

A Literary Analysis of Luis Dato's Poem "The Spouse"

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Literary Analysis is a form of review or criticism to a particular written material. It may be done in different ways but is usually presented in an article or essay. The form of review and criticism may also differ depending on the goal of the reviewer of the literary work" (<http://www.qwhatis.com/what-is-literary-analysis>).

Doing literary analysis is always a given variable in literature classes. This is so because literary pieces are meant that way...for analysis. Otherwise, one cannot fully understand or unearth the hidden meanings of those pieces of writing. A particular blogger has this to say, "We analyze in order to see beyond the surface, to understand the complexities literature points to in different aspects of humanity" (<https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080303194334AA46IEP>).

The fact that there are different ways in analyzing literary pieces as well as there are different forms of reviewing them, for the purpose of this particular paper, the target piece will be subjected to analysis based on the criteria identified by the Association of the American Poets in the 20th Century as cited in <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/a/american-poets-of-the-20th-century/how-to-analyze-poetry>. The analysis will run in the following elements: context of the poem, style, title, opening and closing lines, speaker of the poem, names of characters, culture, mood and tone, themes, rhythm, use of the senses, images/symbolism, and language of the poem.

It is hoped that in doing the analysis, the writer gains thorough understanding and better appreciation of the poem "The Spouse" by Luis Dato.

II. THE AUTHOR



Luis G. Dato was born in Baao, Camarines Sur on July 4, 1906. He went to local schools in Naga during his elementary years. He attended three years in high school in Camarines High School but finished his high school in U.P.

This Filipino writer is a teacher by profession. His published books to include Manila, a Collection of Verses (1926), My Book of Verses (1926), The Instant Lyre (manuscript), Vocabulario Bikol-Ingles-Kastila (1963), Kantahon na Bikol (1969), Morfologia kan Tataramon na Bikol (serialized in Naga Times), Patotodon sa Bikol (Bikol Mail), and Sarabihon sa Bikol. While his Important poems include Life of Christ, Handiong, (Bicol Epic), Sonnets to the Brown Goddess, Translations of the major poems of Rizal, Translations of other Filipino poets in Spanish, Sonnets of the Liberation, Coronation and Proclamation poems, Love Lyrics, Alma Mater poems, Christmas poems, Translations of Spanish, French, Mexican and, Nicaraguan poets, and other religious poems.

As a poet, Dato took inspiration from his personal experiences in life particularly in matters related to the love of his life. He said his loves gave him inspiration to compose. For vivid description of Dato's style in poetry writing, may I quote this personal reply of our poet to questions asked to him in the past which I fortunately came across in the source I will cite while I was finding for related materials to aid in my discussion of this poem "The Spouse."

The writer cannot afford to paraphrase a single line of Dato's reply for fear of not retaining the original tone and melody of the language that only a poet like him could beautifully express.

"To those who want to write poetry, who ask me how and why I wrote poetry as well as the question, "Is poet born or made?" my answer is: Read poetry, the best in world literature, especially English, European, South American and Asian poetry. Imitate the way they think, the way they write. Also, fall in love. Look around at our girls who, I think, are among the loveliest in the world. Break your heart with the pain, the anguish of unrequited love. Indulge in self-pity, if it cannot help. But sublimate your frustrations. You are then in condition to write poetry, poetry from the depths of the soul." (<http://luisgdato.blogspot.com/2011/06/blog-post.html>)

III. THE POEM

THE SPOUSE

Luis G. Dato

Rose in the hand and moist eyes young with weeping,
 She stands upon the threshold of her house.
 Fragrant with scent that wakens love from sleeping
 She looks far down to where her husband plows.

Her hair disheveled in the night of passion,
 Her warm limb humid with the sacred strife,
 What may she know but man and woman fashion,
 Out of the clay of wrath and sorrow, Life?

She holds no joys beyond the day's tomorrow,
 She finds no worlds beyond his arm's embrace,
 She looks upon the FORM behind the furrow,
 Who is her mind, her Motion, Time and Space.

Oh, somber mystery of eyes unspeaking
 And dark enigma of life's loves forlorn
 The Sphinx beside the river smiles with seeking
 The secret answer since the world was born.

Source: <http://www.christianster.com/ctan/html/showsharing.php?authid=119299&m=4&y=2008&d=11>

IV. POETIC DEVICES

The Tone:

Looking into the tone of the poem from the vantage point of a feminism, one could say that the poem is a very good example of men's domination over women especially in the context of the Philippine society.

By expert use of language, Dato was able to depict the woman as being oppressed as indicated by the "moist eyes young with weeping" and deprived as indicated by "She finds no worlds beyond his arm's embrace and the "FORM behind the furrow (the husband) who is her mind, her Motion, Time and Space."

