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Social Texture in the Fiction of Aida Rivera

L. M. G R O W

Seldom is there so wide a range of critical assessment of the quality of an author's work as there is in the case of Aida Rivera's *Now and at the Hour and Other Short Stories*.¹ This collection won a major American literary prize, the 1954 Hopwood Award for fiction.² Alberto Benipayo was so impressed with this achievement that he reproduced two paragraphs of highly laudatory commentary by one of the Hopwood Award's judges, Nolan Miller:

Here is mature writing, a controlled style, a subtle underwriting which is in most instances highly successful. Discounting the exotic background, which is so attractive, this writer has excellent control of her material and knows how to put a story together. I think the best two are "Love in the Corn Husks" and "Now and at the Hour." The former is an almost perfect piece, the motion well-controlled and the characterization—excellent contrast between the elder woman and the young mother—sure and true. . . . For my own pleasure, I read several of the stories twice, and they meet every test: the writer is in excellent control of the material; she knows just how she can best achieve tension. . . . only after reading are we aware of the writer's skill, her subtlety. The "craft sense" of this writer is very high.³

NVM Gonzalez also remarks on her highly-honed craftsmanship: "It is difficult to write about these stories without having to describe how artistic they are."⁴ Surely the most enthusiastic commentator is Bernad, who considers "the five little tales . . . among the best in contemporary Philippine writing."⁵

1. Aida L. Rivera, *Now and at the Hour and Other Stories* (Manila: Benipayo, 1957). Hereafter referred to as NAH.

2. Alberto D. Benipayo, "A Note from the Publisher," in NAH, p. vii.

3. Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

4. N.V.M. Gonzalez, "Introduction," in NAH, p. ix.

5. Miguel Bernad, S.J., *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree: Essays on Filipino Literature in English* (Manila: Bookmark, 1961), p. 87.

Casper, however, has doubts:

... when Aida Rivera chose wartime as the dark-fired crucible for three of the five stories in *Now and at the Hour and Other Stories*, she was not only exploiting a natural symbol for human strain but also preparing a matrix (ideally a deeper receptacle than she managed) for the remaining stories

... All Aida Rivera has done [in "Young Liberator"] is to illustrate the drained and fleshless line drawings made for her text by Teresita Sarmiento. When structures are so compressed that one senses poetry as model—lyric, rather than narrative—the suspicion grows that the author, laboring too long to avoid overwriting, has failed to see or say enough. ...

The situation in "Now and at the Hour"—murder of the collaborator falsely accused—is substance for minute inquest; but it is relegated to the status of "thriller" only, an entertainment in grotesque irony, because the killer-*malgré* no sooner emerges from the community of characters than he vomits once and fades into anonymity, leaving the story to superstition and St. Elmo's fire and other theatrical inconsequences. The texture of "The Madonna Face" is equally promising—the casual camaraderie of events in a girl's life during occupation; one waits, refreshed, for these to be given significance—but judgement passed on the girl friend who gives comfort to the enemy is so stock and standard that the earlier details of to-day are not so much enlivened by the climax as absorbed and deadened by their routine. ...

Here [in "Love in the Corn Husks"] Aida Rivera is at her best: the lyric-like tale of inexperience fumbling toward a definition of what threatens the undefended shores of its consciousness; the young passion trying to take on weight and stature, trying to survive initiation without violation. But such tales can achieve proper form only if attached to characters appropriately sensitive and available.⁶

As Casper's analysis suggests, the principal reservation about Aida Rivera's stories is whether they possess sufficient thematic depth. One immediately striking feature of Rivera's handling of her material is how little of the horror of war and its aftermath—the unspeakable brutality and degradation it wrought—she even suggests. There is only a slight tension, a feeling of wariness, about Japanese occupiers and American liberators, similar, in this respect, to the tone of Estrella Alfon's "Compostela." Compare the realism of wartime nightmare in Gilda Cordero-Fernando's "People in the War." Gonzalez's remark about her subject matter could well be applied to a second-rate writer of pulp, especially sentimental, fiction: "She is our most cogent chroni-

