

Reimagining the Narrator as a Theologian in Nick Joaquin's *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*

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Abstract. Nick Joaquin explored and revealed the intricacies of the Filipino religious imagination in his works, which in turn presented prime examples of theological traditions. While previous readings of the story problematized these concepts, they did not consider a crucial dimension of this text—the presence of a preacher-narrator as evidenced by the very nature of the text and the presence of first-person pronouns. This critique, therefore, attempts to explore the theology packed within Joaquin's story by presenting how the narrator intervenes in the story and the theological concept the narrator conveys to the imagined readers. The preacher-narrator's identity is unearthed; likewise, a legend—apart from being an entertaining tale and a cultural artifact—could have disseminated an ideology advocated by the preacher-narrator.

Keywords. Filipino Catholic, legend, preacher-narrator, theology

What probably makes Nick Joaquin unique is that he explores the intricacies of the Filipino religious imagination in his works more than any other author does. His *May Day Eve*, *The Summer Solstice*, *The Mass of St. Silvestre*, *Dona Jeronima*, *The Legend of the Virgin's Jewel*, and many others illustrate how the Filipino psyche facilitates the syncretism among folk, pagan beliefs, and the Spanish brand of Catholicism. Although the milieu and psyche in his stories are descriptive of the Philippine setting, Joaquin's artistry allows his works to reflect general and universal values (Trestiza-Bucaco, 2008). Consequently, Joaquin's works should be seen not only in terms of their verisimilitude with the Philippine society—past and present—or the beauty constituted by his artistic and imaginative use of elements of fiction but also of the theological traditions and schools of thought that are universal and at the same time very Filipino.

Joaquin's *The Legend of the Dying Wanton* presents one prime example of how such theology is developed and applied in the Philippine milieu. Aside from revealing the socio-historical conditions during the early stages of Spanish colonization, it also deeply explores Spain's missionary role in the Philippines and its emphasis on popular and external acts of piety while contrasting it with ontological truths realized through an encounter between the mortal and the divine amid excruciating suffering and agony.

While previous readings of the story problematized these concepts, they did not consider a crucial dimension of this text—the presence of a preacher-narrator as evidenced by the very nature of the text, which is a legend, and the presence of first-person pronouns, which he uses to associate himself with his collective audience. Moreover, just like other legends such as *Bathala's Creation Story* and *The Igorots' Great Flood Story*, Joaquin's legend disseminates an ideology cherished by the narrator (or, in the present case, the preacher-narrator) and critiques the socio-cultural experience of its target people. Nonetheless, given the audiences of this legend, presumably Filipino Catholics, as will be seen below, the stance that the preacher-narrator presents in the text is not only ideological but, ultimately, theological. Therefore, this work should be read as a theological treatise packaged as a story, considering the narrator's voice, his probable motive, his selected audience, and the "truths" he wishes to share with them. The narrator is not simply a passive storyteller but also an advocate; he or she may intervene strategically to fulfill a purpose that readers often overlook (Gribble, 1998).

Through this paper, the critic attempts to explore the theology by answering the following questions: How does the narrator intervene in the story? What theological concept does the narrator convey to the imagined readers?

An Initial Encounter with the Story

The Legend of Dying Wanton tells the story of the friendship between Dona Ana De Vera, a mother of an official of the Spanish colonial government, and Currito Lopez, a Spanish soldier known for his scandalous and lewd behavior. Set against the backdrop of the early days of Spanish colonization, the story highlights the acts of popular piety whose roots can be traced back to the brand of Catholic faith that the Spaniards brought to the Philippines.

Unearthing the Preacher-Narrator and his Message

Aside from the pleasure it brings, fiction has a crucial role to play in any society, especially when it is didactic: We need fiction to experiment with possible selves, learn to take our places in the real world, and play our parts there (Miller, 1995, p. 68-69). Ultimately, literature contributes to “ethical” understanding.

It can be said that *The Legend of the Dying Wanton* fulfills its function to promote moral, cultural, and social understanding by becoming a model or representation of life—a space wherein ethical and moral values are experimented with and explored. Primarily, this story explores the Sartrean dilemma attached to the existentialist credo “existence precedes essence” where man carries the burden of choosing not only for himself but for the entire human race. Such a burden is too great for him, though, and he ends up in despair, anguish, and forlornness for doing so (Sartre, 1966).