However, from the point of view of deconstructivism, a seemingly opposite picture is seen. The "weeping" of the woman presents an extra woman power which drives the man to follow her desire. This driving power is supported by "Fragrant with scent that wakens love from sleeping" which any man has no power to refuse.

Nonetheless, whichever view we take, the common denominator is that the poem deals with a certain mystery about LOVE. Such mystery lies in the binary opposites of the "sweet-sorrow" nature of love.

The Structure:

The poem is made up of four metered and rhymed stanzas. Each stanza is composed of four lines. All first and third lines are made up of eleven syllables while all second and fourth lines with ten syllables.

The rhymes likewise happen between the first and the third lines as well as between the second and the fourth lines in all stanzas. For the purpose of emphasis, the following devices are used: repetition of the pronouns "she" in lines 2 and 4 of the first stanza as well as in lines 1, 2, and 3 of the third stanza and "her" in lines 1 and 2 of the second stanza; foregrounding of the phrase modifiers in lines 1 and 3 of stanza 1 to describe what the woman is doing; FORM in line 3 of stanza 3 to allude the reader to the symbolism of the word; Motion, Time and Space which all begin with capital letters; and comma in line 4 of stanza 2 to alert the reader on the meaning of the word "life" as suggested in the line.

Symbolism:

The ambiguity of the poem lies in the symbolism of the languages employed by the author. It takes a sharp and critical mind to come up with a piece of interpretation behind the hidden meanings of the text. The "Rose" and Fragrant with scent that wakens love from sleeping are directly attributed to women's power of enticing men to love. No man in his normal biological structure and needs would refuse such woman's charm and invitation. The same charm employed against man has biblical basis when Eve invited Adam to take the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. That was believed to be the origin of the "curse" of man and woman. As cited in <http://www.christianster.com/ctan/html/showsharing.php?authid=119299&m=4&y=2008&d=11> "Both man and woman in this poem suffer the curse. The woman suffers because she is a prisoner and a slave to the desire and devotion that she has for her husband as described in the third stanza. In the same way, the husband himself in the fields suffers the curse of not being able to revel on such passion and devotion that her wife pours out on him. He has to work, and as hard as he could, he must."

The woman's "weeping" which is considered "weakness" is actually her strong weapon against man to get what she wants. There is also sexuality in stanza two of the poem. This too suggests the mystery behind the "sweet-sorrow" act of love which reproduces life. Moreover, the word FORM may symbolize the man being reduced to a lower status or his manhood which oppresses the woman as evidenced in "Who is her mind, her Motion, Time and Space."

What about the symbolism of the "Sphinx"? Yes, man has to understand the riddle, the mystery of love and of woman and deal with it wisely. Otherwise, love will indeed be a "sweet-sorrow" thing which remains mysterious and those involved will suffer the consequence of the curse.

Imagery:

Here are words and phrases used to create pictures and aid understanding of the poem together with their suggested meanings:

Rose in her hand - woman's enticing power over man

Eyes moist from crying - woman's strong weapon to get what she wants

Husband plowing - toiling, working hard, or may mean sexual act

Hair disheveled in the night of passion - sexuality

Warm limb humid with the sacred strife – sexuality

FORM behind the furrow - reduced status of man or man's sex organ behind woman's sex organ

Smiling Sphinx beside the river - the mystery; the riddle; may refer to a woman whose behavior can never be understood

Speaker:

Who is the voice that speaks in the poem? The author used the third person point-of-view. By using the pronouns SHE and HER, the author creates a woman character who is the subject of the poem. But whose voice is actually heard speaking in the poem? Is it of the author himself or of other character? Is it the woman's voice or the man's? The title "The Spouse" even withholds the identity of the one being spoken about in the poem, wife or husband. While the pronoun SHE and HER suggest the wife, it is not clear whose sentiments are actually highlighted. Is it his or hers?

V. THE ANALYSIS

Context of the Poem:

The poem is written by Luis Dato in English. It speaks about the great passion for love but suppressed by some intervening circumstances such as performing or fulfilling one's responsibility inherent to the act of loving.

In the Philippine context and in the feminist point-of-view, the poem may speak of how men dominate women in various aspects as suggested in the third stanza

"She holds no joys beyond the day's tomorrow,
She finds no worlds beyond his arm's embrace,
She looks upon the FORM behind the furrow,
Who is her mind, her Motion, Time and Space.

In here, the woman is imprisoned in her love for the man. The man is established as her life, her strength, her only joy, and her everything. She is obliged to perform the act of loving her man under whatever circumstance. Such case deprives the woman of living outside the world of her love.

A second look at the piece however will give us a different perspective. According to the constructivist, we need to look for the possible exclusion, repression and contradictions in the text to enable us unearth hidden meanings.