6. Leonard Casper, *New Writing from the Philippines: A Critique and Anthology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), pp. 85-88.

cler of our peculiar variety of the middle class, and this class happens to have a story that must be told."⁷ Even Bernad concedes that "Miss Rivera is not a 'serious writer' as that term is used at present, but there is a seriousness behind the light handling of her stories."⁸ As he illustrates in "The Chiefest Mourner": "... Miss Rivera's hands are not clumsy, and in her deft handling, the story has a charming lightness, like something floating in air, bordering on the comic, with a hint of mischief now or of cynicism then, but never really becoming cynical or irreverent."⁹

Casper, similarly, sees a tiptoe effect in the story: "its complicated adolescent observer and commentator . . . [has an] innocence both amusing and instinctive; too young to be commandeered for acts of prejudice, she is capable of unself-conscious pity and unreasoned understanding at the apparent retreat of the *querida*."¹⁰ This concern about whether Rivera is a merely superficial talent perhaps explains why between 1948 and 1968 she did not win a prize in either of the Philippines' major literary competitions, the Palanca Memorial Awards or the *Philippines Free Press* annual short story contests.¹¹

Bernad has cut to the heart of the matter. Rivera's fiction does have ballast. It is simply that her central theme requires depiction of surface shallowness and inconsequence. She shows us how tenuous the human social fabric is, how quickly weak human nature yields to even slight temptation to abandonment and betrayal. We see, uneasily, how little patience, fortitude, and insight we have, with the result that social stability is always quivering on the edge of dissolution.

THE SOCIAL FABRIC IN RIVERA'S STORIES

In the plangent story "Love in the Cornhusks" seduction to abandonment as a theme realized in the human condition of Rivera's characters is made evident in a number of ways. Tinang has left her housekeeper position with the Señora in order to care for the husband and the baby she has now. When Tinang visits the Señora, who is well-off financially, the results of Tinang's withdrawal from the Señora's service are visible:

7. Gonzalez, "Introduction," p. ix.

8. Bernad, *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*, p. 87.

9. Ibid.

10. Casper, *New Writing*, p. 87.

11. Lydia R. Castillo, "Foreign Influences on the Filipino Short Story in English, 1948-1968" Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971, pp. 223-30.

About her, the Señora's white and lavender butterfly orchids fluttered delicately in the sunshine. She noticed though that the purple *waling-waling* that had once been her task to hide from the hot sun with banana leaves and to water with a mixture of charcoal and eggs and water was not in bloom.

"Is no one covering the *waling-waling* now? ["] Tinang asked. "It will die." (NAH, p. 4)

The Señora has also been disadvantaged by the loss of Amado, who has had to leave to take care of his ill mother:

Tinang asked, "How is Señor?"

"Ay, he is always losing his temper over the tractor drivers. It is not the way it was when Amado was here. You remember what a good driver he was. The tractors were always kept in working condition. But now . . . I wonder why he left us all of a sudden. He said he would be gone for only two days . . ." (NAH, p. 5)

But, though Amado's departure has justification, his failure to notify the Señora constitutes abandonment, and the same is true of his failure to inform Tinang for "Many weeks and months" (NAH, p. 8) of his situation.

The parting of Tinang and the Señora has left both worse off. Tinang in particular, as the latter's depressing domestic circumstances indicate: "she sighed thinking of the long walk home through the mud, the baby's legs straddled to her waist, and Inggo, her husband, waiting for her, his body stinking of *tuba* and sweat, squatting on the floor, clad only in his foul undergarments" (NAH, p. 5). Tinang quickly reaches this conclusion herself: "It is hard, Señora, very hard. Better that I were working here again." (NAH, p. 5). Tinang has literally descended into the muck, as her walk makes all too palpably demonstrable:

The rains had made a deep slough of the clay road and Tinang followed the prints left by the men and the carabaos that had gone before her to keep from sinking in mud up to her knees. She was deep in the road before she became conscious of her shoes. In horror, she saw that they were coated with thick, black clay. Gingerly, she pulled off one shoe after the other with the hand still clutching the letter. When she had tied the shoes together with the laces and had slung them on an arm, the baby, the bundle, and the letter were all smeared with mud. (NAH, p. 7)

Tinang reacts with "horror" because she detects the symbolic implications of her predicament; the physical discomfort and inconvenience

hardly call for such a strong reaction. But she perceives that the mud has enveloped her whole life, represented by the baby, the bundle, and the letter.

