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## **A Critical Approach to Bulosan's The Philippine Is in the Heart**

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**A Critical Approach to Bulosan's  
*The Philippines Is in the Heart*  
ERNESTO M. HIZON**

Carlos Bulosan's importance in Philippine literature in English has always been a subject of dispute. His stories have been viewed as an undistinguished collection of folk tales and legends by some critics, while others have considered his fiction a prime example of Marxist or proletarian literature. In 1978, a collection of his prose works, *The Philippines Is in the Heart*, appeared,<sup>1</sup> five years after the first Philippine edition of Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* a fictionalized autobiography describing his boyhood in the Philippines, his voyage to America, and his life in the rural U.S. West.<sup>2</sup> These two publications of Bulosan's fiction followed the reissuing of *America Is in the Heart* in the United States in 1973 by the University of Washington Press.

CRITICS' APPROACH

Bulosan's fiction is rather difficult to evaluate because one's opinion of the work largely depends on what particular literary standard is applied. Reading Bulosan is much different from reading, for example, Manuel Arguilla, whose better stories such as "Midsummer," and "Morning in Nagrebcan," can be judged from both a Western and a Philippine, as well as a political or literary points of view. The same holds true for other expatriate authors like Bienvenido Santos and N.V.M. Gonzalez. Bulosan, however, is much more difficult to evaluate. Fr. Bernad, for example, writes that "Whatever the explanation, a reader going through Bulosan's work has a very uncomfortable feeling: he is never sure when a

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Bulosan, *The Philippines Is in the Heart* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Manila: A.S. Florentino, 1973). The American edition is New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946.

statement by Bulosan is original and when it is an echo of someone else's thought."<sup>3</sup>

Even works of fiction must conform to certain demands of truth, and this is precisely the difficulty with *The Laughter of My Father*. Granted that there never was a father such as this in Pangasinan, we have the right to demand that the situations should at least be plausible — the kind that *could* happen there. Yet in some of the stories, we have situations that simply do not happen — in Pangasinan or elsewhere in the Philippines.<sup>4</sup>

The fact is that the stories in *The Laughter of My Father* were written under the influence of William Saroyan. In Saroyan the laughter is a work of genius. In Bulosan the laughter is somewhat forced. The stories, or some of them, according to Fr. Bernad, must be pronounced inauthentic.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Epifanio San Juan Jr. believes that Bulosan

serves as the militant witness to the indefatigable strivings of the Filipino peasants and workers to liberate themselves from feudal barbarism, from oppression by compradors and bureaucrat-capitalists — the allies of U.S. imperialism. Bulosan was not only a defiant and courageous witness but also a leading protagonist in these historical confrontations between the two main classes in society: the proletarian majority of city-countryside versus the exploiting class of the privileged minority.<sup>6</sup>

San Juan however criticizes Bulosan for believing that "peasants are always helpless victims of the city exploiters"; his work, *America Is in the Heart*, is dismissed as "that masterpiece of Gothic self-pity," and as a "picaresque testament to our romance with a Platonized America."<sup>7</sup>

San Juan's Marxist view however was attacked by another critic, Fr. Joseph Galdon, S.J., who wrote in his review of San Juan's "Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle":

<sup>3</sup> Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., "Carlos Bulosan: The Issue of Honesty," *The Manila Review* 5 (1975): 103.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Epifanio San Juan, Jr., "An Introduction to Carlos Bulosan," *The Diliman Review* 20 (January 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Epifanio San Juan, Jr., "Philippine Literature in English in Crisis: An Interrogation," *The Saint Louis Quarterly* 6 (June 1968): 158. San Juan, in his later writings, is more favorable towards *America Is in the Heart*.

San Juan has discovered intriguing nuggets in the Bulosan memorabilia, and has certainly made clear his own commitments, but his literary criticism is neither perceptive nor comprehensive. San Juan has written about himself and his own literary positions, but he has not written very critically about Bulosan.<sup>8</sup>

Although San Juan stretches the case beyond critical credibility, Bulosan most certainly considered himself a Marxist and had read enough to know what that meant.

The three critics quoted here clearly illustrate our point: the critic's point of view greatly influences his evaluation of Bulosan's work. Bernad's criticism springs from a comparison between Saroyan and Bulosan, reflecting a Western literary norm; San Juan uses Marxist dialectics to support his criticism; while Galdon approaches Bulosan from a classical-formalist theory of literature.

