

**A YOUNG POET DREAMS OF A HUNDRED WORDS
THAT RHYME WITH MAYNILA**

SYNOPSIS

In “A Young Poet Dreams of a Hundred Words That Rhyme with Maynila,” 11-year-old Francisco “Kiko” Balagtas embarks on a transformative journey to Manila in the year 1799. Preparing for his new life in the bustling city, Kiko sets himself a unique challenge: to collect 100 words that rhyme with “Maynila.” This quest not only helps him cope with the upcoming change but also connects him to the poetic heritage he is yet to fully realize.

As Kiko travels from his hometown of Panginay to Manila, he encounters various experiences and memories that enrich his collection of words. These words symbolize his growth and the blend of excitement and fear he feels about leaving his childhood behind. It is important to note that all of the rhyming words mentioned in the story, except for Maynila itself and diwata, can all be found in Balagtas’s masterpiece *Florante at Laura*.

In the end, upon reaching Tondo, Kiko witnesses an old man chasing a clutch of chicks. Locals recognize him as Huseng Sisiw, a figure who will play a significant role in his poetic development. This moment marks Kiko’s realization that he is ready to embrace the future, leaving his childhood behind but carrying its lessons and memories with him.

The story introduces young readers to a significant period in Filipino history and culture, offering a glimpse into the life of one of the Philippines’ most beloved poets, Francisco Balagtas. By focusing on language and poetry, the story encourages a love for words and rhyming, making it both educational and engaging for children. It subtly teaches about phonetics, vocabulary, and the beauty of the Filipino language. Ultimately, the narrative explores themes of growth, change, and resilience as Kiko’s journey is not just physical but also emotional and intellectual.

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THE YEAR was 1799. After El Tor had passed, the people of Panginay eagerly awaited the new century, like waiting for a carnival that would stay with them forever.

Kiko, an eleven-year-old boy, thought about the diwata of the dark, melancholy forest. “She must be excited too,” he mused. “If only I could see her.” He heard that only the old wise trees were there the last time the year ended with two zeroes. “Walang wala,” he murmured, excited by his own play with words. “Tuwang-tuwa.” Another rhyme! He chuckled and pocketed these words in his mind’s special drawer.

This special drawer was for words ending in “a” with a glottal stop, which his Tatang called “may-impit.” All words that rhyme with “Maynila.”

Like “diwata.” And “tula.” And “makata.”

Inawit ng diwata / The diwata sang

Ang pangako ng tula: / The promise of poetry:

Lálaki kang makata. / You’ll grow a poet.

Kiko was the youngest poet of Panginay, but he didn’t know that yet. Creating diona like this one was natural to him.

He didn’t think of himself as a poet. He just loved words. Whenever he heard an unusual one, like “dalita,” he’d think of “ginhawa” right away, even though they didn’t rhyme.

Understanding their meanings made him realize why they didn’t rhyme.

When Kiko found out he was going to Maynila, he started collecting words that rhymed with it. He dreamed in Tagalog but sometimes slipped into Spanish, though he wouldn't admit it. He couldn't help it since he was taught in the caton. He was surprised to learn that Spanish didn't have a glottal stop like Tagalog. This difference made him even more fascinated as he searched for the perfect rhymes.

He believed that once he gathered 100 words, he'd be ready to live away from his family in a new city, in the new century. He started with easy ones: "luha," "aruga," "lupa." He promised never to forget these.

But would it be easy? His Nanay said the move was necessary. "Your future is in Maynila," she told him. He didn't understand what that meant.

To him, Maynila was a maze of bustling streets with charms he didn't want. That's why "panganyaya" rhymes with the place, he thought. It means harm or danger. Once he tucked the word away, he hoped never to use it again.

Then he remembered that Maynila also rhymed with "biyaya." Maybe this was a blessing, as his Nanay said, and there was no reason to be scared. Is there a diwata there that he could see?

On his last night in Panginay, he counted the words in his mind's drawer. Seventy-two! He double-checked. "Tama." Wait, that's another one! How did he miss that? He almost laughed at forgetting "tama."

Now he had seventy-three. Twenty-seven more, and he'd be ready. Hopefully.

His sisters were anxious about his departure. Concha told him they wouldn't fetch water for him anymore, and Nicholasa said that shouldn't stop him from bathing every day.

Kiko imagined them like a hyena and a tiger preying on a tiny, smelly child—himself. “Naninila,” seventy-four. He felt overwhelmed by their affection.

That night, Kiko tossed and turned. His brother Ipe lay beside him. “I won’t have anyone to write letters for me anymore,” Ipe sighed. “My mutya will wonder what happened to my flowery words.” Kiko hugged his brother, adding “mutya” to his list—seventy-five. Then he finally fell asleep.

Before dawn, his Nanang woke him. The early morning was cold and quiet. Flames from the gas lamp danced in the kitchen. His siblings were still asleep. “Drink your milk, bunso,” his Tatang said, sipping coffee. “Manong Karyo will be here soon. You need to leave early to catch a boat.”

Manong Karyo was heading to Manila, and Kiko’s Tatang arranged for him to accompany Kiko. “He’s old enough to sire a child of his own,” Tatang told Manong Karyo, making Kiko blush with “hiya,” his seventy-sixth word.

Kiko was eleven. “You no longer have enough fingers to count your age,” his Tatang told him.

What are all these fingers for, Kiko thought, but to count the syllables in deep words in long paragraphs to understand them.