Finally, she locates a corner of a field where cornhusks were scattered under a *kamansi* tree. Here she reads a letter which has just come from Amado. The letter expresses his ongoing love for her. Immediately she is affected in a way that does no justice to her marriage vows: "A flush spread over her face and crept into her body. . . . She pressed herself against the *kamansi* tree. . . . And she cried . . ." (NAH, p. 9)

But it is possible to question whether a letter rendered in such "painfully copied language"¹² represents amatory coin of the realm:

It is not easy to be far from our lover. . . . I hope your kind and generous heart will never fade. . . . Still I remember our bygone days. . . . I was always in despair until I imagine [sic] your personal appearance coming forward bearing the sweetest smile that enabled me to view the distant horizon. . . . Please respond to my missive at once. . . . I think I am going beyond the limit of your leisure hour so I close with best wishes to you, my friends Gonding, Serafin, Bondio, etc. (NAH, pp. 8-9)

This is an excellent candidate for the most contrived, artificial, stilted love letter in English language literature, the sort of thing a mooning adolescent might produce. If so, it represents a condition of being in love with love, not genuine human bonding. The most charitable interpretation is that Amado is so crazed with love that he has lost his wits, as the nonsensical "I hope your kind and generous heart will never fade" (can a heart fade?) and, worse, "until I imagine your personal appearance coming forward bearing the sweetest smile that enabled me to view the distant horizon" might suggest. The bizarre image of a disembodied personal appearance carting about a smile that enables him to look away from her to 'the distant horizon' comes perilously near to lunacy.

But, if we accept the "crazed by love" hypothesis, how do we account for his leaving with no word to anyone, including his lover? Even if he had only intended to be gone two days, is it conceivable that such an impassioned soul would depart with no word to his *enamorata*, even though they worked on the same premises and saw each other daily? And why has he waited so long to write her? Again, some of the rest of the letter is so casual that it casts doubt on the genuineness of the sentiments it expresses. It opens with the breezy 'Hello, how is life getting along?' the sort of thing one would put into a letter to a former school chum. Next we get "Are you still in good condition?,"

12. Casper, *New Writing*, p. 87.

an inquiry appropriate to a commodity such as a used car. And the letter closes with "best wishes to you, my friends Gonding, Serafin, Bondio, etc.," which puts Tinang into the same fondness category with his acquaintances, some too fleeting to bother specifying with more than "etc." Does one conclude a letter to one's heart of hearts with "best wishes"? And the "Someday or somehow I'll be there to fulfill our promise," because of its vagueness, is unconvincing.

The concluding paragraph of the story illustrates shifting allegiances on such a rapid-fire basis that, were its implications not so sobering, it could almost achieve comedy:

A little green snake slithered languidly into the tall grass a few yards from the *kamansi* tree. Tinang started violently and remembered her child. It lay motionless on the mat of husk. With a shriek she grabbed it wildly and hugged it close. The baby awoke from its sleep and cried lustily. *Ave Maria Santissima*. Do not punish me, she prayed, searching the baby's skin for marks. Among the cornhusks, the letter fell unnoticed. (NAH, p. 10)

First Tinang forgets her baby, so engrossed is she in the letter; conversely, she remembers the baby and neglects the letter, which evidently she leaves behind. Appropriately, the letter, now a discard, falls among the husks, the discarded part of the corn. The snake is familiar from another betrayal story, Eve's betrayal of trust by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Her plea "Do not punish me" is ironic, because, since the expulsion from Eden, woman's punishment has been to suffer pain while bearing children, a "punishment" which is alluded to by the Señora earlier:

"Didn't I tell you what it would be like, huh? . . . that you would be a slave to your husband and that you would work with a baby eternally strapped to you. Are you not pregnant again?"

