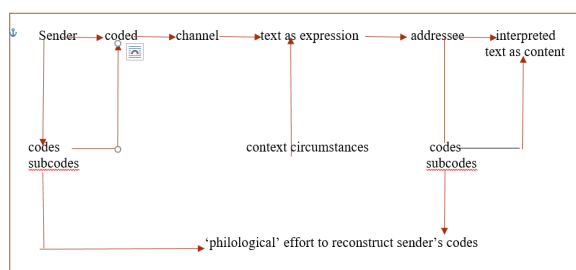
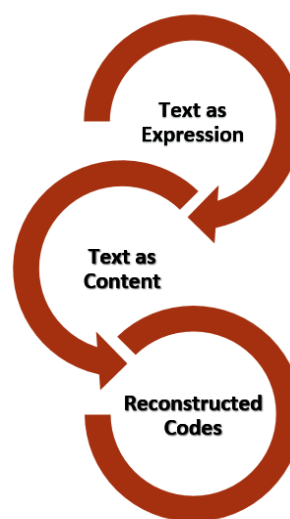


Figure 1

The **text as expression** shows the reader (addressee) a possible interpretation of the text based on the codes/subcodes of the addressee. The framework in Figure 1 shows how a 'message' or text can be reconstructed through the network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification.

Here, the reader tries to reconstruct sender's code through the text.



May Day Eve was set in the late 1800s. It started in a Ball at Montiya's residence. Badoy Montiya and the other "young bucks" have just arrived from Europe and were back in the Philippines for a vacation. During that time, young men were given privilege to study abroad while women stayed in the country and were not given the same opportunity to develop themselves; "...how carefree were men but how awful to be a girl and what a horrid, horrid world it was..." (Croghan, 1975, p192). That is why, Agueda hated the idea



of entertaining those *young bucks* from Europe, “*Oh how I detest you, you pompous young men! You go to Europe, and you come back elegant lords and we poor girls are too tame to please you...*”

In May Day Eve, a strong implication on incestuous marriage may be drawn from the text. The characters Badoy Montiya and Agueda are cousins; however, in the story (not explicitly mentioned) they got married due to the “trap” on that *wild* May Day Midnight. As a reader of this open text, there is an attempt to apply semiotic literary interpretation on the basis of the code/s (the text itself) presented in the story.

III. THE PLOT (FABULA) OF MAY DAY EVE BY NICK JOAQUIN AND THE SEMIOTIC LITERARY INTERPRETATION

Young Agueda together with her cousin (the owner of the house) and the other girls were chased off to bed by Anastasia (the helper). Anastasia told a story about *the Night of Divination*. She said May Day Eve is *the Night of Lovers*. She said if one wants to see her future husband then she must face the mirror in a dark hall with a lighted candle on her hand and recite the incantation “*mirror, mirror/show to me/ him whose woman I will be.*” She said, “if all goes right, just above your shoulder will appear the face of the man you will marry and if all does not go right, then you may see the devil!”

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
“ <i>mirror, mirror/show to me/ him whose woman I will be.</i> ”	The woman as a lover, a wife and an object that can be owned	The focal concern of every woman that time was to marry and be a wife to the “young bucks” from Europe.

The whole idea of *the Night of Divination*, *the Night of Lovers*, and the *Future Husband* had boxed the character of a woman. The woman as

a lover, a wife and an object that can be owned (*mirror, mirror/show to me/ him whose woman I will be*) by the husband is a social conditioning on the role of women. It seems that the focal concern of every woman that time was to marry and be a wife to the “young bucks” from Europe. There was no other role that can be played, but just a wife and a mother to her husband and children.

In the study, *Language and Identity of Agueda*, Juanillo and Martinez (2020) wrote that the identity of Agueda reflects the status of women living in a patriarchal society who wanted to be able to express and assert their opinion, which are sometimes being overlooked.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
“ <i>Memory of one Wild May Day Midnight</i> ”	Agueda went down the dark hall as she went to the <i>sala</i> , tiptoeing across the hall with the lighted candle in one hand	Agueda was a rebellious, fearless, and stubborn girl who challenged her ‘being a woman,’ who wanted to experience trying new things especially for a girl like her who was not given that “freedom.”

However, in the character of Agueda, on why she went down the dark hall may be seen as a challenge to her being a woman. She dared to go despite the warnings given to her. It was not that she wants to see her future husband but to experience trying new things especially for girls like them who were not given that “freedom.”

This analysis is supported by the study conducted by Juanillo and Martinez (2020), when they analyzed the language and identity of Agueda. The study revealed Agueda’s used of *emphatic stress* that showed her assertiveness in her utterances; *disalignment* and positioned herself along the affective scale. This revealed that she is an assertive and strong-willed young woman, who likes to do whatever she wants.



