

## Understanding Jose Garcia Villa's Footnote to Youth

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**Asia Pacific Journal of  
Multidisciplinary Research**

Vol. 6 No.4, 38-45

November 2018

P-ISSN 2350-7756

E-ISSN 2350-8442

[www.apjmr.com](http://www.apjmr.com)

CHED Recognized Journal

ASEAN Citation Index

*Date Received: March 8, 2018; Date Revised: August 16, 2018*

**Abstract** – *This study analyzes the short story Footnote to Youth by Jose Garcia Villa using five literary theories. This aims at finding out what Footnote to Youth means as interpreted in terms of Biographical Criticism, Reader Response Criticism, Formalism, Archetypal Criticism, and Feminist Criticism theories. This study makes use of the descriptive-qualitative design specifically the content analysis using literary criticism in interpreting the literature. This research utilized text evaluation through triangulation using the short story itself as the primary source of data and secondary data in the form of interview of Villa's close acquaintances, related documents (i.e. published letters), other literary texts and online conversations with the ultimate goal of yielding valid and trustworthy inferences. In interpreting the short story, five literary theories classified by Abrams' Major Literary Classification of Literary Theories were used. As analyzed, the story could be: an expression of Villa's yearning for a father figure in his life, a message extending caution to the readers on the pitfalls of teenage marriage, an exhibit of the 'literariness' of Villa's workmanship, a symbolic representation of archetypes and a reflection of the undermined the roles of women in the society.*

**Keywords** – *Jose Garcia Villa, content analysis, literary criticism*

### INTRODUCTION

Literature exerts an intangible bond to human lives. It greatly influences humanity because it is given a sentimental importance. It is important to people because it speaks to them that even when life is ugly, literature is beautiful [1].

For years, continuous study and appreciation of literature flourish unceasingly. It is marked by the evolution and at the same time, conservation through studies and education. The study of literature is given prior importance in the academe because it is “an excellent way to sharpen one's close reading skills, assemble excellent critical thinking apparatus, and refine the general sense of art appreciation” [2].

Among all the literary genres, short stories are much preferred to be taught by many teachers because they appeal to the reader and can easily catch their attention and motivate them to concentrate on the story. Students of literature also say that they prefer fictional texts [3]. In addition, studying a short story could open up the realities in life expressed artistically to students [4]. The researcher had chosen to conduct an interpretative work on this genre since the culture embodied in these texts is

a culture that many could possibly relate to most especially the students.

Among all the short stories, Footnote to Youth was chosen because of its historical significance. It is the first short story to be published in English in the United States by a Filipino. Chua [5] noted that the publication of Villa's Footnote to Youth may be considered as a milestone in Philippine literary history, a testament of Villa's excellence as a writer.

This study aimed to interpret the short story “Footnote to Youth” using various literary approaches thereby bringing in different perspective in interpretation. Literary criticism is employed to objectively comprehend and interpret the text. Literary criticism is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. Modern literary criticism is often informed by literary theory, which is the philosophical discussion of its methods and goals [6].

Introducing students to literary criticism while introducing them to literature boosts their confidence and abilities to analyze literature, and increases their interest in discussing it” [7]. Through this, the students' critical thinking ability is enhanced.

The short story was interpreted and evaluated using five literary theories from the four major literary classifications. It endeavored to give different possible meanings of the story and draw out multiple facets and perspective in interpretation. Specifically, it sought to answer the question: What does this story mean as interpreted in terms of Biographical Criticism, Reader Response Criticism, Formalism, Archetypal Criticism, and Feminist Criticism theories?

In a wider scope, this study is also expected to be a guide to teachers on how to apply various literary theories in the interpretation of literature. Literary criticisms are often biased, and this study could hopefully set an example to some teachers to utilize literary theories to avoid such subjectivity. The use of literary theories could elicit multiple facets of meaning drawn from the text and not just rely on narrow sighted and singular viewpoint in interpretation. More so, studying our own literature could help us further understand the cultural impact of the piece and recognize the significance of preserving our literary heritage. Readers could not fully appreciate and give high esteem to a text unless they truly understand its deepest meaning. Understanding Jose Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth* could hopefully incite values of well-planned love, self-preservation, Filipino pride and preservation of literary legacy among the readers.

#### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the qualitative research employing content analysis. Qualitative content analysis do away with rash quantification and focuses instead on empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification [8]. Content analysis examines words or phrases within a wide range of texts. By examining the presence or reputation of certain words and phrases in the texts, a researcher is able to make inferences about the philosophical assumptions of a writer, a written piece, the audience for which the piece is written and even the culture and time in which the text is embedded [9].

This qualitative research utilized text evaluation through theory triangulation since more than one literary theories were used to interpret the text with the ultimate goal of yielding valid and trustworthy inferences. Data source triangulation using other source of data from interview, related documents (i.e. published letters), other literary texts and online conversations aside from the primary text itself was used in the biographical

criticism theory. In interpreting the data, guide questions by Diyanni [10] for biographical criticism and by Bascara [11] for the rest of the theories were used as basis.

The interpretation employed literary theories classified by Abrams [12] in his *Major Literary Classification of Literary Theories*. The various theories were arranged under Abrams' distinction of Artist, Audience, Work, and Universe [13].

Under the Artist classification, Biographical Criticism theory was used because the interpreter only had to learn certain events in the author's life through his biography and compare its possible relation to the meanings depicted in the story. Aside from biography, personal letters and online interview with his close friends, editor and literary executor were also used to shed light on some part of Villa's life. For the Audience classification, Reader Response Criticism was used because it could provide a venue for individual reasoning to the author. For the Work classification, Formalism Theory was used because it is an inquiry into the form rather than the content of the works. And for the Universe, Archetypal and Feminist Criticism were used. Archetypal was used because it allows the author to recollect recurring and similar images, patterns or symbols that appeared in other literature [14]. Feminist Criticism was employed because of the rising gender issues in our society which is oftentimes reflected in our literature.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Five Literary Theories and Interpretations on Jose Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth*.

##### **(1) Biographical Criticism**

(This interpretation is based on some account of events that happened in the life of the author.)

*Footnote to Youth* reflects the personal life of Villa specifically his yearnings in life. Though the story was modified into a complete contrast from his real life, it depicts his heart's desires. Certain events in his life motivated him to write *Footnote to Youth*. Villa's obvious inclination towards the solidification of a harmonious paternal relationship is clearly inscribed purposely to reveal his personal perception and emotions on how an ideal father-and-son relationship is supposed to be.

Upon closer look, the story shows a warm paternal bonding between Dodong and his father. "Dodong thought to himself he would tell his father about Teang... What he had to say was of serious importance as it would

mark a climacteric in his life.” This line confirms that Dodong regards his father with respect and that, there is a close bonding between them sensing the fact that Dodong included his father in a very important decision that he has to make.

On the other hand, Villa is a rebellious child to an imposing, traditional and strict father which prompted him to a self-exile in the US. The paternal relationship in the story is in complete opposite to the life of Villa and one can, therefore, assume that Villa had expressed his desires and yearnings in the story. To further solidify this interpretation, an outlook to a certain event in Villa's life is brought to view. This is his lukewarm relationship with his birthright father, Don Simeon Villa, a Colonel in the Philippine revolution. Don Simeon Villa participated gallantly in a revolution that overthrew three centuries of Spanish colonial rule on June 12, 1898.

Tabios, the editor of Villa's *Anchored Angel* [15], claimed that “Villa grew up as a child in the household of a Colonel of the failed Philippine Republic, a father who was forever a grim silent man — someone perceived as cold and heartless by his child, the burgeoning poet.” This statement could firmly lead the readers to believe that Villa, as a child, grew up to have a distant bonding with his father.

Villa is often described as a child who is “going up against ...his father”. As the great Filipino writer Nick Joaquin would put it, the tensions between Jose and his father symbolized the generational tension between two worlds clashing together in the 1900s to the 1920s: fathers who lived in the dying past and impatient son's eager to embrace the new American culture. And embraced Villa did, for in his early age of 21, he migrated to the US on what he called as his “literary exile”.