Tinang squirmed at the Señora's directness but admitted she was.

"Hala! You will have a dozen before long." (NAH, p. 5)

Bernad views the cornhusk scene in a far more positive light:

The story is well-titled: "Love Among the Cornhusks." It is an ambivalent title; for the love that the young woman feels for her lover—a frustrated love which the belated letter has momentarily revived—gives way to a more urgent, compelling, more realistic love. She is after all a mother now . . . The letter brings back memories and dreams of what might have been: but these dreams are now a danger, like the snake; the child must be protected, must be nurtured, and in the urgency of that duty, the belated letter falls forgotten.¹³

13. Bernad, *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*, p. 89.

I do not think Bernad, however, noticed either the Eden allusion or the symbolic significance of the cornhusks, especially since he has misconstrued the title, which is "Love in the Cornhusks," not "Love Among the Cornhusks." The cornhusks may be dismissed as merely a convenient means to dry footing, or perhaps a touch of local color, in the case of "Love Among the Cornhusks," but in the case of "Love in the Cornhusks," the correct reading, the cornhusks are integral to the love and thus symbolic of its condition, since the love is in, i.e., within, the cornhusks.

In "The Madonna Face" the De Juans are at least suspected of collaboration with the Japanese Occupation forces and thus of betrayal of their countrymen. Captain Ishimaru of the Air Corps "had much more cordial relations with the De Juans." (NAH, p. 17) One day Ishimura and another Japanese military man visit the De Juans in order to dance with the De Juan daughters, Marilou and Nenita. Although Señor de Juan only reluctantly calls his daughters out to dance with the Japanese, he does accede to Ishimaru's request: "Poor Nenita struggled with him, disgust and martyrdom alternately reflected on her face. Their father stood by with a helpless and bewildered look." (NAH, p. 18)

That the De Juans were not coerced into being as friendly as they were to the Japanese is suggested by the way the narrator's mother conducts herself:

But that was not the end of the cold war between my mother and Ishimaru. She tried to avoid him and would duck into a friend's house if she saw him coming toward her. But one day, she could find no escape as they came toward each other down the street. Mamong did not look at him but Captain Ishimaru stopped her and asked, "Why, don't you know me? We have met already. Why don't you bow?" Mamong managed an answer: "Yes, I know you but I do not bow to people whom I do not see." He had no reply to that. (NAH, pp. 16-17)

Nenita tells the story's narrator that Señor de Juan "was promised the managership of the La Granja Central and they expected to go out of town soon. Angeling and I had been warned by our folks not to say anything and so we just said 'uh-huh' to everything Nenita said." (NAH, pp. 18-19) One wonders whether the managership is not a payoff for cooperation with the Japanese. Obviously, the narrator's parents question the De Juans' loyalty, and they are by no means alone:

There were many other dance sessions after that but the De Juans were careful to close their windows. Ishimaru frequently came alone. . . . I think it was Manding who started the gossip that Marilou was Ishimaru's *querida*.

Almost everyone found it easy to believe that. The young folks stopped going to see Nenita and Marilou and hardly anyone spoke to their father. (NAH, p. 19)

Although the narrator says, "Much as I wanted to, I could not believe that the proud and beautiful Marilou could give herself to Ishimaru," it does appear that Marilou has done so. The story ends with an aerial dogfight in which an American aircraft is shot down by a Japanese pursuit plane. The American aviator bails out but is machine-gunned by the Japanese aircraft pilot. Observing this, "Across the street Ishimaru and Marilou stood together, clapping." (NAH, p. 20) The respective alignment of loyalties is transparent in this tableau, with Ishimaru and Marilou "working their side of the street," as the colloquialism goes, and the Filipinos "working their side of the street."

