

Poetic Vision in Alberto Florentino's Select Plays

¹Mardie E. Bucjan

Abstract

Literature is life-it represents human experience, values and culture. It also mirrors humanity, events and history. It is one of the seven art disciplines which bring happiness to every soul, hence; it is fascinating to take a glimpse on its beauty as a work of art. This paper aims to identify the poetic vision of the selected plays of Alberto S. Florentino through Mimeses in terms of characterization and setting; and Semiotics on signifier-signified relationship (symbolisms). The qualitative content analysis is used in this paper and the analysis focuses on the five award winning pieces namely. "The World is an Apple", "Cadaver", "The Dancers", "Cavort with Angels" and "OliImpan". Results reveal that these plays reflect the social ills as gleaned from their characterization, setting, signifier- signified relationship and poetic vision. The following are hereby recommended: (1.) The inherent features of a literary work such as; characters, settings and symbolisms of any literary genres such as; poetry, short story and essay be analyzed as to their poetic vision; (2.) Analysis of social themes and symbols may be used for inclusion in the course syllabus, curriculum design and instructional materials development for literature classes.

Keywords: Alberto S. Florentino, literature, mimeses, plays, poetic vision, signifier-signified

Corresponding Author: mardie_bucjan@yahoo.com.ph

1.0 Introduction

Literature is life-it represents human experience in various forms such as sensation, feelings, moods, attitudes, thoughts and events in interrelated series through specific vehicles or artistic structure (Tan, 1995). This study aims to identify the poetic vision of the selected plays of Alberto Florentino through Mimeses in terms of characterization and setting; and Semiotics on signifier-signified relationship (symbolisms). Mr. Florentino, is an author and a playwright of fame. His works usually tackles with everyday scenarios of a commoner's life which depict the struggles of most Filipinos. Florentino is one of the Ten Outstanding Young Man awardees for literature. He was among the honorees in a tribute to the living legends of Philippine Theater. Among the famed plays of Florentino is "The World is an Apple" which deals with the commoner's life or an ordinary Filipino citizen. This play won him a Palanca Award, at age 23, while studying accountancy in the University of the East. He has written several plays and won awards, like "Cadaver", "OliImpan", "The Dancers" and "Cavort with Angels".

Literature can be studied in several ways, Ang (2009) continued, it could be for its thematic value, for richness of its plot or for comparison. In reading literary text understanding is important in order to appreciate it. In understanding a text there is a subsequent step to apply so that a reader can get the meaningful learning out from the text read. The true beauty of a literary piece is seen in the interpretation- this can be made available in the class through differentiated activities which allow learners to be proactive in learning literary works. The literary piece can be used geared toward the learning style of the child. The use of a variety of tasks such as; poetry interpretation, verse choir, reading aloud,

pantomime and the like can be a very good efforts in the development of the analysis and appreciation of literary text. In the development of language skills and use, and the development of critical thinking- the activities such as literary analysis, book review or movie review of their most favorite movie, or literary criticism or research paper are good avenues to further the critical thinking skills of the learners.

On the other hand, the plays of Alberto Florentino are very useful literary genres for the study of Philippine Literature. In the context of K-12, the Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum specifies the use of literary works of the Philippines for the students. In contextualization and localization issues, the utilization of Filipino text and works help the learners understand appreciate his own beginning and preserve his own cultural heritage. This study addressed the gap of knowledge in the context of literary analysis for appreciation of cultural heritage and preservation of one's identity through a lens not seen in the past studies read. The point of interest of this paper has not been delved by other researchers; hence, the apt of the researcher to take part.

2.0 Research Methodology

This paper uses qualitative research design in a form of content analysis. Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. It deals to quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part (Carney, 2014). Texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper

¹Surigao del Sur State University - Tandag Campus, Philippines

headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language. Texts in a single study may also represent a variety of different types of occurrences.

In the case of this paper, five award winning pieces of Alberto Florentino namely: “The World is an Apple”, “Cadaver”, “The Dancers”, “Cavort with Angels” and “OliImpan” are chosen as unit of analysis . The analysis is focused on their poetic vision. The study is premised in the theory mimeses in terms of characterization, setting and signifier-signified relationship (symbolisms). This analysis is based on the idea that art imitates reality, the idea that literature is a mimeses of real event in the actual world. In the analysis of the characters of the play, this analysis is based on character flaw of the tragic hero by tracing how it is revealed in the play and how mimeses led to the unifying idea (themes) of the play. This is an interpretative approach in analyzing the poetic vision depicted in five select plays.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The tables below summarized the analysis and the discussion of data.