His repulsion to his real father could be traced in his own embittered words as cited by Cowen [16]. “In 1941, the Philippine Writers' League published, *Poems by Doveglion*. When I (Cowen) asked Villa why he didn't use his real name, he explained, “I was angry with my father for not supporting me in America, and, therefore, I refused to honor him by using my surname, so I chose the pseudonym— Doveglion-- which I created myself.” This statement confirms that Villa is denouncing his father of any honorable rights in his fame and glory in literature. Doveglion, which characterizes Villa to be as “gentle as a dove, free as an eagle and fierce as a lion” is not just a symbol of being a renowned poet but a statement of rebellion against his father.

Quite frankly, Villa never had a positive relationship with his embittered father. Until his father's death, there was no peace between them as Luis Cabalquinto, a close

friend of Villa, sadly reminisced during an online correspondence. He stated that, “Jose never reconciled with his father, who died during the World War II Liberation bombing of Manila by U.S. warplanes.”

Despite this negative experience, he values and recognizes the importance of a father's role in the *Footnote to Youth*. Away from his native soil and the people he grew up with, he could have possibly expressed his solitary loneliness in this story. Instead, Villa sees the fatherly figure on his close friend and mentor E.E. Cummings, a known American poet whom he had met eight years after he had written *Footnote to Youth* in 1933. He is his inspiration and the root of his literary acclamation. Villa might have considered Cummings as an answer to his yearnings for a father because of the latter's great significance in his life.

In Villa's life, it is Cummings who became his real life hero and Master. Cummings had served as a turning point in his literary field. The coming of Cummings in Villa's life seems to be the focal point and highlight of Villa's career and personal life. Cummings is considered as “Master” by Villa frequently addressing him in this manner. Cummings influence could be seen in the shift of Villa's career that in 1938 after Villa read Cummings' *Collected Poems*, he completely abandoned the short story as his literary medium.

Another great testimony of how important and loved Cummings is to Villa is the letter written by Villa to Cummings' wife, Marion, shortly after Cummings died. Villa wrote a touching letter of condolences to Marion, expressing how painful the loss was to him, dated, September 22, 1962: “Dear Marion, I have intentionally delayed writing to you, knowing that you would be flooded with messages. Also, it might have been very difficult for me to write then -- I was so shaken by the news (I heard it over the radio -- I was breakfasting & suddenly I was in tears. It is not easy to say this -- I, who have been priding myself on having gotten “harder.” But E. E. was my Master -- I would never have written poetry but for his example. My mother died last year and I had no tears. Now you see that the Master was loved.) Please bear well. My Master was a great poet and a great human being. But you shine also, and with your own grace and you must continue to shine - With love, Jose V,” Such is Villa's testimony of the love that he devoted for Cummings, his father figure and literary hero.

## **(2) Reader Response Theory**

(The interpretation is based on the researcher's perception of teenage marriage which is the central issue in this story.)

Footnote to Youth accentuates the nature of teenage marriage to impress upon the youth its entailing difficulties. The title itself bears a stern reminder about the pitfalls of an unrequited and unplanned love to the youth who most oftentimes fall prey to the disillusion of love. The story is very rich and vivid in its direct portrayal about a family life laden with hardships and melancholy as a result of early marriage. It is a warning, it is a caution to the youth of today whose rising number of pregnancy is alarmingly increasing. This story gives the reader an overview of a married life built on flimsy dreams and youthful love.

Teenage marriage is characterized as the marriage of either a bride or groom "under 20 years old" [17]. Footnote to Youth tells the two unpleasant marriages in the lives of Dodong and Blas. The lines "he wanted to marry, he was seventeen," is a strong indication that Dodong married so young. On the other hand, Dodong was confronted with a dilemma "when Blas was eighteen" and asked permission to marry. With the similar incident that happened between father and son, the hardship in life is not farfetched. Teenage marriage serves as a signal of the impending hardships that will soon follow in the life ahead.