Yet after the expulsion of the Japanese the narrator recalls "the Marilou who danced with American officers after Liberation" (NAH, p. 12), and the story opens with this same Marilou, in spite of her conduct during the war, apparently fully reintegrated into the Philippine community, even functioning as a trend setter: "I was looking idly at a caption of a picture in the society page of a newspaper. It read 'Fashion show at the Manila Hotel—The models are, from left to right, Sonia Diez, Amparo Neri, muse of the Club Kalipay, and Marilou de Juan . . .'" (NAH, p. 11) Marilou de Juan may physically resemble a madonna, but her fickle, vacillating allegiances do not qualify her for this appellation in either of its usual senses, "a title of respect" or "the Virgin Mary."

"Young Liberator" is another story with a tantalizing title. "Young" can be taken to refer to the man who proposes to do the liberating or to the lady whom he proposes to liberate ("Liberator of the young" rather than "a young person who liberates.") This double sense of "liberator" is enhanced by the title character's MOS, medic, thus a person who is supposed to save people. But his name, Emerson Davis, is also suggestive. Ralph Waldo Emerson is remembered, of course, for advocating liberation from dogma and doctrine, for suggesting that each of us must find our own angle of vision, formulate our own system or be enslaved by another's and realize that even our own angle of vision will not remain immutable. ("A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds . . .") But to many, Emerson also stands for no lasting affiliations. He resigned his pulpit and refused to denominate himself a Transcendentalist, and his angles of vision may be construed as convenient avoidance of principle and commitment. It would indeed be ironic if "Davis" conjured up a picture of Jefferson Davis, since in this event "Emerson Davis" would constitute an

oxymoron in terms of what degree of adherence to a system one should properly subscribe to. "Emerson" represents total freedom; "Davis" represents slavery, the total absence of freedom.

In the story, Em (as Davis is familiarly known) first sets out to liberate proper young ladies from their inhibitions by spiking their cokes (NAH, p. 22). As Ling, the girl whom Em takes to, remarks, this form of liberation is hardly admirable: "Oh you bad man! It was in the coke you served us. You want to corrupt us." (NAH, p. 25) That for Em "liberation" means "corruption" we can see shortly: "I'd like to take down that pompadour, he thought" (NAH, p. 25). Ironically, to do so would be to dissociate her from liberation, since "her hair was waved high in a pompadour which seemed to be the fashion with these liberation belles" (NAH, p. 24).

At the end of the story he acts on this impulse: "Look— I've been wanting to do this a long time? Do you mind?" Before she could protest, he ran his fingers through her thick black hair, tousling her stiff pompadour." (NAH, p. 33) Mrs. Mendez sees this wanton act, thus ending Em's ideas about "liberating" Ling:

"Why, aren't you going to stay for coffee, Mr. Davis?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Mendez, but I think it is better that I go."

He was in his jeep in no time, and with a shriek of the gears he went off. (NAH, p. 34)

Em goes on to "liberate" her from "an effeminate-looking boy [who] had danced with her and tried to kiss her as they came to a dark corner" (NAH, pp. 25-26): "You're not going home with that louse!" Em said." (NAH, p. 26) Gallantly, Em borrows a jeep and drives Ling into the country, hoping to do with Ling just what the "louse" had attempted.

What really rescues Ling is her preoccupation with the ruins of the sugar mill nearby. The reader inclined to see this language as symbolic would consider it fortunate for Ling that the facility had been bombed, for "In the midst, a giant smoke stack stood aloof, jutting from the very ground" (NAH, p. 26) and, as Ling notes, "I used to come here before the war. Our sugar was milled here . . ." (NAH, p. 27) The now inoperative male symbol means that no sugar of Ling's will be milled on this night, whatever Em's desires might be.