She was indeed rebellious, fearless, and stubborn girl as she went to the *sala*, tiptoeing across the hall with the lighted candle in one hand while the other she pulled up her white gown from her ankles. She stood before the mirror, and she lifted the candle level with her chin. She closed her eyes and whispered the incantation. Samson (2017) observed the same qualities of Agueda as she demonstrated hardheadedness, pride, and bravery. Agueda also appears as a bold and a curious young woman. (Julve, et.al, 2026)

This was the memory of one **Wild** May Day Midnight years and years ago. She remembered how fresh young face like a **pure** mask she had brought before the mirror but now the face she saw in it was an **old face- a hard, bitter, vengeful face, framed in greying hair, and so sadly altered, so sadly different from the other face.**

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
"...so sadly, different from the other face"	the face she saw in it was an old face- a hard, bitter, vengeful face, framed in greying hair, and so sadly altered	These words describe the feelings of Agueda and how she had suffered from that May night.

In this paragraph, the text explicitly demonstrates what Agueda had experienced after that May night. The words that were used are enough to describe the feelings of Agueda and how she had suffered from that May night.

To qualify such claims, Eco mentioned in his book "The Role of the Reader" (The Model Readers for Open Text, p9) that the reader is strictly defined by the lexical and the syntactical organization of the text. The text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own model reader. The exactness of the textual project makes for the freedom of its own Model Reader. This explanation shows that the sender

(author) has foreseen a model possible reader that had made his text communicative. The specific linguistic code, the literary style and the specific specialization indices generate the meaning of the text.

Julve, et.al (2026) posited that the narrative expresses the violent undercurrents embedded in romantic attraction. This fusion of passion and cruelty foreshadowed a marriage restrained by power struggle rather than intimacy, reinforcing the instability of marital ideals. Apparently, marriage becomes a repository of regret, demonstrating how initial defiance, illusion, and passion culminate in enduring bitterness.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>She narrated to her little girl that she saw the 'devil' that night, and that the devil has curly hair, has scar on his cheek, had mustaches, he wore fine clothes, and he has flashing eyes.</i>	The little girl responded, "like those of papa!"	The devil that Agueda was referring to was Badoy Montiya who was her cousin, and he's also the 'devil' that the little girl was able to identify after she described how the 'devil' looks like.

Agueda narrated to her daughter what she saw in the mirror. She told her that she saw the devil and that the devil has curly hair, has scar on his cheek, had mustaches, he wore fine clothes, and he has flashing eyes. She even remembered how brute this devil was to her and how he was barring her way so she cannot pass. She was in total humiliation for the "devil" said that she was admiring her charms in the mirror in the middle of the night. She does not know what to do so she cried. Badoy, (later named in the story) "the devil" who was conscience-stricken, apologized and kissed her hand. She moaned to let her go but Badoy insisted to forgive him first. But she didn't. Instead, she pulled his hand to her mouth and bit it- bit so sharply into the knuckles that he cried with pain. Then Agueda rushed to the stairs then into the bedroom. Cruel thoughts raced through his head: he would go and **tell his**



mother and make her turn the savage girl out of the house- or he would go himself to the girl's room and **drag her out of bed and slap, slap, slap her silly face!** Oh, he would have his revenge, he would make her pay, that little harlot! She should suffer for this, he thought greedily, licking his bleeding knuckles. But- Judas!- what eyes she had! And what a pretty color she turned when angry!

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>He would still make her pay; he would still have his revenge- "I will never forget this night."</i>	Cruel thoughts raced through his head: he would go and tell his mother and make her turn the savage girl out of the house. But- Judas!- what eyes she had! And what a pretty color she turned when angry!	The passage explained how the "trap" was conceived in Badoy's mind. Young Badoy who was deliriously or madly "in love" with Agueda but still would want to make her pay and that he will never forget this night shows an indefinable emotion towards her.

He remembered her bare shoulders: gold in the candlelight and delicately furred. He saw the mobile insolence of her neck, and her taut breasts steady in the fluid gown. She was quite enchanting! He realized that he had fallen madly in love with her. He ached intensely to see her again- at once! To touch her hand and her hair; to hear her harsh voice.