Words, “wika.” Check! Paragraphs, “talata.” Check! Understand, “unawa.” Check!

Kiko was happy he added three more words, bringing his total to seventy-nine as he finished his milk.

“Your future is not solely in your hands,” his Tatang said, passing a packed bayong. “You also need to see, listen to, smell, and taste the future.”

Unlike his siblings, who stayed in Bulakan with their parents, weaving cotton instead of words. Kiko smiled. Actually, his siblings weren't into weaving, and there was no cotton in their town. The play on words made it sound more believable than what his siblings would actually do while waiting for their turn to go to Manila. They would all be together in Manila eventually, his father reassured him.

"But you need to help your Tiya Idad with her chores," his mother reminded him. "We didn't raise you to be lazy, bunso."

Kiko heard many things about Manila. The huge churches and stone houses connected by cobblestone streets and surrounded by walls. The majestic galleons from faraway islands with exotic animals and fruits. Children from different kingdoms speaking various languages. Books with stories he could only dream of. Colorful festivals and games with tricksters acting as monsters. He eagerly looked forward to seeing all of it.

But he was also afraid of being alone. "Don't just roam around, it's easy to lose yourself in a sea of people," his mother added.

The youngest poet in Panginay's eyes sparkled at the rhyming words with "Maynila," instantly composing a proverb:

Huwag kang basta gumala,

baka maglaho sa madla.

"Why are you smiling?" his mother asked.

Kiko just hugged her.

When Manong Karyo arrived, Kiko tried not to cry. “Is this your first time traveling?” the old man asked. Kiko nodded. The farthest he’d gone was to the Bigaa church for Christmas and town fiestas. On Sundays, they only went to the Panginay parish.

His father helped him into Manong Karyo’s carriage. “Go back to sleep,” his father said. “Manong Karyo will wake you when you’re close to the river.”

“I want to see the road, Tatang,” Kiko whispered, hugging his parents for the last time.

Manong Karyo gently tapped Sinta, and the horse slowly started walking, pulling them along. Kiko didn’t speak. He watched the brightening surroundings. Dreams floated through his mind like the egrets over the vast rice fields. Maybe a diwata is watching us now, he thought.

As they approached the Angat River, Kiko’s eyes widened at the sight of wooden bancas bobbing on the water. Manong Karyo approached a boatman who offered them passage downstream toward Manila Bay. Sinta was left with Manong Karyo’s kumpare, who was waiting for them at the riverbank. With a mix of trepidation and anticipation, Kiko climbed aboard, feeling the boat’s gentle rocking as they pushed off.

As they drifted down the Angat River, Kiko’s heart raced with every gentle sway of the boat. The lush greenery on the banks seemed to whisper secrets as the vibrant songs of maya birds filled the air. He felt a twinge of disappointment, realizing that “maya” didn’t rhyme with Maynila, and he couldn’t think of any bird that did. He leaned over the edge, watching the ripples dance across the water’s surface. As the morning sun continued to rise, casting a golden glow over the water, Kiko’s thoughts shifted. The scene of small riverside villages waking up, with the sounds of fishermen preparing their nets and children stirring from sleep, brought a

sense of calm and wonder to him. He hoped for a final glimpse of the diwata of the dark, melancholy forest.

Reflecting on his eleven years in Panginay, Kiko realized his father was right. He was growing up. How else could his fingers not be enough to count his age? But inside, he still felt like a child. He remembered being ten, watching a komedya performance for the first time, marveling at the actors' skill and their colorful costumes. At nine, he was captivated by Tita Idad's visit, enchanted by her recitation of verses from Amante's korido adventures. When he was eight, he got scolded by his father for picking papayas to give to his friend Laurenaria. At seven, he learned to write his name: Francisco. At six, he memorized prayers in catechism. At five, he...

By late afternoon, they reached Manila Bay, where the river widened and merged with the sea. Kiko's heart raced as he caught his first glimpse of Maynila's distant skyline. The massive stone walls looked like giant guardians. Tall church towers poked the sky like pointing fingers. Inside the walls, the red-tiled roofs of old Spanish houses huddled together. Beyond, he could see lots of green trees and plants stretching out, making the city look like it was hugging the wild land around it. Manong Karyo took his hand as they disembarked.

As evening fell and Maynila's lights flickered, Kiko felt a surge of pride. The warm glow from lanterns and small fires shimmered through the windows of wooden houses and reflected on the river's surface. Kiko recounted his words, including those he had gathered during the journey—ninety-nine. Just one more to go. "I'll take you to your Tiya Idad first," Manong Karyo said.

Finally, as the stars twinkled overhead, Kiko arrived at the outskirts of Tondo. Dirt paths wound between the homes, and the air was filled with the mingling scents of cooked rice and grilled fish. Small market stalls were closing for the night, their vendors chatting softly. The gentle hum of evening activity, mixed with the distant sound of the river, created for Kiko a peaceful yet lively ambiance. Exhausted but exhilarated, he gazed at the city's towering walls, not knowing that he was embarking on a journey that would shape his destiny. He noticed an old man following a clutch of chicks toward his Tiya Idad's house. "Tandang Huseng Sisiw!" he thought he heard someone call out to the old man. But no one else was there. Maybe it was the diwata?

That was when he realized what he had left behind was his childhood. Sooner or later, he would need to let it go. He put "pagkabata" in his mind's drawer and knew he was ready to leave it there and grow up.