This is not to suggest that Em has any more insidious desires than young men normally possess. In fact, Em does not approve of the "liberators" who merely treat local females as conveniences of the moment and are oblivious to the needs of their families:

Em looked with pity and distaste at some of the characters that trooped in: the girls slicked up for the date in too tight dresses, their lips over-bright with the priceless lipstick given by the GI's; the aunts and cousins shabbily dressed in relief clothes; the assortment of bedraggled children trooping after with tropical sores on their legs. . . . always there was that heavy nose-clogging smell of chlorinated relief clothes. (*NAH*, p. 27)

But Em's capability for steadfastness is limited; he, like so many other characters in the stories of *NAH*, simply cannot sustain a tie of attachment, as his perfectly standard handling of Red's nosy question indicates:

"Why, if you aren't the sly one—where ya hidin' that sweet convent girl. . . . Say, tell me, how d'ya make out with her?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Em said, giving Red a whack in the seat of his pants. He was very much tickled. (*NAH*, p. 28)

One day Em again borrows a jeep and calls on Ling. He is met by Ling's mother, who is civil to Em but obviously wary of him and, as it turns out, for good reason. Ling's family has achieved continuity over the generations, as the architecture of the family home suggests: "It was a structure that had stood since Spanish times with its limestone foundation almost as thick as an armspread. . . . He felt that the air dated back to Spanish times. . . . He . . . was confronted by . . . pictures of two very dead-looking ancestors on the wall." (*NAH*, p. 28) Significantly, when the Japanese had commandeered the house, during the Occupation, they had burned every piece of furniture but had left the two portraits (*NAH*, p. 29). While they could destroy the family's possessions, they could not sever family tradition. Em's efforts to disrupt the orderly progression of the family through time are similarly futile. That he represents such disruption, however unintentionally, is clear from his remark to Ling "You don't belong here". (*NAH*, p. 31)

This is why the two portraits irk him. Em sarcastically responds to Ling's quiet explanation of why she cannot go out alone with him: "'Well, why don't you take your father and mother and everybody else. Bring these people too,' he said, indicating the picture frames." (*NAH*, pp. 30-31) Ling's parry is in the plural, showing her solidarity with her countrymen: "'Oh, Em, you'll never understand us. . . . you don't know us well enough. How many Filipino friends do you have?'" (*NAH*, p. 31) When Em protests that Ling is different, "so far above the rest of your countrymen" and reminds Ling of "the looters and

the men who sell their sisters and daughters and . . . the families who sponge on the boys" (NAH, p. 31), he only calls attention to the rarity of human perseverance. Em is right about Ling, however: ". . . she turned upon him a gaze shy but unwavering. 'They are beautiful steadfast eyes,' he said" (NAH, p. 32).

When Em, embarrassed at his impulsive act of tousling Ling's hair, tries to excuse himself, he reveals the casual, shallow nature of his association with Ling:

"I guess it was done without thinking . . . in a carefree mood, you know—"

"Then don't think any more about it," Mrs. Mendez cut in. "I understand what you mean—these things are treated lightly in your country, are they not?—even kissing and petting . . ." (NAH, p. 34).

But, thoughtless or considered, intentional or accidental, Em's action menaces continuity as much as the Japanese invaders' acts did, as Mrs. Mendez stingingly informs him:

Of course we are still very old-fashioned in our customs here, but it's all a matter of attitude. The Japanese, for instance, regarded slapping as a mere disciplinary exercise and could never understand why the citizens resented it so. We learned how to put up with our conquerors . . . You must give us time to get used to the ways of our liberators. (NAH, p. 34)

"The Chiefest Mourner" is a story of divided loyalties with a Trollopian flavor to it. This bittersweet tale enriches the texture of the betrayal/abandonment theme by providing paradigmatic examples of both abandonment and adhesion. The narrator reacts to news of his uncle's death with "I felt that some part of me had died too" (NAH, p. 35) but writes a biographical article about him which has to be censored by the college advisor (NAH, p. 36). Whether this article is motivated by respect or disdain for the uncle's memory is not quite clear. ". . . I still maintain that in his vices, as in his poetry, he followed closely the pattern of the great poets he admired" (NAH, p. 37). But is devotion to vice loyalty or disloyalty? Does one have to choose between fidelity to the demands of poetry to one's family obligations? The uncle seems to answer the latter question in the affirmative when "he walked out of the door and never came back." (NAH, p. 37)