Nonetheless, Joaquin, in his short story, rebuts such an assertion by acknowledging the divinity revealed through the religion introduced by the Spaniards. Although man experiences despair, anguish, and forlornness in an incoherent world, he ultimately finds redemption when he surrenders his ego after a tortuous ordeal and becomes humble and contrite. At such an instance, the divine comes to him, offering him salvation from all the worldly toil he had undergone.

Such points were made in previous readings of the story. Nonetheless, such analyses fall short of the nature of the tale itself—that ultimately, it is a legend, albeit one presented as a sermon or a theological treatise, told by a narrator who identifies himself with his target audience and espouses an ideology. As such, to gain a fuller view of *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*, the story is examined through formalistic lenses to unearth the narrator’s identity, the message he is trying to convey, and the stakes in this act of storytelling.

How does the narrator intervene in the story?

In answering the first research question, it must be understood that the story is labeled as a legend. Legends, by nature, are unverifiable stories that hold power because of their ability to create and maintain ideology (Degh, 2001; Tangherlini, 1990). Nonetheless, the power of a legend does not lie in whether it happened; just like myths, both the narrator and his audience regard it as true (Bascom, 1965, in Eugenio, 1985). In addition, legends are also set in a world not too far removed from reality (Bascom, 1965, in Eugenio, 1985). This is meant to be historical, legitimized by its assumed authenticity and audience acceptance. In the story, there is a typical recurrence of collective first-person pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “our,” which indicates the narrator’s association with the supposed audiences of the legend. Just who, exactly, are the “we” in the story? At its onset, we read:

There lived in Manila in the year 1613, a certain Dona Ana de Vera, one of the principal ladies of the country at that time and a woman of great piety (Joaquin, 1963, p. 48).

In the first sentence, the narrator calls the Philippines, where all the story’s events happened, “the country.” The prepositional phrase “that time” also implies that he does not belong to the period when the story took place and, therefore, must belong either to the current generation or a generation much later than what is portrayed in the story. Hence, it can be presumed that the narrator is a Filipino who belongs to and addresses a generation existing outside the tale. Perhaps another clue that reveals the identity of this narrator would be his allusions to Christianity in general and Catholicism:

This Currito was a lost soul; his every action being so public a scandal that even decent people knew who he was and shunned him like a leper.

... but his swart bearded face of Lucifer never struck her with terror.

Being in charge of the “Santo Rosario” – the fine Madonna whose shrine at the Dominicans the Dutch pirates were soon to make famous (Joaquin, 1963, p. 48).

The terms “lost soul,” “leper,” “Lucifer,” “Santo Rosario,” “Madonna,” and “Dominicans” were presented as if the audiences were familiar with these and no longer required any explanation. Hence, it can be surmised that the narrator, just like the audience, is also a Filipino Catholic or remarkably familiar with a Catholic orientation. It can be said that the occasion for the story might probably be a mass, worship service, or a religious gathering of sorts wherein the narrator is in a superior position to tell the tale, presumably to promote the values it advocates to the members of his group, and in turn, re-establish their identity. Moreover, because of his religious and pedagogical role in his community, the narrator may rightly be called a “preacher-narrator.”

Establishing the probable identity of the narrator and his audience would provide a glimpse of the legend's message. He skillfully uses the story, interspersed with personal commentaries, to preach salient theological truths to his community. At the exposition, he right away establishes the binary opposition between Dona Ana de Vera, a highly revered member of the Spanish elite and a pious Catholic who is zealously devoted to the Virgin Mother and her Child, and Currito Lopez, a Spanish soldier deployed in Manila who earned notoriety because of his scandalous behavior. In a very plain sense, Dona Ana was the typical “good,” and Currito was the epitome of “bad.” Despite this immense difference, they are both devoted to the Santo Rosario; Dona Ana religiously changes the icon's clothes, and Currito prays the rosary daily. As the story progresses, the narrator makes it apparent that such devotions are merely external acts of piety and that no genuine love or reverence lies in their hearts and minds. Such is the premise that the preacher-narrator wishes to establish upfront, and this is also the prevailing attitude of those to whom he is speaking.

What theological concept does the narrator convey to his or her imagined readers?

The second research question is answered through a close reading of scenes depicting Currito's dying moments. At this point, the preacher-narrator unfolds the main drama in the story: Currito's ruminations and “hallucinations” during his prolonged episode of dying. At the beginning of this episode, Currito is found to be thinking of all the hedonistic pleasures that the world has to offer—from the beautiful women he mingled with to the various enchanting places he visited—instead of his fate after death. When he finally realizes the direness of his situation, he begins to blame the world around him for the evils he has committed.