Maybe when the poem was written by Luis Dato, the Filipino women were not yet emancipated from men's domination as popularized in history books. Or maybe women during those era were simply submissive to men that even in matters of unrequited love they simply bear the pain and the sorrows.

But what if these were not totally true? Then maybe the constructivists were right. Filipino historians may have overlooked or deliberately excluded some facts about our culture. We read stories in books on how women during the early history of the country played significant roles in the lives of Filipino men. We listened to wonderful and painful love stories in the past featuring women's power over men. Biblically, we were taught of how Eve used her power to entice Adam to sin. Historically, this writer has witnessed how male Filipino politicians were brought down from power because they listened to and followed their wives.

What is being pointed out here is that when it comes to love, there is no superior nor inferior gender and that both man and woman may suffer from the pang of love.

Style of the Poem:

Luis Dato as a writer took inspiration from his love life. In his autobiography, he mentioned about his numerous love affairs and interests which ranged from young and old, single, divorced and even married women. As a man, he was a lover if not womanizer.

His poem “The Spouse” suggests his experiences as a lover. It has an autobiographical nature. In his relationship with women, he confessed a number of frustrations, break up and pains brought about by passionate affairs. These were eternalized in this particular poem.

The ambiguity of the owner of the silent voice that speaks in the poem seems to depict Dato’s attempt to keep the real score in his affairs with women. Although he mentioned about his passion for love, he was not open about some sensitive details. What he just shared the readers is the painful consequence of the act of loving if not properly handled.

Title of the Poem:

Why the title? Was there an intention to keep the identity of the spouse who actually suffered oppression and deprivation? Dato’s style in titling this particular poem is parallel to that of Robert Frost’s “The Road not Taken”. While the character in Frost’s poem described the road he was trudging, his mind was actually focused on the other road he did not take. That thought kept on haunting him which became the main theme and the title of the poem.

Similarly, while Dato describes the woman as represented by the pronouns HER and SHE, he presented signs of ambiguity as represented by the “man plowing” and the man being reduced into a “FORM behind the furrow.” Who is now the silent voice in the poem, the man or the woman?

Opening and Closing Lines of the Poem:

The first line in stanza 1 presents a picture of a woman holding a rose and crying while the last line in stanza 4 gives a description of the mystery of sweetness and sorrow behind loving.

The two lines are important parts in analyzing the meaning as well as the theme of the poem.

Why should a woman be crying when she stands right there witnessing her beloved doing the plowing? Is there pain doing it? If yes, then only lovers truly know. In the consummation of the act of love, a new life is borne. This is the consequence lovers have to face. They have to bear the responsibilities. In doing so, they must be ready to deprive themselves of things they used to do and enjoy.

The confirming statement is found in the last line of the last stanza. Even if lovers truly know that pain is inherent in loving, they would never understand why this is so for it will remain a secret forever that only God knows why.

Speaker of the Poem:

After reading Luis Dato’s autobiography, it can be said that it could be he himself who speaks in the poem. As mentioned, this poem is autobiographical in nature. The imagery and the symbolism suggest the author’s experiences in his personal life. The speaker in the poem is a man who speaks about his mysterious relationship with a woman. Needless to say, Dato as a writer was a lover with rich experience with women. Some of them intimate but ended painfully.

There was an attempt by the speaker to talk in universal basis but obviously the theme depicts the Filipino culture as indicated by the spirit of romanticism in the “Rose” being held by the woman as well as in the spirit of industry in the “plowing of the man”.

Names of Characters:

“Spouse” is common noun. It is either the man or the woman. Using the term instead of WIFE is perhaps another device of the author to keep the identity of whoever is oppressed and oppressive in a particular relationship.

“Sphinx” is an allusion to the mystery of loving and of women which male lovers cannot understand. It represents the punishment or the pain that lovers will go through as part of engaging in the act. As explained in Greek Mythology, a Sphinx is a curse.

In this poem, both the man and the woman suffer the curse. He by doing the hard work to sustain his living with the woman he loves. She by being slave to his love. She becomes dependent to him that in the end she suffers paranoia when he turns his eyes to other objects of affection.

Mood of the poem:

The speaker in the poem suffers from a lot of repression. This speaker marvels in the ecstasy of loving but finds desolation in repressing emotions. There is a suggestion of hidden mysteries in relating with someone as evidenced in

“Oh, somber mystery of eyes unspeaking
And dark enigma of life’s loves forlorn”

There is pain and sorrow. The speaker knows this but there is no way of understanding why it has to be like this.

The Poet’s Tone:

Luis Dato was serious about his revelation of women and of love. There is an agonizing pain in his tone when he described the consequences of getting involved in loving and in women.

By using the language of ambiguity, the author was able to depict a picture of a deprived and oppressed man under the guise of a strong woman using her weakness as a machination to control the man. The woman is the “Sphinx” who mysteriously devours her prey.