The incident involving the uncle's special lemonade is likewise laced with ambiguity:

I was very little at that time, but I remember that shortly after he went away, my aunt put me in a car and sent me to his hotel with a letter from her. Uncle ushered me into his room very formally and while I looked all

around the place, he prepared a special kind of lemonade for the two of us. I was sorry that he poured it out into wee glasses because it was unlike any lemonade I had ever tasted. While I sipped solemnly at my glass, he inquired after my aunt. To my surprise, I found myself answering with alacrity. I was happy to report all the details of my aunt's health, including the number of crabs she ate for lunch and the amazing fact that she was getting fatter and fatter without benefit of Scott's Emulsion or Ovaltine at all. Uncle smiled his beautiful somber smile and drew some poems from his desk. He scribbled a dedication on them and instructed me to give them to my aunt. I made much show of putting the empty glass down but Uncle was dense to the hint. At the door, however, he told me that I could have some lemonade everytime I came to visit him. Aunt Sophia was so pleased with the poems that she kissed me. And then of a sudden she looked at me queerly and made a most peculiar request of me. She asked me to say ha-ha, and when I said ha-ha, she took me to the sink and began to wash the inside of my mouth with soap and water, the while calling upon at least a dozen of the saints to witness the act. I never got another taste of Uncle's lemonade. (NAH, pp. 37-38)

The uncle's spiked drink lowers the narrator's inhibitions, so that she blurts out such details as Aunt Sophia's fatness, details that of course the narrator, as a loyal niece, was not supposed to disclose. In keeping with his vocation as poet, but also in keeping with his devotion to alcohol, the uncle sends some poems, complete with a dedication, to Aunt Sophia. This is really a statement that he intends to persevere in his current lifestyle and his manufacture of the "lemonade" for the narrator is a form of social bonding with him, though it is, at the same time, a form of weaning the narrator away from Aunt Sophia. When Aunt Sophia washes out the narrator's mouth, she is reversing the process, effecting separation from the uncle and his lifestyle and a reestablishment of Aunt Sophia's influence. The dedication of poems to Aunt Sophia is of course to treat her as the lemonade has treated the narrator. Later, when the uncle comes to the narrator's college to read some of his poetry, the narrator's loyalties are strained, for the "other woman" whom the uncle has been living with accompanies him to the reading. The narrator fakes illness, which does not really indicate full support of either Aunt Sophia or the uncle.

At the uncle's funeral, the narrator notices in the casket flowers ambiguously inscribed "From the Loyal One" (NAH, p. 40). The ambiguity stems from the fact that both Aunt Sophia and the other woman are present for the funeral. This creates an uneasy situation for the uncle's friends, for as they arrive for the service they must choose to sit on Aunt Sophia's side of the chapel or on the other

woman's side, leaving them in doubt about which decision is fitting expression of loyalty to their deceased friend. And the issue of who has been loyal and who disloyal arises when the uncle's sisters try to induce the other woman to leave. She says:

During the war when the poet was hard up do you suppose I deserted him? Whose jewels do you think we sold when he did not make money. . . . When he was ill, who was it who stayed at his side . . . Who took care of him during all those months . . . And who peddled his books and poems to the publishers so that he could pay for the hospital and doctor's bills? Did any of you come to him then? (NAH, pp. 43-44).

The funeral is a crucible for the loyalties of the respective characters. Perhaps that is why the story's title is "The Chiefest Mourner," not "The Chiefest Mourner." The funeral is indeed the chief test of loyalty and the chief mourner is the one who best passes it. Ironically, however, the test is beset by paradox: loyalty to Uncle expressed by loyalty to Aunt Sophia is betrayal of the other woman and, conversely, loyalty to Uncle expressed by loyalty to the other woman is betrayal of Aunt Sophia.