Table 1. Summary of the analysis in the play “The Word is an Apple”

Title	Signifier (Symbols)	Signified (meaning)	Poetic vision/ Themes
The World is An Apple	World Apple Job	-signifies the world of unhappiness - apple valuable as Sita the child of Mario. -losing the job means losing everything valuable to him.	-Social injustice -Alienation and frustration -Theme of friendship -Irony of Life -Moral order and social justice -moral looseness/ Moral decadence

In this discussion, the characters of the play are analyzed in the mimeses of reality as Mario-the main character, struggled the hardship of life after he lost his job. According to Aristole, mimeses of events undertake the nature and differentiating qualities of imaginative literature with a view of demonstrating that it is true, serious and useful. The play “The World is an Apple” depicts the painful reality which a man can experience just like what Mario the protagonist of the play. He becomes a victim of faith and the situation when other people around him are envious and wanted to take him out of job for personal reason and interest. The real nature of man is revealed when he is on a situation where he becomes so helpless. Mario as a father of a sickly daughter and as a head of

the family- it is his duty and responsibility to provide the needs of the family. In the Philippine family code- the father is the head of the family.

Sison (1959) on his review of Florentinos works, once said; “The World is an Apple”, sets the motif of the entire collection which explores men’s ultimate resort to crime and sin after a social fact, or after an economic necessity. In present time, “losing a job is not easy, to find a new job is more difficult”. Hence, Mario in the story should have been careful; he should have not exchanged his job with a single apple because eventually, he can have more apples if he received his salary. His pay can provide more than an apple because a job would always mean life. It is then a mimesis of event when Mario goes back to his old job- stealing with his friend Pablo. This is a reality that in time of hardships when no one to go, one may resort to anything whether it is legal or illegal. Any desperate person can make harsh decision amidst of adversities.

The play is a portrayal of the real life situation of poor families who struggle a lot in order to survive. The characters actions and decisions lead to the theme of the play which is on social injustice- social injustice is described in the play as it includes oppression and abuse of human rights, poverty and economic inequality. The lack of time to hear the side of Mario and to explain the truth is an abuse of human rights- there is no due process of law. The poverty of the protagonists in the play is a not a choice but due to economic inequality where the problems crop up and ended with too much social injustice.

The setting is a mimeses of a poor surroundings and home of the unprivileged. The scenario created by Florentino is depicting the very complicated and difficult situation of the characters in the story. This is to show the realistic feature of a common environment of the below average earner-citizens. It is only these lowly people who can exist in this kind of environment. There are two kinds of mimeses; the good and bad mimeses according to Plato, hence, living in this kind of environment in the city is an example of a bad mimeses. In usual case, the squatter’s area becomes the hot bed of crime due to many people who have no permanent job, no comfortable living and homes in particular. The scenario created by the playwright is indeed a realistic picture of today’s humanity in the big city.

In this discussion, both the characters and the settings of the play “The World is an Apple” are mimeses of real event in the world today. Moreover, the characters and setting depict the theme of the play, as it evolved in the more complex life of the characters and more complicated setting where the characters strived in order to survive in this very intricate society.

The title: “The World is an Apple”, symbolizes the world of unhappiness – the irony of an apple

which is sweet and delicious which in turned becomes bittersweet life of the protagonist in the play. The frantic kind of living in the world of the slum where the lives of the couple revolved, it is the exact opposite to the real world of an apple. Dharam (1959) said; “the playwright has a heavy-handed manner of stacking up the cards against his protagonist-dire poverty, ailing daughter, loss of job, the ingredients of a sure-fire heart-tugger”. It seems that the essence of living hold through the single apple which affected the whole life of the family of Mario and Gloria. The apple also signifies the love of Mario for his child Sita. Sita is the apple of the eyes of Mario; she is as valuable as an apple and of losing a job. The love of a father is willing to sacrifice and even to give up his own life; this is the intense surrender of a father for a child. The job in the play signifies life that is why when Mario lost his job, it also means losing everything valuable to him, like his family, his pride and his life. In reality, Florentino’s works are viewed as the product of work and emphasized the role of class. The realm of production and consumption he called economics. The economic status of Mario and Gloria matters a lot in their existence which is tantamount to being alienated from one’s own nature. The spiritual loss of the protagonist of the play- losing one’s capacity make a life and transform their world into a happy one. The social themes on alienation and frustration, oral order and social injustice are basically evident in this play.

felt in the jealous heart that steals the goodness of life as God gives him the gift of existence on earth. He is not happy; he has more to complain about and has an envious heart. These are the truths of man’s nature- the discontentment of the situation may lead him to do anything, whether it would mean immorality in the eyes of God and the law of man.