The result of unwise decisions by Dodong led him to have a regretful and unfulfilling life. "Dodong whom life had made ugly," is Teang's sentiment in her kind of life as a result of her teenage marriage with Dodong. Dodong accepted this fate knowing that he had made this fatal mistake in life but his fears were reawakening when he realized that Blas is about to make the same mistake that he had committed. For he knew in his heart that "Blas was very young. The life that would follow marriage would be hard." Dodong and Blas sealed their fate to have an arduous life brought about by teenage marriage.

### **(3) Formalism Theory**

(The form of the short story Footnote to Youth is scrutinized particularly in the style and manner in writing, the theme, the point of view and the meaning of the symbols in contribution to the overall impression to the story.)

The distinct "literariness" in this text is determined by his usage of theme, and style in order to relay the story in an easily comprehensible way. Villa's style in writing Footnote to Youth could be attributed and compared to the works of Anton Chekov, a legendary Russian fictionist. Footnote to Youth, as classified by the researcher, is distinctly a Chekovian short story due to its Chekovian point of view expressing the thought that the look of life in literature should be in all its banality, all

the tragic comedy and refuse to make judgment [18]. Villa refuses to condemn the characters that he made. He only narrated the actions of the character as they are and leave them to speak for themselves. What Villa did is to bring to light the tragic events in the story and let the reader judges the merits of the characters' worth.

In comparison, Villa's works are embodied with simplistic usage of words and is devoid of many flowery modifiers. Chekov [19] detests unnecessary modifiers in his suggestions stating that it could not be easily grasped by the readers. Villa aims to target the reader's comprehension. He wants the lesson to be unmistakably understood through the clarity and logical sequence of events. And this is what, additionally, makes this story appealing to the reader.

Chekov also suggested that descriptions of nature should be very short and always be *à propos* in writing. The pacified and calm setting in description of the nature in Villa's story owes its luster from Chekov's. There is no heated illustration nor passionate description as the nature is being depicted. It lends a peaceful atmosphere to the reader imagining the "sweetish earthy smell," "the furrows in the field" and "the coming dusk." He had chosen small details in describing nature. The realm of imagination is very broad and it is best to leave the reader to think about the small details.

Footnote to Youth could be said to portray the philosophy of realism. Realism in literature attempts to describe life without any kind of idealization or romantic notions wherein human life and social conditions are presented in its actual state [20]. Footnote strictly adheres on the fidelity of life and to the actuality of its representation in the literature. The setting, the theme and the characters are all realistic and does not exaggerate nor flaunts hyperbolic events in order to bridge the imagination of readers to the meaning of the story.

As to the symbolisms used in the story, the recurring cycle of Youth, Love and Life are emphasized. In the story, it happened to Dodong and recurred to Blas. Villa artistically stressed this cycle twice in the story. Youth is characterized in the story as the time of fancy, immaturity, vigor, aggression, and freedom. Youth also possess this uncanny habit of being reckless and irresponsible in their actions. Most of their doings are mandated by the drive to be always happy and free. However, their irresponsible merriment often constitutes with thoughtless means of actions leading to unfavorable results.

Love, as depicted in the story, can be either the most powerful motivation for growth or the most destructive

force in your life. Youth are swayed with the onset of the enormous intensity of love. Dodong, in all his youthful vigor, failed to grasp the real essence of all its deeper worth. He only skims its shallow impression. Dodong is Villa's representation of a youth who had been waylaid by love. He had also served as a caution to those youth that love must not overpower wit and defy reasons.

Life in *Footnote to Youth* is considered as an offspring of what comes after Youth and Love as stated in the lines, "Youth must triumph... now. Love must triumph... now. Afterwards... it will be life." It is Life that decides if Youth and Love had indeed succeeded. It is the outcome of Youth and Life that dictates the way of life.

Villa had repeatedly emphasized the interconnection of Youth, Love and Life as a cyclical occurrence. They are the elements that make up the person's being. What one attains in Life is a byproduct of his actions in Youth and Love.

#### **(4) Archetypal Criticism**

(This interpretation makes use of archetypes present in the story and its possible meaning in correlation to preexisting archetypes in other literary works.)

*Footnote to Youth* could be understood in a different light by locating the archetypes used and its possible meaning and connections of idea present in other literary works. The researcher had pointed out some archetypes that appeared in the story and recurred in many other literary works.

