

# A Literary Analysis of Nick Joaquin's “May Day Eve”

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Known by his passionate expression of the Filipino people's sentiments over their political conditions even before he became a known writer through his unique style, Nick Joaquin is this writer's favorite. Although not a rabid reader like her idol, she had read and appreciated few of his works to include this piece “May Day Eve”. In fact, she smiles at the thought of how she and her friends tried during their college days the same incantation used by Agueda to see in advance the face of the person they were destined to marry. Like Agueda, their interest in the romantic suggestion of the story was so intense that they dared try the trick and like what happened to Agueda, they ended in trouble when they were reprimanded by their landlady after disturbing other boarders in the middle of the night.

No doubt, Joaquin's literary styles invoke interest as they suggest hidden mystery to the minds of his readers.

This literary analysis of Nick Joaquin's “May Day Eve” is the writer's attempt to see through the “mirror” what really is the story all about.

## II. THE AUTHOR



*Nicomedes “Nick” Joaquin a.k.a Quijano de Manila, 1917-2004*

This Filipino artist is a novelist, poet, playwright, biographer and essayist in English. He holds the title National Artist for Literature. Nick wrote largely about the Spanish colonial period and the diverse heritage of the Filipino people. After World War II Joaquin worked as a journalist, gaining fame as a reporter for the *Free Press*. His most acclaimed play is *A Portrait of the Artist As Filipino* (1952). Nick Joaquín lived through eight decades of Philippine history and witnessed the slow, uneven, and often violent transformation of the nation to include the American idyll of the prewar years, the violence and degradation of an enemy occupation, the Communist insurgency and the hard choices it confronted the Filipino with, the dark years of martial rule, and the waxing and waning of hopes for a better nation. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Nick Joaquín, the writer, was that his was always the voice of a deep, inclusive, and compassionate optimism in the Filipino. (<http://ewinmanuel.wordpress.com/tag/may-day-eve-by-nick-joaquin/>)

### III. THE SUMMARY

Agueda and Badoy's story began in that first night of May. Agueda is a smart girl who seems to mature ahead of her age. Unlike girls of her age, she is bold and liberated. Badoy is much older than Agueda is. He studies in Europe and likes to play with girls as Agueda hears it from his stories with his friends. She hates him for that.

The party that night in the house of the Montiya's was in honor of Badoy who just came from Europe. The old people have ordered to stop the dancing as it was getting late at night but Agueda and the girls went upstairs to continue the noise. The caretaker Natasha mentioned about the spell which allows one to see the face of his/her lover. The other girls were afraid but not Agueda. She convinced Anastasha to tell her the incantation. Alone in the middle of the dark room while holding a candle, Agueda whispered the incantation and there she saw the face of the devil.

Badoy and Agueda both lived through it, thinking each other as devils. They severely hurt each other. The tragedy is when Badoy's heart forgets how much he felt for Agueda. Both were not careful enough to mend their drifting marriage. Both Badoy and Agueda perceived their marriage to be a taste of hell.

Their prides prevented them from admitting that they saw each other's face in that mirror. They continued to claim that it was the witch or the devil they saw. Each claimed that the devil bewitched them, tortured them and ate their hearts. It was so because it was how they were to each other as husband and wife.

Their contrasting attributes brought them together to that situation they suffered all along. They were blessed with a daughter. But even this did not soften the hatred each has for the other or maybe lowered each other's pride to admit the truth between them.

Donya Agueda succumb to death after the long agonizing years with Don Badoy Montiya. Alone after his wife's death, Don Badoy painfully recalled of the girl who had flamed so vividly in a mirror one wild May Day midnight, long, long ago and refreshed his memory of how she had bitten his hand and fled which surprised his heart in the instant of falling in love with Agueda.

Crying his heart out, Don Badoy realized that time has healed the wounds of their relationship. The old love that was blinded by hatred which brought pain has now resurfaced. The tragedy is that it is too late. Agueda is gone. She never had the chance to know the truth that he had actually loved her and she meant so much to her all those times. Love didn't go away. It was just hidden in their proud hearts.