To apply the standard literary norms to Bulosan would inevitably result in the claim that his stories are trite, pedestrian, simplistic and unsophisticated in technique. The "standard literary norms" spoken of here are those evaluative standards utilized in approaching most of Philippine literature in English. They are mainly thematic, and based on symbolism and imagery. This criticism would treat Bulosan's prose works as examples of local color, humor, or innocuous folk tales, "cute," but hardly enduring. In all these approaches Bulosan's relevance to Philippine literature would be confined to standard, fixed "attitudes" encouraged by the particular group of critics viewing his work.

We must remember that Bulosan's reputation in the Philippines came only after the author had achieved a reputation in America as a humorist.<sup>9</sup> The appeal of Bulosan's humor to the Americans was the appeal of the novel and the strange and the exotic. His tales are not original, merely a re-telling in most cases of local and foreign tales known to many lands, but he injected them with a "local habitation and a name."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., "The Bulosan Odyssey," *Philippine Studies* 21 (1973): 215.

<sup>9</sup> Arturo G. Roseburg, ed., *Pathways To Philippine Literature in English*, rev. and enl. ed. (Quezon City: Alemar-Phoenix, 1966), p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

## AN ALTERNATIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

To judge Bulosan fairly various factors have to be carefully considered. First we must avoid the temptation to praise his work because the tales are good samples of "local color." The "local color" tag was inspired by the American public who "appreciated his humor better than his own countrymen."<sup>11</sup> Leonard Casper, an American critic, comments:

The ultimate irony is that successful misreading of Bulosan . . . has encouraged imitations of the most pretentious sort. Reviewers incapable of distinguishing between enduring literature and transparent local color share in the irresponsibility which continues to promote, in foreign eyes, the oversimplified image of the Filipino as Peter Pan or as the lovable village idiot, everyman's eccentric uncle.<sup>12</sup>

Bulosan called his own work "satire": "Let me remind you that *Laughter* is not humor; it is satire; it is an indictment against an economic system that stifled the growth of the primitive, making him decadent overnight, without passing through the various stages of growth and decay."<sup>13</sup> But to rate a story good satire, it is not enough that something be satirized, or attacked. Pure denunciation without humor falls flat and is ineffective. The reader should be well appraised of the double focus of morality and of fantasy.<sup>14</sup> The work should be written in such a way that the reader can distinguish the fantasy and the reality, for if he cannot, the point of satire is lost. If the fantasy element wholly erases any semblance of realism, the satire is unsuccessful. Therefore, in approaching Bulosan, the critic must keep in mind the elements of local color and of humor-satire.

The third and most important factor in evaluating Bulosan is the tradition in which he writes. As T.S. Eliot wrote in his pioneering essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard Casper, *The Wounded Diamond* (Manila: Bookmark, 1964), p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 52. Casper is citing D. Feria.

<sup>14</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 224.

contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the quality of Bulosan's writing should be evaluated in the light of the tradition of Philippine literature. It cannot be good prose simply because it happened to be popular during the second World War. Nor can it claim to be commendable satire solely because it parodies the feudal economic structure of the Philippines before the war years. Bulosan's stories are essentially not sociological documents or anthropological treatises dispensing the local folk tales of a country, but pieces of literature to be dissected and analyzed as literature. Sociological insights gleaned from such a study are incidental and not primary to the objective of criticism in the literary sense. Bulosan must be judged in the general context of the Philippine tradition in literature. It is probably also true that Bulosan must be ultimately judged in the context of his total work.

It may be argued that to use a classical definition of satire in the evaluation of Bulosan leads the critic once more to apply Western standards of criticism to a Filipino writer, and to ignore the Philippine tradition in literature. But to judge Philippine literature, especially that written in English, certain Western norms have to be taken into consideration without ignoring the necessity of evaluating the work in terms of the Filipino sensibility. When Bulosan left the Philippines in 1931, he hardly knew how to speak English. His knowledge of the language and his familiarity with American short story writers came entirely through self-study while in the United States. It cannot be denied that much of his writings was influenced by short story writers such as William Saroyan, John Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell. Inevitably, the technique of these writers found its way into Bulosan's writing. The task of the critic is not to deny this Western influence but to observe how this technique and style expresses the Filipino sensibility.