The setting of the play is a description of real poverty experienced by the characters. Bernard (1959) points that the theme of the play speaks of the terrible life of the people in the slums. This theme holds true in the five plays of Florentino; this is an ugly setting, for it deals with the facts of life in the slums; and in the slums the facts of life are ugly, Bernard (1959) added. This is a sign of social protest in the mind of the author who instituted the ugliness of slum life as depicted in most of the setting of his plays. It is a denial of truth if the government could not find comfortable places for these families under the bridge, sleeping on the streets, and sheltering on the tomb in the cemetery.

In this discussion, it was pointed that the characters and the setting of the play “Cadaver” is an explicit portrayal of alienation and frustration which speak the bad mimeses of life. The mimeses of event is rather sad, as Mudrick, Scholes and Kellogg’s mimetic category refers to the realistic form of literature. They added that such character exists in realistic literature and mimetic characters independently exist in a realistic form of literary work. The very poor setting depicted in the play is more of the conventional- this is rather stereotype to the commoner’s life in the Philippines. The characters and settings hold through the the theme of play on its entirety as a realistic literary work which revealed the very heartbreaking actualities in the lives of the characters of the play and the poor Filipinos who search for asylum in the big cities in the Philippines.

The title of the play depicts the hopeless case of Torio the protagonist of the play. Cadaver signifies that their situation in the slum is more than the situation of a dead person or cadaver in the cemetery who, sooner or later, turns into ash or soil. The situation of characters in the play is an analogy of the cadaver; this is used by the author to depict the fruitless kind of life the characters have. The jewelry signifies anything very valuable. In the play, this is life of our characters. There is no more than enough, as significant as the life itself, whether one is rich and poor. The way life is lived by and enjoyed; yet in the play, the life of our characters is unpromising and very frustrating. In Florentino’s use of slums or squatter’s area as a common setting of his play, he portrays the hardships of the people residing in such places. The people there seemed to be left with no choice that is why poverty abound their whole life through. In this work of Florentino, the mimesis of events such as the economic dimension of literature

Table 2. Summary of the analysis in the play “Cadaver”

Title	Signifier (Symbols)	Signified (meaning)	Poetic vision/ Themes
Cadaver	Cadaver	- signified that their situation is more than a dead person even if they are still alive.	-Social injustice -Alienation and frustration -Theme of friendship -Irony of Life
	Jewelry	-jewelry signifies anything valuables such as the life of the poor people	-Moral order and social justice -moral looseness/ Moral decadence
	Slums/ Squatter’s area	- signifies hardships of the poor. It is poverty, nowhere to go / no choice.	-inevitability of death

The consistency of the claim of the characters in the play being financially broke and even more morally low is prevalent in the play, as Torio pitied himself with too much disappointment and lament for his miserable life. The extreme poverty of Torio is

is highlighted through the economic status of the poor characters in the play. It is how literature reflects and mirrors the social realities as it is experienced by the characters like Torio in the Cadaver. Generally, the play portrays the social themes on social injustice, alienation and frustration, theme of friendship, Irony of life, moral looseness and inevitability of death.

Table 3. Summary of the analysis in the play “The Dancers”

Title	Signifier (Symbols)	Signified (meaning)	Poetic vision/ Themes
The Dancers	Dancers prostitution	- Life - Money	- Social injustice -Alienation and frustration -Irony of Life -Moral order and social justice -moral looseness/ Moral decadence

According to Clarke, the realist argues that literary works can objectively and accurately represent, reflect, mirror, capture, depict, portray, refer to or correspond to reality or the world as it really is. The play titled “The Dancers” mirrored the very nature of a lazy and irresponsible father as portrayed by Mang Tomas in the play. According to Sison (1959), the work of Florentino is apparently a tale of a single senile person from start to finish.