### IV. PLOT STRUCTURE

#### a. The main problem:

The main problem started when young Badoy Montiya cornered Agueda in the dark room alone. She asked him to free her but he insisted having a dance with her until she struggled for her freedom but he was stronger than she was. When the candle went off, Agueda started to cry not because of fear in the dark but because she hated how Badoy behaved. Badoy started to apologize sensing Agueda's discomfort but she refused the apology. Instead when she had the chance, she bit Badoy's fingers forcing him to retaliate by slapping her but she avoided and fled away from him. That started their unending conflicts.

#### b. The climax:

The two were married. Unfortunately that marriage was not the solution to their problem but the cause of the complications. None of them admitted their real feelings for each other. They both found hell in their marriage. They both considered each other as devil and witch which inflicts them harm and pain.

#### c. The resolution:

The heart grows weary. The body succumbs to pain. Donya Agueda was not able to bear it anymore. Her death signaled the realization for Don Badoy. He loved her all those times. It was a pity she would never know it anymore.

#### d. Characters and their Characterization:

The main characters in the story are the following:

**Young Agueda** – the pretty young woman who is curious, hardheaded, brave and proud. She was married to Badoy Montiya but never bowed down to admit her admiration for Badoy. She died losing her youth and living a lonely married life.

**Young Badoy Montiya** – the vain good looking man who will do everything to get what he wants. He was a vengeful fellow who married Agueda but never admitted he had loved her since the night he cornered her in that dark room until she died.

**Anastasha** - the old woman who is loyal to her mistress and believes in supernatural beings. She taught Agueda the incantation which can make her see the face of the person she is to marry.

**Daughter of Donya Agueda and Don badoy** – a curious girl who was persistent in knowing her mother’s past.

**Voltaire** – Don Badoy and Donya Agueda’s grandson who like his mother heard the story of witches that bewitched, drunk the blood and ate the hearts of his grandparents.

#### e. Setting:

The story happened in the year 1847; on May Day Eve.

#### f. Style and Techniques:

##### *The conflict:*

- Man vs. man ( Badoy vs. Agueda)
- Man vs. self (Badoy vs. himself; Agueda vs. herself)

##### *The symbolism:*

The main symbol used in the story is the mirror which refers to the physical attractions of Badoy and Agueda for each other and the illusion brought about by those attractions.

##### *The theme:*

Love cannot be based on passion alone nor in superstitious beliefs and in fate.

#### g. Analysis:

##### *On plot:*

“Regrets come late”. Oftentimes we realize the blessings we have only when they are gone. For Badoy and Agueda, life and love were wasted. Living together, suppressing the lovely gifts of these two most precious gifts because of pride and prejudice for each other is the most painful experience a couple could have.

As Diaz in his post mentioned, Badoy was luckier because he still had the chance to reminisce the past with Agueda and take joy in the pleasant memories of his hidden love for her while Agueda was unfortunate not to know the truth about her husband’s love for her. ([http://www.litreact.com/reactions/may%20day%20eve\\_joaquin\\_diaz.html](http://www.litreact.com/reactions/may%20day%20eve_joaquin_diaz.html)). However, by deconstructing principle, it could be noted that it was unfortunate for Badoy to live suffering the anguish of unexpressed love for Agueda. Regrets come to Badoy too late when he realized the precious gift he had lost. But in the end, to mention the binary opposite description of loving being a “sweet-sorrow” experience, the characters of Badoy and Agueda must be blessed to have one May Day Eve in their lives and have instant feelings of love even if they chose not to demonstrate.

##### *On characters/characterization:*

Agueda is the most dynamic character in the story and the one with severe internal conflict. Although her dynamism is not reflected in the changes of her personality, she was responsible in the changes which happened to Badoy after her death. In her first encounter with Badoy, Agueda demonstrated hardheadedness, pride and bravery. But there were moments during her life together with Badoy that she recognized her admiration for him although she chose not to be demonstrative about it. In other words while living as wife of Badoy, Agueda was in pain of keeping her feelings for him brought about by her pride and prejudice to Badoy.