On the other hand, to contend that the stories are simply folk tales, akin to the early "dagli" or narrative sketches of the Philippine vernacular writers in the early part of our history would obscure the Western literary influence in the Philippine tradition. This attitude would in effect regard the Bulosan stories as purely

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Javanovich), p. 38.

parochial and untouched by Western influence. The ultimate test is whether the tale aptly expresses the Philippine sensibility in the form the writer uses. In other words, how does the Western form or influence operate within the tradition of Philippine literature?

With these ideas in mind – the critical elements of local color, satire and the Philippine literary tradition – we may now proceed to a discussion of the Bulosan stories.

#### THE PHILIPPINES IS IN THE HEART

Bulosan is at his best when he confines himself to one single theme, building up to a climax in a dramatic situation at the conclusion of his story. What results is a well-integrated story, where simplicity becomes a virtue. One such story is the first story of *The Philippines Is in the Heart*, "The Rooster's Egg." During Easter week each young boy in the village brings with him a basket of eggs to enter into an egg-knocking competition. Each contestant pairs off with another to test the resiliency and strength of each other's eggs by striking the other's egg with his. In the framework of this plot, Bulosan skillfully weaves a second plot, the legend of the rooster's egg. Cardo's father tells his son that when he was a young boy he found a rooster's egg that made him win over two hundred eggs. Excited, Cardo searches for the rooster's egg. Cardo's father finally finds it and gives it to his son. It is this egg that enables Cardo to win the contest.

"The Rooster's Egg" succeeds because Bulosan has focused his folk tale on a single event, the egg-knocking competition, and woven into it the legend of the rooster's egg. The prose is tight, spare and leads to the inevitable conclusion – Cardo's winning the contest. A few incidental details are introduced by Bulosan in the story – the horses in the corral talking to each other, and his adolescent crush on Susana Luz, the mayor's daughter, who was Easter Queen for the celebration. But these sidelights contribute to the main situation, and recreate the setting and context for the main plot of the tale. Obviously, Bulosan is retelling some kind of folk tale. But he also appears to be establishing a link between the temporal and spiritual, the material world and nature. As Cardo's father puts it: "His egg is a message from the night, from many things unknown to men; a promise that everything is not complete in itself, that there is always something missing in

the night . . .”<sup>16</sup> The story also manifests the limitless energy and faith of the human heart: “All things begin from this small white egg and go back to it . . . the wisdom that is in our heart, and the divine flame in our souls.”<sup>17</sup>

### THE GHOST STORIES

Bulosan reiterates the theme of inner strength in the three stories in his collection which deal with supernatural figures — “The Amorous Ghost Came To Town,” “The Return of the Amorous Ghost,” and “The Lonesome Mermaid.” In these seemingly trivial tales, the amorous ghost once more confirms the bond between the material and non-material world. In the first two stories the ghost is in love with Cousin Juana, Uncle Roman’s daughter. At first the towns-people panic, but later, it is discovered that the ghost is a gentleman and can be placated. In the second tale, the ghost returns to the village after a long time and “kidnaps” the baby of Juana who has married Puroc. It turns out that the ghost merely wanted to “see what kind of a boy I would have had, had I married Juana the beautiful.”<sup>18</sup> In the third story, a lonesome mermaid emerges from the river to claim victims, all of them young men. Only those who are pure of heart can see her. One day she came for a stranger whom Cardo had just met. The stranger disappears and is never heard from again. Many years later the stranger mysteriously reappears and encounters Cardo, revealing “I’ve sacrificed my life for this town, but that is nothing. If I didn’t go with the queen, she would have taken many of the young men in this town.”<sup>19</sup>

In this last story as in the other two, a deal is struck between the creature of the other world, the mermaid, and the stranger with the guitar, who is of this world. Bulosan repeatedly exhibits the affinity between our own material world and the non-material one. The two are not isolated from each other but are closely related. To achieve this, Bulosan employs commonplace symbols: the rooster’s egg in the first story, the gentleman ghost in the

<sup>16</sup> Carlos Bulosan, *The Philippines Is in the Heart*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.



ghost stories, and the mermaid in the last. The stories may be criticized for being simplistic, yet an internal logic permeates each story.