It is emphasized in the poem that there is no point of finding out the answers to the mystery behind a woman’s act. She is meant that way...mysterious. “A woman ceases to be a woman if she loses her mystery and man is always at a loss comprehending what is totally woman – that MYSTERY is the KEY to DOMINATION.” (<http://luisgdato.blogspot.com/2011/06/blog-post.html>).

Theme of the Poem:

From the vantage point of deconstructivism, the poem tells us that it is the woman who holds dominion over the man. This has historical, cultural and biblical basis. Perceived as the weaker sex in the Philippine context, the woman seeks refuge in her “weaknesses”. These are her best weapons to oppress the man and to get what she wants.

Having been in various relationships with women during his prime age, maybe Dato experienced how these women’s weaknesses worked in him and in other men sharing the same behavior with him. Maybe he had proven the mystery behind those weaknesses which got the best of him.

Therefore, it is always best to follow what God teaches us especially in relating with others. When we are wrong, we must learn from our mistakes and avoid doing things which can cause us pains.

Rhythm of the Poem:

“The Spouse” appears to reveal a persona’s agony over the mysterious nature of a woman. There is consistency all throughout the poem in the presentation of a woman as the oppressed and deprived party using ambiguous statements. The ambiguity, the repressed emotion, and the real identity of the “Spouse” who suffers more are all devices that contribute to the hidden mystery.

There is an air of confidence in the revelation as suggested by the consistent meter and rhyme of the lines and of the words from the 1st up to the last stanza.

The Imagery:

The ROSE she holds in her hand along with CRYING depicts the image of a woman who is fragile and is suffering from something painful. The PLOWING he performs is an allusion to hard work he has to do. Metaphorically plowing may refer to a sexual act. Both DISHEVELED HAIR and WARM LIMB HUMID WITH THE SACRED STRIFE are symbolic of sexuality. Moreover, FORM behind the furrow may refer to the reduced status of man or metaphorically it may mean male sex organ behind woman’s sex organ. On the other hand, the SPHINX is the riddle or the mystery which can never be understood.

From these images, this writer interprets the poem as representation of the persona’s struggle and pain after engaging or involving himself in a very intimate relationship with a woman described to be weak but mysterious in her strategies to get what she wants in her man.

The relationship seems to be “indecent” and “unlawful” that after the desire of the flesh is fulfilled, both the man and the woman must face the painful consequence of the affair. Adding up to the complication is the new life produce out of the relationship. This is the nightmare both parties must bear.

Being in the situation, both man and woman are made slaves of the relationship. She is dependent upon him and has to do everything to keep to him. On the other hand, he has to labor hard to sustain their needs. He loves her that he has to give in to what she wants. But in the process of providing the needs, he has to repress more important things. The woman would not like it. And the man could not understand why. Thus, the mystery that brings pain and sorrow.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The writer grew up in a society where she was taught to be patriarchal. Part of her Filipino culture and even history was made known and popularized by some twisting of truths authored by writers with self-serving interests. Among the twists she came to realize is the fact about men domination over women. By deconstructing this belief, she came to the realization of this truth.

True enough, in the Philippine society, women have stronger power over men. But this power is manifested through subtle machinations such as the use of weeping and invitation to sex. On the superficial level, these two devices can be considered as weaknesses of women. But deconstructivism is presenting an opposite view. Crying and sex are women’s greatest weapon against men. It is very ungentle for a man to make a woman cry because he does not give what she wants. Moreover, how much of the Filipino husbands fear of being “outside the Kulambo” if he does not heed his wife’s words?

The writer is convinced that Dato is defining a particular experience in his life which he intends to share to his readers hoping that they learn an important lesson from it.

Put in the present Philippine context, the poem becomes more intensely realistic. With women emancipation from male oppression through empowerment, Filipino woman now is braver, stronger, and wiser than before. She continues to work in a mysterious way with extra strength and power hidden in her weaknesses.

But let this not blind us to whatever virtues a Filipina should possess. In the challenge of modern expression of love, a Filipina should be strong in spirit but pure at heart. She should constantly cultivate a culture of fear to the Lord and heed His commandments.

Finally, the poem reminds us of equality between sexes. Man and woman share equal responsibilities, struggles, sorrows and joy when it comes to love. Getting involved in an intimate relationship means facing responsibilities. Every married man and woman must understand this. When children come, they no longer are two but many. The wife must devote herself to her husband and take care of her children. In doing so, she has to sacrifice other personal whims to keep her family happy. On the other hand, the husband must work hard for the family. He too must repress himself from things he used to enjoy. This may be a form of oppression and deprivation. But it is how it works. It is the RIDDLE that should keep the fire of love burning. And only God knows why.

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