Ultimately, what this shows is the sinful nature of man—that even in the last few moments of his life, what he values more are worldly pleasures than the prospect of divine rapture. Just like Adam and Eve were confronted by God upon eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, Currito blamed the world around him, everyone except himself, for all the sins he committed and mishaps he experienced, thinking himself innocent despite all the evils he had wrought. Despite his bad deeds, he accepted his death with carelessness. It is at this point that the preacher narrator suddenly interrupts his story and presents a personal commentary addressed to his audience, stating that “even at the hour of our death when one might think, we would look at last abandon the incoherent series of poses that we call the ‘self,’ we are still more concerned over our judgment of the world than of Heaven, persisting, whether on a public scaffold or in a private bed, to play our life out like an actor impressing an audience (Joaquin, 1963, p. 52).”

After the short commentary, the preacher-narrator leads the readers again to Currito, who, by now, has already felt complacent about his status before God because of his daily devotion to the Virgin. Subsequently, he called on the name of the Virgin, expecting to receive redemption from her. To his surprise, he encountered a Virgin who was unlike anything he had ever known. In response to his call, an angry Virgin Mother “robed in sunlight and crowned in stars” (Joaquin, 1963, p. 53) appeared before him. Interestingly, in this apparition, the Virgin's appearance resembles that of Jesus Christ in the Book of Revelation. In this portion of the Bible, Jesus Christ is portrayed not as an amiable figure ready to embrace sinners into His fold but as a fierce judge who is about to pronounce the penalty of the unrepentant. Thus, it can be theorized that the Virgin Mother, an amiable mother that he only needed to offer daily prayers to give him redemption, would judge him for his faults.

It is also worthy of note that the Virgin Mother appeared to Currito instead of Jesus Christ Himself, as written in the Book of Revelation. One possible explanation for this shift is that since the audiences were Filipino Catholics, they would be able to relate more to the message if the Virgin—instead of Jesus—were the one to appear since, according to the Catechism for Filipino Catholics, the Filipinos held more affinity with the Virgin than the Son (CBCP, 1997).

At this juncture, the preacher-narrator presents the possible picture his audiences may face should they continue their complacent ways. He confronts their zealous and probably ostentatious forms of external worship devoid of genuine devotion by presenting an angry Virgin, which ultimately represents God, who is ready to punish the wicked. This is a pivotal point in the story, since it is at this instant that he confronts his audience's lack of true piety. He paints a picture of what is familiar to them and ultimately condemns such ways through his story. He confronts their "old childhood familiarity with Heaven," which breeds "presumption" (Joaquin, 1963, p. 53); thus, for the preacher-narrator, there exists a great discrepancy between popular piety, which only invests in mechanical rituals such as the daily prayer of the rosary, and genuine worship, which entails worshipping "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24, KJV). Briefly, he wants his audience to see God for who He is—holy, angry, and intolerant of sin—and reject the notion of a god who can be easily pleased with rituals.

However, despite the certain damnation Currito faces, hope is offered to him upon hearing the prayers of his mother, Dona Ana, the monks, and all the faithful in the world, who seem to compensate for his lack of holiness by crying out to God to forgive him of his sins and accept him into His kingdom. He is overwhelmed at how connected the entire Christendom is in prayer and at how they showed solidarity in caring for him. Because of this display of kindness, Currito experiences a change of heart; if, before, he blamed the entire world, which seemed to him in his youth apathetic to his needs and wants, he is now mesmerized at how the same world that he hated and blamed for his sins congregated in prayer for his soul's welfare. As a result, he finally admits his sinfulness before God and repents for his sins.

The theology that the preacher-narrator presented before the audience shuns the mechanical practices endorsed by institutional religion and exposes the true nature of God in all His holiness, strictness, and, quite paradoxically, generosity. Yes, God is holy, and He is intolerant of sin. However, when a person touched by the kindness brought by human solidarity admits his sinfulness before Him and begs for forgiveness, God is willing to waive his sins, to wipe his slate clean, so that he could be welcomed into His kingdom. Such a theology is very disparate from what the audiences, predominantly Filipino Catholics, are remarkably familiar with. Nonetheless, this disparity also makes it very emancipating since, from this point of view, salvation is obtained not through the observance of rituals.

Within the purview of the story itself, the study contributes a fresh layer of meaning to Joaquin's *The Legend of the Dying Wanton* by unearthing the preacher-narrator's identity. It has to be underscored that a legend, apart from being an entertaining tale and a cultural artifact, disseminates an ideology advocated by the one telling it.

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