In another Bulosan tale, "The Summer of Beautiful Music," the central figure is Silent Popo, the deaf-dumb lunatic of the town. Popo returns to the barrio out of nowhere after a five year absence, discovering a friend in a strange trumpet player practicing sad songs on his instrument. The two are avoided by the town, but the stranger's music touches the hearts of the village people. In this story, the outsider-stranger is again the instigator of events. Popo is the neighborhood "loko-loko," and the trumpet-player is the passing mystery-man. Bulosan here uses recurring images in Philippine literature — the eternal innocent, the naive drunk, the town lunatic — to again underscore the temporality of our world. It is the music and innocence of these so-called "rejects" of society that moves the emotions of the village people. Their deaths only serve to foreshadow the inevitable end of all material life.

#### THE MATERIAL VS. COMMUNITY SPIRIT

The symbols of these four stories hint at the author's repudiation of the material, the temporal. He preaches instead a community spirit and a human understanding. Bulosan's "reality" is the fantasy recreated into a fictional world. As Wellek and Warren put it,

The reality of a work of fiction — i.e. its illusion or reality, its effect on the reader as a convincing reading of life — is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance or detail or commonplace routine.<sup>20</sup>

The best of the ghost stories, where Bulosan, in addition to the usual folk tale treatment, adds a strong satirical element with a social message, is the story "The Angel in Santo Domingo." The longest story in the book, the tale begins with Señor Gonzalo demanding that Vitte, a peasant, pay his debt. Since Vitte has not yet recovered from malaria, he is unable to work in Capitan Tiago's mines to earn money to pay off the debt. Señor Gonzalo then suggests that Vitte's daughter work in Capitan Tiago's house. Vitte refuses because his daughter is betrothed. Pepe Torres, his daugh-

<sup>20</sup> Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 213.

ter's future father-in-law agrees to postpone the wedding and pay Señor Gonzalo with his next paycheck.

Meanwhile, Panchito, Vitte's son is awakened from his nap by an angel named Angela sent from heaven to help the family raise money to pay off the debt owed to Señor Gonzalo. As in the story "The Lonesome Mermaid," the ethereal creature only communicates with those who are "pure of heart," a restatement of the theme in the other stories. How does the angel intend to raise the money for Señor Gonzalo? Angela answers Panchito, "Tell him to spread the news that there is a real angel from heaven in this house. When the people start coming he should stay at the door and charge them entrance fees. But you must stay here because you are the only one who can talk to me."<sup>21</sup>

When the word spreads, everyone wants to get into the act. Don Teodoro, the cock aficionado, the town mayor offering his protection for a fee, Capitan Tiago, the owner of the village mines, and Abel, the town fool. After a few hours it seems the entire town is in Vitte's house, each of them paying a fee to see the angel. Bigger Muñoz, the town gambler then offers to buy the angel from Vitte to improve his luck at the gambling table. Vitte gives in for two thousand pesos. But when the angel learns of the shady deal, she makes a quick exit, telling Panchito, "I have to go now . . . you have made enough money to pay Capitan Tiago."<sup>22</sup>

#### APPLYING LITERARY NORMS

"The Angel in Santo Domingo" is one story that could be interpreted in various ways, depending on the literary norm applied. Evidently the somewhat improbable storyline is repeated in the barrios even today. Often we hear of stories of apparitions of blessed virgins appearing in rivers, people offering contributions in order to see the holy apparition. The story might be considered, therefore, as a literary record of a quaint Filipino cultural belief. Thus, the story may be evaluated as "good" simply because of this "recording" of the Filipino custom. In contrast to this attitude, another critic might use the story to confirm the notion of the ignorant native untouched by civility and manners. In short,

<sup>21</sup> *The Philippines Is in the Heart*, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

two extreme viewpoints are elicited by the story, but both perceive the fiction as a sociological document reflecting Filipino mores.

We cannot be sure whether Bulosan narrated this story because there really was such a practice in his hometown. Such an incident may or may not be authentic. The story, in fact, can also be held to mirror the strongly spiritual facet of the Filipino mentality. Not all these apparitions should be dismissed as animistic or primitive. What should concern us is whether the story achieves an artistic unity which serves its aesthetic purpose. Definitely, it does. The symbol of the angel, which represents the non-material world, functions as the medium by which the author satirizes the greed and selfishness of the townspeople, sparing no one except the young Panchito. Bulosan in this story creates two worlds — the fantasy world embodied by the angel and the real world of the village. The object of satire is the village society: Vitte the poor peasant, a victim of Señor Gonzalo's greed, prey to his own selfishness by agreeing to sell Angela for 2,000 pesos; Fr. Ruiz, the parish priest calling Angela the property of his church; Bigger Muñoz who only thinks of the next gambling session; the miserly Don Teodoro shelling out twenty pesos when he learns that his favorite cock will win the next day. In satire, wit or humor that is fantastic or absurd is used to imply a certain norm of morality. In "The Angel in Santo Domingo," it is not only the angel's proposal to collect fees which is absurd. It is also the fact that the village people are willing to pay. This is the absurd which implies another norm of morality that becomes the message or moral of the tale. When the angel leaves, her mission is accomplished — in both the storyline, and in its function as a vehicle to express the satire in the story.