##### **a. The foreboding night time setting.**

It was nighttime when Dodong asked permission from his father to marry Teang. A sort of *déjà vu* also occurred when Blas stated his intentions to marry still in the night time setting "where everything was still and quiet... The moonlight was cold and white." The nighttime setting in the denouement of the story is a puzzling occurrence.

One possible point of using the night time setting is that it might heighten the somber mood of the hesitant fathers in their own sons' decision to marry. The reaction of Dodong's father can be traced with gloom and disagreement. Dodong also, has a "wistful and sad feeling" when he was confided with the same situation by his son later in his life in this similar moment. Night time in its mythic meaning is always associated with anything that is related to darkness.

The night archetype and its menacing concept can also be traced in other literature. Authors use nighttime and readers respond to it with great emotion because

there resides within the collective unconscious a myriad of ancestral memories that associate night with fear and the unknown [21]. The night time setting used by Villa serves as an indicator of the ominous threat of hardships in the lives of Dodong and Blas. Villa also used the night time setting to further emphasize the gloomy disposition of Dodong's father and later, of Dodong.

##### **b. The quest for wisdom.**

Another archetype used in the story is Dodong's search for wisdom. Man's search for wisdom depicted in literature stretches from ancient time to the present. The quest for wisdom warns of looming sacrifices but it sometimes does not ensure success. The quest for wisdom is an archetype that could be traced even to the earliest myth of the Norse people, the *Nibelungenlied*. Odin, the greatest of the Norse Gods, had himself searched for wisdom. But he had paid for this wisdom dearly by sacrificing one of his eyes.

The Bible also tells of King Solomon's wish and preference to have wisdom than any other material and worldly power and riches. God had granted him this but he had later disappointed the Giver by turning his back on him resulting to a catastrophic division of his kingdom.

The *Life of Cardo* by Amador T. Daguio also tells the story of a man searching for wisdom to answer the questions about his adversities in life. Cardo is the seeker after the meaning of life in the question, "Is there something in life so good, so beautiful that we can never know?" Even as the story comes to an end, he had not found the answers to his questions.

The quest for wisdom is also implied in this story. Dodong wanted to know why "Love did not fulfill all of Youth's dream... He wanted to ask questions and somebody to answer him. He wanted to be wise about many things." The hardships in Dodong's life is an enigma that he longed to be remedied but sadly, he was denied with wisdom to satisfy his emptiness in life. "He had wanted to know a little wisdom but was denied it."

These stories tell us that wisdom is an elusive thing to achieve and is often coupled with extreme sacrifices. Oftentimes, the quest to better one's life through wisdom does not even have a positive result and some are left empty handed with the answers they aim to seek. This may indicate that wisdom is profound and that, no human is wise enough to answer all the riddles in life.

##### **c. The tragic young love story**

The tragic young love story could be considered as an archetype because of its frequent appearance in classic

or modern literature. Starting from the much celebrated Romeo and Juliet in the Elizabethan Era, it had sprouted roots and influenced lots of writers to work in the same theme. This story gives the reader a glimpse on how love works on the adolescent world with Juliet, not yet 14 and Romeo, perhaps a year or two older. Love, as depicted in this story, is a burning passion that once uncontrolled could consume ones being ending in a total devastation and tragedy.

In the classic Greek mythology, reckless young love often grounds from restriction such as the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, Antigone and Meneceus, and Medea and Jason all of whom ended in sorrow all because of the thoughtless, aggressive and reckless love of the youth.

Unrelenting passions in love are often depicted in young lovers. Learner [22] in his views about teenage love says that "Love means more to these people than life itself. It is about reckless love, about giving up a long life for a moment's bliss. It is this very recklessness that has the power to move us, no matter what our age or experience may be." Youth experiences the most blissful love because it is a love without responsibility, cares and worries. Their emotions are unrestrained and these often lead to an unfavorable turn of events. This story emphasizes the beauty of love while being young but it also cautions that too much of it is bad enough. Literature serves as a reminder through the tragic young love archetype of the ill effect of too much emotional inclination and unhampered actions brought about by love.