The pattern of human betrayal and abandonment is retrained in "Now and at the Hour." The first instance is relatively mild. Augusto Baylon, who has tried to ingratiate himself with the Japanese Occupation government, is nonetheless evicted from his home, surely an act of betrayal of sorts on their part:

Engineer Augusto Baylon would never have thought that he too would be forced out of his house. He was assistant City Engineer and, having performed every ceremonial nonsense faithfully under the Japanese government, he thought he was immune. During the early days of the Occupation, he was one of those who stood in a drizzle while the High Command in Negros lectured to the officials on cooperation. When he was told to salute, he strained his paunchy waistline bowing; he attended the Niponggo classes faithfully and raised his hand like a little boy when he knew the answers. (NAH, p. 48)

The next occurrence is more serious, involving the dormitory-like conditions resulting from people losing their homes:

The other day one of our good matrons told me her family had to move out because, *sabes tu*, a man whom you would never suspect, a very well-known citizen who had been living in that same house, tried to scale the partition that marked off their daughter's bedroom; but luckily this Romeo's wife woke up and raised a great fuss (NAH, p. 50).

This man simultaneously betrays his wedding vows and the rules of hospitality.

It is the Asuncions, however, who are the most tragically betrayed, ironically because it is generally assumed that the Asuncions are themselves betrayers. The mistrust of the Asuncions begins with vague rumors and gossip:

Now, the sugar-mills were not functioning and it was rumored that Mr. Asuncion sold iron and rails from the mill to the enemy. . . . "I saw Mely flirting with a Japanese official". . . .

"Don't you think we should warn Padre Ignacio about the Asuncions? I thought I was the only one who noticed how Mr. and Mrs. Asuncion have been so friendly to the Japanese. For all we know they may have coached Mely to fool around with those Japs. Do you know they've suddenly acquired several bags of rice when before they could hardly get anything to eat?" (NAH, p. 52)

When Padre Ignacio is taken to the Kempetei, a common reaction is "There is a Judas among us . . ." (NAH, p. 56) Naturally suspicion immediately falls on the Asuncions, especially since Father Ignacio has recently let the Asuncions know that he monitors Voice of Freedom broadcasts:

"It seems too that Padre Ignacio has let Mr. Asuncion in on the secret, and I remember now that Mrs. Asuncion was present when Padre Ignacio told us about Wake . . . and she so inquisitive about the radio. . . . I had always suspected the Asuncions from the first . . . There's no doubt about it—they've been planted here among us by the Japs." (NAH, p. 56).

The suspicions seem confirmed when Mr. Golez reports seeing Mr. Asuncion at the Kempetei. As it turns out, Mr. Asuncion's visit to the Kempetei was for the purpose of pleading with the Japanese on behalf of Father Ignacio. The latter is grateful to Mr. Asuncion, for the Japanese "said that if it were not for him . . ." (NAH, p. 62). But Mr. Asuncion has been killed by the Baylons, in the mistaken belief that the Asuncions were responsible for the incarceration of Father Ignacio. Ironically, years later Padre Ignacio looks back to the Occupation almost nostalgically: "And there was that beautiful bond of comradeship among the Baylons and the Roldans and even the Asuncions." (NAH, p. 64) The crowning irony is, of course, that the Baylons' deferential attitude toward the Japanese might well have positioned the Baylons for the same fate that they brought on Mr. Asuncion.

CONCLUSION

The pessimistic conclusion which we must draw from all five of the stories in *NAH*, then, is that humans are impatient, treacherous, and too easily deflected from their goals and principles. This thematic consistency is a major contributor to the impression of unity which the stories convey: "The five stories that make up the collection, taken separately and, then, on rereading taken together, produce a wholeness of effect which approximates that of a full-length novel."¹⁴ The two stalwart characters, Ling and Father Ignacio, are foils, unrepresentative of the general human gravitation toward Quislingism. In turn, this human foible creates unpredictability and instability, so that we feel our own security threatened and our own lives tenuous and vulnerable, now and at the hour.

14. Gonzalez, "Introduction," p. ix.