#### FANTASY AND REALITY

But the line between what is believable and what is fantastic is a thin line. As long as what the writer creates is credible, the difference between fantasy and reality can be discerned, and the message is perceived.

In the story "Really, A Ghost?," Bulosan oversteps himself and fails. The tale is too incredible. It is the standard plot of a man who meets a child ghost, a good samaritan, who leads him away

from his planned itinerary, saving him from a group of bandits. Tiago, the child ghost, was a boy who lived during the Spanish era and guided the revolutionaries to safety. Himself deceived by treachery, he saves present-day wayfarers from the treacherous of today.

Once again, we have the formula of the classic Bulosan story: a simple plot, a single dramatic incident leading to an expected conclusion derived from a folk tale or legend. The theme revolves around the material-nature world idea. But in this story Bulosan fails because he has become too simple, and the story lacks the coherence possessed by the other four stories we have discussed. In the first few paragraphs, there is a hint of misplaced sophistication, a mimicry of Western literary technique:

I have met a ghost: I claim this unique distinction. And furthermore, I will be glad to confront the shade or shades of Mr. Woolcott with my evidence. I say shades of Mr. Woolcott because, considering the shadow cast by his birth on this planet, he may be entitled to more than one shade.

It is unfortunate that Bulosan has attempted an exposition he is not comfortable in. The material, or subject matter in the story — the young Tiago being the little hero of the Filipino revolutionaries during the Spanish time — offers the author numerous possibilities for development. Instead of concentrating on this link between present and past, Bulosan focuses on trivial details with the bandits and the townspeople. He might have capitalized on the “friendly, helpful ghost” symbol, which is a recurring one in all literature — the stranger, the outsider — not unlike Silent Popo in Bulosan’s other story. But alas, “Really, A Ghost?” is a failed attempt at sophistication. For Bulosan is certainly no sophisticate.

Another tale of Bulosan that fails to exploit its thematic potential is “The Springtime of My Father.” It is the story of Cardo’s father’s brief summer flirtation. The tale is full of symbols of passion — the heat of the summer, the quiet and mysterious quality of the female guest of Uncle Antonio, Father caressing his favorite gamecock Prince, the red wine — which could have been organized into a vivid sketch of summer passion. But Bulosan again is not comfortable with this type of material.

### SOCIAL SATIRE

In the pre-war essay, “Proletarian Literature: A Definition,” S.P. Lopez stated that “a writer’s attitude towards his art and his

material, nay, his very choice of subject-matter, is to a very great extent dictated by the social milieu into which he is born and has his being".<sup>23</sup> Lopez's theory of the "social conditions of literature"<sup>24</sup> can help explain the possible intention, and perhaps provide the proper perspective to the "Uncle Stories" or social satires of Carlos Bulosan. The strong satirical bent in Bulosan's writing has occasioned numerous detractors and admirers, with comments ranging from "harmless," to "enlightened Marxist critique." Definitely Bulosan in his "Uncle" stories is preaching a strong social message, but it is not necessarily Marxist in approach. These "Uncle" stories cannot assert themselves as mere reflections of problems in barrio cultural patterns or economic structures. The fictional milieu that Bulosan creates does not have an exact correspondence with what actually occurs in the Filipino barrio. Bulosan's tales are not sociological documents but pieces of fiction.