The vanity and good looks of Badoy used by Nick Joaquin to symbolize what man wants did not totally work well on Agueda. In fact, it was the charm she hated most in him. It was the charm that made him the vengeful and proud man who never admitted his real feelings for Agueda because she too chose not.

Anastasha's belief of the supernatural beings emphasizes other people's perspective about the role of fate in one's life. In the story "May Day Eve", both Badoy and Agueda believed they were trapped in the magic of the mirror one night in their lives and thought they were fated for each other. Unfortunately, the mirror seemed to have lied and they did not do anything to save what was in them for their relationship to have triumphed.

***On setting:***

The story happened in the year 1847 on the eve of May. It deals with witchcraft as depicted in "She bewitched me"; blended with horror as evident in "She suck my blood and ate my heart; and flavored with fiction as expressed in the superstitious belief of the devil and the witch coming out of the mirror if everything in the ritual will go wrong. These are descriptions of the anguish one has to go through when he chooses not to be true about his feelings.

***On conflict:***

There is the presence of internal and external conflicts all throughout the story.

In that encounter in the dark room, Young Badoy already realized how sudden he fall in love with Young Agueda. But when they were married, they both manifested regret and revealed hatred for each other as reflected in their description of each other as the devil who inflicts them harm. Out of pride and desolation, Agueda bore it out until death. After her death, the painful realization for Badoy was depicted. The tragedy was that it was too late for him to tell her the truth about how he felt...that she loved her all through those years of pain and of hating. Thus the conflict between man and himself and between man and another man.

***On symbolism:***

The mirror symbolizes the physical attraction of Badoy and Agueda had for each other. Even in their first meeting the attraction was already tense which they thought to be love. On the part of Agueda, this is manifested in her recall of Badoy's "flashing eyes", "very elegant moustache", "fine clothes", and "curly hair" as reflected in the mirror. On the part of Badoy, his physical attraction was evident in seeing the young Agueda's "charms," "tremendous beauty," the "eyes she had," "bare shoulders gold in the candlelight and delicately furred," "the mobile insolence of her neck, her taut breast," her enchanting "fire" and "grace," "her hair that was like black waters" as they were reflected in the same mirror.

The illusion became evident when they married and thought of each other as "fatal creatures". The symbolism of illusion was reinforced when that physical attraction was not transformed into something more positive during their marriage years.

***On the theme:***

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. It has to be constantly worked on, nurtured, earned and given willingly rather than be based on superstitions and fate.

It is only under this criteria that love grows and blossoms. Otherwise, like the story of Badoy and Agueda love will be blinded and will be turned into hatred. Then, the regrets and the realization of what we actually had when it is already gone.

## V. CONCLUSION

If the mirror is a symbolism of an illusion, then this story could be about someone's illusionary love affair as portrayed by the different characters. Or is this just another literary piece of Quijano de Manila portraying something more serious under the guise of a woman's weakness and limitation like that of his story "The Summer Solstice"? But why always portray the woman as a creature of limitations and weaknesses but keeps hidden strength?

If we have to consider the fact that some writer's literary pieces are auto-biographical, then maybe the story has something to do with Nick Joaquin's unfulfilled romantic relationship? In his biographies, there is no mention of

Joaquin's romantic involvement with opposite gender except admiration from a lot of his female fans. Moreover, there is no mention of whether he was a married or a single person until his death. But whatever it is, the truth remains about his being an exemplary literary person whose legacy is recorded in the country's history.

The main theme of the story "May Day Eve" is that 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. Love is never proud nor vengeful. To be happy in love, one has to manifest it through actions. Finally, it is the lovers who decide to succeed or to fail in loving and not fate.

#### REFERENCES

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