

## ENGLISH – KABATAAN ESSAY

### Until Transcendence

I can travel the world in a click, and unfortunately, I am often faulted for doing so. Like most of my peers, I have succumbed to more-than-occasional BuzzFeed links, YouTube webseries, and Distractify articles that do just that: halt my productivity in favor of sneezing pandas and singing babies from halfway across the globe. The Information Age unearths with it quirkiness on a global scale, the sort that my digital generation simply *devours*, and so, for all our hankering after three- and four-dimensional visuals, our lives seem to play out one-dimensionally on computer screens. Now more than ever, ideas are currency, and when they're packed in 140-character tweets or status updates or viral videos for quick consumption, we get hard-pressed to keep up with them exclusively through those ways, too.

Though I'm not so young that I forget about a different time, when the best stories were the ones bounded together page by page, in printed words upon yellowed chapters. Before Kindles and Kobos, I lived for the physicality of books—how, by leafing through them, I could explore fantasy realms and dystopian worlds, or grow up along with a tortured soul into his own denouement. Those were adventures only challenged by the space left on my bookshelf. Even then, I took pride in my literary conquests lined up where I could see them, revisit them anytime, and plunge others through the same exploits. Nonetheless, as storytelling shifts towards encapsulation and away from engagement, we refrain from investing our time, much less *ourselves*, in literature. And what a shame that is, because in our being human, we have the most to offer the written word.

I've learned through the years that books give as much as they get, and that my enjoyment of a story depends on my readiness to absorb whatever soul an author has breathed

into it. When schoolwork claws its way up my to-do list, I'm limited to sneaking in chapters between months and relying on hazy memory to advance plots along. In those cases, reading is reduced to the attrition of a foe, to something that I have to slowly beat just to say that I've made it, or to a chore which I've surrendered to. I miss having hours to myself for poring over sentences and phrases and words of fiction rather than speed-scanning blocks of journal text. Such is life when academia threatens to take over it; however, education, rife with group lectures per semester, has also lent me a new literary perspective.

I used to have an old, ill-conceived philosophy about reading: that it was supposed to be a purely solitary experience—just me, my books, my armchair, and my imagination. But it's not so much a misconception as it is a paradox, because stories do have that ability to brew in a writer's head, transfer themselves to immersed readers, and then emerge as discourse from those affected. If a book moves me, it moves *from* me to willing hands, willing eyes, to the people with whom I'd be willing to discuss it. Pre-Goodreads and similarly addictive fiction recommendation websites (which I thank my lucky stars for now), books were already my friend requests, conversation starters, and instant messaging programs to communicate what I liked and disliked in the world, compacted in a story that got more enriching with every novel opinion on it. My truly effective language teachers, in English and Filipino, have always steered classes towards that sort of dialogue, towards ambiguous character motivations, deliberate diction, and deep-as-the-ocean symbolism, among other interesting elements. I've since realized that we add value to stories whenever we talk about them with discernment, or whenever we allow them to penetrate our hearts and minds and flow to our deeds, *not* when we end up skimming for keywords in a hurry. Subscribing to the former again reveals the great paradox of literary ideas: that they are intimate and transcendent all at once, while we humans still aspire to be so.

*Transcendent*, we wish to be—a race whose lessons surpass national borders and generation gaps—and yet we yearn for *intimacy*, particularly in genuinely relating with each other’s hopes and dreams despite distance. Ironically though, this era of breaking news seems to have forced our sincere regard for faraway peoples into retreat. Beyond the viral campaigns for stopping Kony and muscle diseases, beyond the hype surrounding whatever next Pacquiao fight there is, beyond tweet-induced prayer rallies for a woman framed and sentenced to death, what makes real-life situations matter to us, outward online sympathy aside? And do they really, after everything’s said and done, when what was once trending is now gone?

I like to think that literature helps unlock the more personal facets of such issues. Hard news and hashtags will throw us facts and figures *stat*, but tone and stylish word choice in an essay, autobiography, op-ed, *heck* even in fiction push readers to ponder things like nothing else. Probably because authors tediously ponder, line after line, how to relay their respective messages and experiences with utmost finesse. Perhaps because we all ponder how to make ourselves heard amongst multiple voices and victories and versions of reality, or in the midst of the miseries and mysteries swamping our nation’s senses.

Swamped. In watching steam from the political scandals blazoned on front pages and news feeds (not to mention those in tabloids), we frequently overlook some bubbles that boil to larger, looming problems. Out of negligence and ignorance, many are set to burst within us.

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The summer before my junior year, I signed up for an internship program aimed at high school students, and promptly hoped to the gods of productivity that I would land the magazine, science museum, or tech start-up post.

Wrong gods (or the right ones, I suppose, given my insights in the process). With my dinner-snippet, school-report, Twitter-timeline knowhow of the Philippine government at that time, I got dropped into a senatorial internship as a legislative assistant for a month. Legislative assistant also meant the resident correspondence sifter, the minutes-of-the-meeting girl, and the shadow of the whole staff, such that I followed my co-workers to hearings and workshops, where resource speakers would provide input on bills, and then to Session Hall, where legislators would consolidate the perspectives to strengthen their causes. Incidentally, the senator I served under focused on often dismissed advocacies, like that of the environment and indigenous rights, so it was largely a summer of ancestral lands, local textiles, protected areas, and wildlife bureaus.

It was enlightening.

I had never considered how much a cloth and its weaving could mean to a people, until I had to read over a resolution honoring Lang Dulay of the *T'bolis*, a master dreamweaver who struggles to keep her craft alive among young women of her tribe. She is culture in the flesh.

I had never looked past wreckage shown on television to comprehend the pain of those uprooted by calamities, but I knew their suffering through *Agam*, an anthology of poems and pictures furnished upon my principal for her review. *Agam*, that which is a snapshot of climate change in various languages from majority and minority groups spanning our homeland.

I had never lamented the state of our parks until reading descriptions about them in decay, which spurred me into finally segregating and cleaning in school and at home. I had never contemplated the sides of regional journalists, tribesmen, electrical engineers, and fishermen until receiving their position papers for this case and that case.

Never have I understood until I gleaned information from carefully written materials about them, and thus I wonder how we would fare with everyone's stories recorded creatively, if

a Filipino's position paper could become his autobiography. We are in need of enlightenment as a single, national conscience that recognizes the worth of its parts by their individual journeys.

We will *never* lack stories; there is *no until*.

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Philippine literature serves as the position paper of our race. Embarking on *Noli* and *Fili*, my teacher would persuade me and my classmates to imagine ourselves as Crisóstomo, idealist-turned-cynic, or as María Clara, victim of forbidden passion and treachery. We had to create monologues for modern adaptations of Rizal's characters: an exercise in imagery, since María Clara could be the bullied schoolgirl, or the obedient daughter, or the slighted wife. For Crisóstomo and others, the present likewise holds a more extensive cast of characters than I could ever name. There are also the quintessential *Ibong Adarna* and *Florante at Laura*—works that have equally portrayed the Filipino condition. More recently, I've trudged through F.H. Batacan mysteries and the *Manila Noir* collection, scared to my bones of what could happen in the city's underbelly, because the portraits of extreme margins were so apt.

And yet, I have much to discover about the Filipino. It appears unfair that we humans only get one skin each, one shell with which to savor the world, and it's difficult to relate with others in spite of that handicap. But books are different. They've swapped leather spines for plastic casing seamlessly, while retaining their spirit. It's about time that we elevate ourselves to the same transcendence.

Today, I read a book, and I earn in the currency of ideas.

Of hopes, dreams, and experiences.

And tomorrow, I don the clothes of my people.