How then should we view the social satires of Bulosan? As S.P. Lopez has proposed, the work of art is "socially conditioned." No doubt the satire of the stories begins from a particular social milieu, cultural pattern and economic structure. Lopez, in a recent essay which reexamined his early collection of essays, wrote that art and literature can only bring about change if "the objective conditions demand it, and if there exists in men's minds and hearts a subjective readiness and determination to bring it about."<sup>25</sup> In other words, for Bulosan's prose to succeed as works of art which both entertain and communicate, the form in which the subject matter is expressed should first, be based on a cultural milieu, and second, fashioned in such a way that cultural change would find a "subjective readiness and determination to bring it about." Had Bulosan's tales been wholly realistic, his collection would just be another anthropological study. If his stories were completely idealistic, delineating the somewhat idyllic life of the barrio, and the docile, lovable and to a large extent, content people of the town they would have been pure imagination. Bulosan's

<sup>23</sup> Salvador P. Lopez, "Proletarian Literature," *Literature and Society* (Manila: University Book Supply, 1940), p. 217.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Salvador P. Lopez, "Literature and Society - A Literary Past Revisited," in *Literature and Society: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Roger J. Bresnahan (Los Baños: The Proceedings of the Eleventh American Studies Seminar, 1976), p. 15.

stories do reflect to a certain degree this idyllic life, yet they are also fused with both legend and fantasy to impart a realistic social message.

#### USE OF STOCK FIGURES

Bulosan utilizes stock figures as characters in his stories. These stereotypes are the uncles of the narrator in all the "Uncle" stories. There is Uncle Sator, the typical barrio-bred boy who made it big and is now the rich man of the family; Uncle Sergio is the perennial gambler; Uncle Soyoc is the bandit uncle; Uncle Manuel, the jailbird; Uncle Roman, the naive, innocent uncle; Handsome Pulong, the playboy lover of the tribe. These stereotype figures are culled from characters that exist in any barrio — the rich man, the playboy, the gambler. In satire, there is a "comic struggle of two societies," one normal, the other absurd. In the "Uncle" stories of Bulosan the normal and the absurd exist simultaneously. Each "Uncle" stereotype, of which there is a counterpart in barrio society, is also a part of the "fantastic" world in the satire since Bulosan stretches the Uncle's qualities to absurdity to manifest the very absurdity of that quality.

In "A Rich Man in the Family," a little boy of seven who idolizes his rich Uncle Sator, finds out when Sator visits their home, that despite the wealth his uncle possesses, he does not have a kind heart. When Pecto, the lazy brother, takes notice of Sator's visit, he suddenly becomes industrious and helpful, hoping that Sator would pay attention to him, and maybe, give him some of his wealth as an inheritance. Uncle Sator is pleased with the boy's industry, yet when he leaves, he leaves only fifty centavos for Pecto.

This story illustrates the manner in which Bulosan effectively communicates his message. At first glance, it is a simple story, characteristic of barrio life. Yet beneath its simplicity a few facts emerge: the total superficiality of the wealthy Sator, the idol of the community, the rich man, who exhausted all the savings of the poor family but did not give even a token of appreciation; and the now hardworking Pecto, toiling as he has never done before, only to impress his stingy uncle. In this tale, the attack is on the values of the community. The rich man is rich in wealth but not in compassion. Pecto strives hard not for the intrinsic

value of honest labor but for the lure of a possible inheritance. Bulosan is saying something about the evil inherent in treating money as an end and not as a means.

In "The Way of All Men," Uncle Sator offers money to Uncle Sergio, the gambler, to open a gambling den. Uncle Sergio explains his reason for opening a gambling den: "People don't know how to spend their money. I would be doing them a favor if I spent it for them."<sup>26</sup> The gambling business is a success, and the poor peasants spend practically all their money. Three policemen raid the premises of Uncle Sergio but Uncle Sator intervenes, advising his nephew, "You will see a man of wisdom and wealth handle a poor and ambitious little man. There are always little men in their world."<sup>27</sup> The "little men" are those who are willing to sell their souls for cash. It is Uncle Sator then who is the "littlest" man in the world.

In the story "Dinner With a King," where Uncle Sator dines with King Alfonso, the king of beggars, who threatens to organize all the beggars and send them to Sator's house to beg for alms, Bulosan again restates the same theme using irony and satire. King Alfonso, the king of the poor, is not the true representative of the beggars after all because he too desires the money of the hapless Sator. He too is not "rich in spirit." At the end of the tale we discover that King Alfonso is actually Pecto, the little boy's brother who now succeeds in avenging his humiliation. The result is an irony upon an irony. When Sator asks his little nephew what is bothering his brother, Cardo replies, "Your money."<sup>28</sup>

#### BULOSAN'S BARRIO WORLD

Bulosan's barrio world is populated by characters who are simple, down-to-earth, and practical, and yet they suffer from the scourge of materialistic values. In this community-world, it is money which is the gauge of success. The old values of honor, honesty and industriousness have been given up in favor of materialism. But that is not all. What is shown as absurd is the fact that