### **(5) Feministic Criticism**

(This interpretation used the perspectives of feminist criticism in consideration of the cultural and social roles of women in literature as expressed in a male-authored text.)

Feministic criticism judges the literary work on the representation of the women's condition and criticizes the restrictive role of the women. In this interpretation, the roles of the women are deeply analyzed if there are undervalued gender issues and biases based on the outlook of the male author as in this case, Jose Garcia Villa.

Footnote to Youth mirrors the Androcentric Culture of the Filipinos which is much frowned upon by feminism. Androcentric culture is termed as the culture "where men have access to the world while woman have access only to the house and where the "common humanity" of women have largely been ignored [23]. This is a culture that feminism strives to avert advocating

that women should be granted with equal opportunity and women's rights, interest and issues, shall be promoted.

The Androcentric Culture is clearly evident as portrayed by the two women characters in the story. Villa might be impartial in depicting the strength and weakness of both female and male characters but the dominating figure is still irrevocably the males, whereas, the women in this story are characterized as the lesser persons because of the weakness that they mostly portray. To deeply acknowledge this claim, a thorough analysis on the roles of each major characters are examined to find out who between the male and female characters are weak or strong individuals. Dodong is an assertive son who manipulated his father in bestowing his blessings and permission for him to marry. Dodong's father is portrayed as a head of the family and therefore should be sought for guidance and wise counsel. The patriarchal schema of the story begins from him and is immensely given prior attention due to the cyclical events that happened even until to Dodong's own son. As for the female counterparts, Dodong's mother is seen only as a silent figure whose roles alienates her from the outside world. She functions only inside the home. Teang, Dodong's wife is easily interpreted as the voiceless and conforming wife representing further the restrictive role of women in the story.

However, the Androcentric culture depicted by Villa is not a solid accusation that would pin him down in undervaluing the women's role. His point of view is the result of traditional influences of how Filipinos look upon women during Villa's era in the 1930's. This view is also apparent in other culture during this time. Hall further summarized the condition of women in the 19th century when she wrote "The Attribute of Womanhood" by which "a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife - - woman." As Williams [24] further suggested that "if women were strong, physically or mentally, she was not given the respect that she deserved. The men at this time wanted their women meek and undominating because that was romantic to them."

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

In this study, five theories were yielded with different conclusions, each distinct from the rest. For the Biographical theory, it concludes that Villa is expressing his longings for a father figure in his solitary life during

his literary exile in the US. The life of Villa exemplifies that a father in one's life needs not to be blood imbued but rather, it is on the love endowed. For the Reader Response Theory, the story openly speaks and cautions of the disadvantage of teenage marriage. It tells about how youth was curtailed through the allure of love and how life suffers afterwards. For the Formalism Theory, it implies that Villa's Footnote Youth follows a Chekovian style in writing with its realistic outlook in life. Its theme focuses on the cycle of youth, love and life and how these three are interconnected on the outcome of one's life. For the Feminism theory, it is concluded that the story portrays an Androcentric culture. For the Archetypal Theory, it is concluded that the archetypes found in the story bears similar meanings to archetypes which are the night time setting, the quest for wisdom and the tragic young love story. Finally, Footnote to Youth is a literary work that was yielded with multiple varied meanings based on the five literary theories that were employed. It is proven to give multi-faceted meaning in congruence with each theory applied.

Findings on this study is limited mostly to the thesis and views formulated by the author guided by literary theories and supported by secondary documents and review of related literature. Future researchers are encouraged to use other literary theories following the same method of interpretation. They could also form their own interpretation since literary criticism encourages diverse perspectives on literature.

Based on the findings, Footnote to Youth is much advised to be incorporated to the secondary curriculum where younger students could glean lessons on about the pitfall of early marriage due to the alarming rise of teenage pregnancy and marriages in the country. Villa's life is also marked with the struggles and difficulties in the process of perfecting his skill and should therefore be introduced to budding writers and poet in Literature classes. Lastly, it is highly recommended that literary criticism employing literary theories be followed in the teaching of literature in order to make a sound and systematic judgment of the text.

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