It was May, it was summer, and he was **young- younger- and deliriously in love.** Such happiness welled up within him the tears spurted from his eyes. But he did not forget her- No! **He would still make her pay; he would still have his revenge;** he thought viciously and kissed his wounded fingers. But what a night it had been! **"I will never forget this night!"** -he thought aloud in awed voice, standing by the window in the dark room, the tears in his eyes and the wind in his hair and his bleeding knuckles pressed to his mouth.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>"...her bare shoulders; gold in the candlelight and delicately furred. He saw the mobile insolence of her neck, and her taut breasts steady in the fluid gown..."</i>	...he was young- younger- and deliriously in love. Such happiness welled up within him the tears spurted from his eyes.	He got enchanted, in fact he was really attracted, sexually. The text implied that he was attracted to her sexually

It was indeed an unforgettable night. The highlighted words and paragraph in the passage explained how the "trap" was conceived in Badoy's mind. Young Badoy who was deliriously or madly "in love" with Agueda but still would want to make her pay and that he will never forget this night shows an indefinable emotion towards her. Words are playing on thought about *love*. **He is deliriously in love.** Insinuates that there was love and that Badoy was in love; however, this phrase contradicts other phrases in the text: "But he did not forget her!-No! He would still make her pay..." clearly shows the real intention of Badoy. His intention of *forcing her to marry him*. He did make her marry him. He forced her to marry him though he is not 100% sure about what he truly feels about her. Yes, he got enchanted, in fact he was really attracted, sexually. The text implied that he was attracted to her sexually; **"...her bare shoulders; gold in the candlelight and delicately furred. He saw the mobile insolence of her neck, and her taut breasts steady in the fluid gown..."**

The story of Badoy and Agueda which was founded on physical attraction is a proof that love cannot be based on passion alone. It has to be deeply rooted from respect and acceptance of each other. (Samson, 2017)



Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>"Be quiet, you might awaken my mother!"</i>	The "cousin" ("implied" sister of Badoy) was ordering everybody to keep quiet because they might awaken her mother, which implies that the "mother" owns the house.	The character of the mother may be perceived as an important link to the relationship of Badoy and Agueda and thus establishes the claim of incestuous marriage.

This passage further reveals the relationship of Badoy and Agueda. When he was plotting his revenge, he thought of telling **his mother** to send the savage girl away from their house. This insinuates the connection of Badoy with the "cousin" of young Agueda in the early part of the story. In that part, the "cousin" ("implied" sister of Badoy) was ordering everybody to keep quiet because they might awaken her mother, which implies that the "mother" owns the house. Then here comes Badoy creeping home that night in that same house strengthens the claim that he is a brother to the cousin of Agueda who is also the owner of the house. The mother was mentioned several times in the story and thus signifies an important part in the story. The character of the mother may be perceived as an important link to the relationship of Badoy and Agueda and thus establishes the claim of incestuous marriage.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>But Alas, the Heart Forgets: The Heart is Distracted; and Maytime Passes; summer ends; the storms break over the rot-ripe orchards, and the heart grows old</i>	The years pile up and pile up, till the mind becomes too crowded, too confused; dust gathers in it, cobwebs multiply, the walls darken and fall into ruin and decay, the memory perishes... and there came a time Don Badoy Montiya walked home through a May Day Midnight without remembering, without even caring to remember.	This reveals how Badoy Montiya fell on that same trap and how he wanted to forget that May night.

"But Alas, the Heart Forgets: The Heart is Distracted; and Maytime Passes;" summer ends; the storms break over the rot-ripe orchards and the heart grows old; while the hours, the days, the months and the years pile up and pile up, till the mind becomes too crowded, too confused; dust gathers in it, cobwebs multiply, the walls darken and fall into ruin and decay, the memory perishes... and there came a time Don Badoy Montiya walked home through a May Day Midnight without remembering, without even caring to remember. He saw a face in the mirror, this time a young lad standing in front of it with a lighted candle in his hand. It was his grandson, Voltaire, who wanted to see his wife in the mirror. Don Badoy recalled that May night when he was newly back from Europe: he had been dancing all night: he was very drunk: he stopped in the doorway: he saw a face in the dark. He bitterly narrated to his grandson that once he saw a "witch" in the mirror; a witch that was so beautiful and that she was the most beautiful creature he has ever seen. Her hair was black waters, and her golden shoulders were bare. She was enchanting. She bewitched him and tortured him. She ate his heart and drank his blood.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>He bitterly narrated to his grandson that once he saw a "witch" in the mirror; a witch that was so beautiful and that she was the most beautiful creature he has ever seen. Her hair was black waters, and her golden shoulders were bare. She was enchanting. She bewitched him and tortured him. She ate his heart and drank his blood.</i>	His grandson, Voltaire, responded, "like those of grandma?"	Agueda who was implicitly labeled as a witch "who ate his heart and drank his blood" implies that she had made him fall for her; thus, he was also trapped on the Wild May Night.