<sup>26</sup> *The Philippines Is in the Heart*, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

these barrio folk are content to believe in these selfish values, without any pangs of conscience. These distorted norms are then passed on to the young Cardo, the narrator of the stories, the Pectos, and the other young people populating Bulosan's fictional town. In "The Bandit and the Tax Collector," Cardo is promised a 10 percent commission from a friendly tax collector to help trap his bandit uncle. With the deed done, Cardo does not receive his tip but is arrested instead. Hardly remorseful, Cardo only believes in being realistic. His brother Pecto in "Dinner With a King," still believes that material possessions are the most important badges of achievement. Uncle Soyoc, bandit of the tribe, who ends up in jail for accidentally shooting a man when he holds up the gambling house upon the instigation of Uncle Sator in "The Betrayal of Uncle Soyoc," looks upon banditry as a profession with even more conviction after his capture.

In this simple, close-knit community, genuine human values, untouched by the harmful effects of modern technology, should have remained intact. Yet, they are not. The irony of it all is that the adherence to materialism has become a way of life. True, the camaraderie and tranquility is ever present in this small town, but in the total perspective, the characters of this world base their relationships on the power of the peso. It has become so much a part of themselves in spite of obvious events which point to the necessity of changing these attitudes. In Bulosan's barrio, what is absurd is that the absurd has become the reality.

Bulosan's social satire communicates on two levels. The first level refers to the fantastic in his tales becoming part of the real. This holds true even if the stories are exaggerations of what really occurs in the town. The tales do depict materialistic values prevalent in barrio life, even though they have been expanded to the point of caricature. The emphasis is on the *individual*, on the *inward*, the deterioration of the peasant's personal values, a decay within rather than without. We may speculate that Bulosan's intent was also to reflect the effect of an economic structure on individuals. It seems clear that it was. But the stories revolve primarily around caricatures of individuals — the uncles, the Cardos and the Pectos — who are too narrow to embody social or economic structure.



On another level of satire, Bulosan may simply be using familiar characters to the Filipino, or of the Filipino, creating comic situations to frame his message. In the latter case, Bulosan superimposes the familiar world, represented by his stock characters, on the fantasy world, which is actually an extension of the traits possessed by these figures. In both cases, there is a tension between what is real and what is fantasy. In this struggle between these two worlds, a fictional milieu is created, a social message revealed.

#### BULOSAN AND THE FILIPINO SENSIBILITY

Bulosan's short stories are rich in insights which may help us re-examine traditional Filipino values. Bulosan's social satire is not realistic. We often do not know where the reality ends and the fantasy begins. But it seems there is an aesthetic purpose to this type of writing. The Filipino is basically a fun-loving, humorous individual who wishes to be entertained. He is a subtle person, a stranger to excessive straightforwardness, an expert in the art of tact. Bulosan's stories have the Filipino psyche in mind. Bulosan is both subtle and tactful at the same time; didactic and philosophical, as well as entertaining. In attacking the values of his reader, he offers a dose of humor and wit. Bulosan is neither sophisticated nor contrived. This is why, though his stories are riddled with imperfections, their plainness and lack of sophistication become their virtue.

Essentially, what Bulosan decries are the inroads of material values into society — whether our own, or any other. The economic iniquities noted by Marxist critics are reflected in his prose. However, the root of all these economic structures lies in the materialistic values of individuals who make these societies. Wealth need not pervert one's human values. What Bulosan laments is not only the decay of society due to oppressive economic restrictions, but the disintegration of the human spirit caused by allowing these limitations to intrude into our values. Hints of the need for a spiritual reawakening are embodied in the symbolism of music in "The Son of Uncle Sator," "The Lonely Mermaid," and "The Power of Music." In these tales, the music from Cousin Armando's guitar soothes the greedy Sator's woes. Uncle Sator's son who suffers from his parent's broken marriages seeks refuge in the comfort

of music. The lonely mermaid permits her male victim to return to our world to fetch his guitar.

S.P. Lopez has said that social literature can succeed only if there exists in men's minds and hearts a subjective readiness and determination to bring such change about. Bulosan understands the Filipino sensibility. Through the form of his stories, the reader who is both entertained and enlightened, may be a trifle more ready and determined to accept, if not effect, change in a society ailing in its spirit.