The long narrative text shows a particular style of the author that indicates the shift or the



change in setting. It presents three generations in the text: Agueda and Badoy, Agueda and the daughter, and Badoy and the grandson, Voltaire. In terms of structure, the author explicitly shows the intention of leading its reader in the chronology of the story. This also reveals how Badoy Montiya fell on that same trap and how he wanted to forget that May night. But he was reminded of it once again when he saw his grandson in front of the mirror. As he was bitterly narrating what he saw in the mirror, he cannot help but to recall what he had felt towards Agueda. Agueda who was implicitly labeled as a witch “who ate his heart and drank his blood” implies that she had made him fall for her; thus, he was also trapped on the Wild May Night.

Text as Expression	Text as Content	Reconstructed Codes
<i>They were at peace at last, the two of them and her tired body at rest; her broken body set free at last from the brutal pranks of the earth- from the trap of a May night; from the snare of summer; from the terrible silver nets of moon.</i>	Agueda was dead. Nothing at all! Was left of the young girl who had flamed so vividly in a mirror one wild May Day midnight, long, long ago.	Agueda, the young Agueda who was trapped into marriage to young Badoy chose to live like “hell.” She did not find calm and peace in living with Badoy. He would have wanted to live in peace and in love with Agueda, but the anguish caused by that forced marriage was amplifying; echoing the betrayal of Badoy when he forced her to marry him.

Don Badoy Montiya for a moment had forgotten that Agueda was dead, that she had perished- the poor Agueda; that they were at peace at last, the two of them and her tired body at rest; **her broken body set free at last from the brutal pranks of the earth- from the trap of a May night**; from the snare of summer; from the terrible silver nets of moon. She had been a mere heap of white hair and bones in the end; a whimpering withered consumptive, lashing out with her cruel tongue; her eyes like lie coals; her face like ashes... Now nothing- nothing saves a name on a stone; save a stone in a graveyard- nothing! Nothing at all! Was left of the young

girl who had flamed so vividly in a mirror one wild May Day midnight, long, long ago.

Agueda, the young Agueda who was trapped into marriage to young Badoy (the young buck from Europe) as illustrated in the text, chose to live like “hell” with Badoy. She did not find calm and peace in living with Badoy; however, found a consolation through her daughter as she knew in her heart that she also fell in love with Badoy on that May Night. Ironically, they can’t live together and seemingly lived under the curse of that Night of Divination, the Night of Lovers. He would have wanted to live in peace and in love with Agueda, but the anguish caused by that forced marriage was amplifying; echoing the betrayal of Badoy when he forced her to marry him. With all the circumstances surrounding that situation, the blood on his knuckles when she bit him that must have stained her white night gown as well as her being alone in the dark hall on that faithful May Midnight with a man (Badoy) may have been used as evidence to convince “the mother” to save the name” of Agueda from shame. Now Badoy asked that same question; “what name was to save- to save in a stone” when nothing was left of the woman who lived in hatred, regrets, and sadness. Finally, she’s free! They’re both free from the trap of that Wild May Midnight. When both felt the love- young love, deliriously and madly in love; however, was trapped into marriage that they both regretted. The devil (Badoy) and the witch (Agueda) lived together in “hell”!

Love is not founded on magic. For it to grow and blossom, lovers should nurture the seed by watering it with acceptance and respect for each other. There is no way for love to prosper in proud and hateful hearts. (Samson,2020)



IV. CONCLUSIONS

The words (as signs) in Nick Joaquin's *May Day Eve* explicitly revealed the meaning of the text through the process of Umberto Eco's reading of an open text. The standard communication model of sender, codes, and addressee provided the basis for interpreting the words (as signs) in this analysis. Following the *semantico-pragmatic process* [expression-content-codes] in analyzing the text, the narrative revealed layers of meaning that not many of the reviewed studies were able to draw from its analysis. Thus, this paper offers interpretation using semiotic approach in analyzing a literary piece. The text suggests how that "wild May night", the Night of Divination and the Night of Lovers, of summer love, of young love, of "falling deliriously and madly in love" with each other brought so much pain, hatred, and regret. The text also suggests how unsuccessful the marriage was and how both suffered from the "trap" inferred as "marriage." How Agueda despised Badoy from the beginning of the story until the end when she died; "...she had been a mere heap of white hair and bones in the end: a whimpering withered consumptive, lashing out with her cruel tongue; her eyes like live coals; her face like ashes...", and how Badoy has been relieved with the thought that finally both of them are at *peace*.

This semiotic reading of Nick Joaquin's *May Day Eve* poses four points:

1. That incestuous marriage did exist between Badoy Montiya and Agueda (they are cousins)
2. That oppression among women was grievously manifested in the circumstances that Agueda was involved in (confrontation in the dark hall; she was forced to marry Badoy)
3. That corruption (sexually) among youth was explicitly demonstrated (Badoy was a lot older than Agueda)
4. That objectification of women was rampant (Badoy desired for Agueda that turned him to be deliriously "in love" with her")





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