Mang Tomas is built by Florentino as the mimesis of reality of an indolent and negligent father. Sison (1959) commented that Florentino wanted to effect a bitter comicality of the father’s omnipotence in the Filipino household of plain despicableness for its own sake. He must have worked for his family, but it was the opposite because Tony, the eldest son was the one who worked for them to survive. Tony as a character foil of his father is performing the supposed job of the head of a family. This is also what is called “ irony of life” when in real sense, it should be the father who burnt the midnight candle to bring money home, but the story depicts the opposite. Florentino portrayed how miserable the lives of the children become when the head of the family is foolish.

A description of a deprived household of the characters in the play in Florentino’s setting is a depiction of a poor environment, signifying that the family is suffering from too much poverty due to the father’s inability to groom the family members to be a good citizen but rather bring his children to prostitution in order to bring him money at the end of the day. The family is in the slum area- no comfortable home to stay and no enough money to provide for their needs. The exits put the two girls/ children to the hell of prostitution.

The characters and the settings are drafted by the author to describe certain painful truth that poverty exists. In this context of Florentino’s play,

poverty becomes a choice of the father because he was too lazy. He should have initiated to help his home but it is his laziness that drags him to the grave of death.

The dancers- the title signifies life and hope. Dancing in the limelight of the clubs is a life to the whole family of Mang Tomas, it saves the dying mother for without Rita’s work, and her mother could die at once. In the play, prostitution is highlighted where the head of the family himself pushed his children to this kind of work in order to earn. Prostitution in the play signifies the dying dreams and hopes of Rita and Nenita. The lazy and irresponsible father makes it all impossible for them to fulfill their dreams. The father in the play is the capitalist in real household, who tried to destroy his own children. The play reflects the illness of the society, the man who built his own society and annihilated it for his greed and avarice. Florentino tried to expose the evilness of man’s nature in the character of Mang Tomas, the conflict between the greed of man versus the goodness of man. It is depicted in the play that the economic status of the characters which lead them to their destruction of their own nature, talking about the children –Tony, Rita and Nenita who experienced the hardship of life with their oppressor the evil father . This play simply depicts the following social themes based on the analysis above; social injustice, alienation and frustration, irony of life, moral looseness and moral decadence.

Table 4. Summary of the analysis in the play “Cavort With Angels”

Title	Signifier (Symbols)	Signified (meaning)	Poetic vision/ Themes
The Dancers	Dancers prostitution	Life Money	- Social injustice -Alienation and frustration --Irony of Life -Moral order and social justice -moral looseness/ Moral decadence

According to Aristotle, all kinds of poetry or other forms of literary works involve mimeses, imitation or representation; and one can represent various aspects of real or imaginary situations through any one of a variety of means or media. The play” Cavort with Angels” talks about the two sisters who happened to survive with each other’s presence after world war two. The elder sister is a portrayal of a loving sister who hoped for the best for her younger sister and because of being totally broke she made a way out to feed her sister by selling herself. Prostitution is the way to justify the means between the two sisters; they both live together and continue to exist in the name of both better and worst situations in their lives. The younger sister was hopeful that they will be able to go against the flow of their present life,

by changing the way they carry themselves through a man who will truly love them. Florentino uses a very strong personality in the character of the elder sister and a weak personality in the younger one. The older sister seems to accept her life; as long as she lives it doesn't matter whether she is a prostitute or whether or not somebody would love her. She does not trust anybody, especially not the man she found sleeping with her younger sister. Her only inspiration is to survive with her sister because they have nothing and nowhere to go, she did not even go to church.

In Aristotle's definition of tragedy, the death of Lita portrayed the tragic flaw- the passion to reach her dream life and home in the future with the man who will marry her. The world has become too unkind, the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness have joint together that is why the main protagonist in the play died in despair. In that very dark room of their apartment, her body one morning was found cold and dead. The setting of the play depicts the miserable situations of the sisters. The setting portrayed the very sad situation of the characters in the play. Hence, both the characters' situations and behaviors give the readers/viewers ideas of the universal truth which talks about poverty of man. The setting and its characters helped the play developed the theme in "Cavort with Angels".

Cavort with Angels means prostitutes; they are the angels in the night who work hard in order to survive. The rat poison signifies death, the death of the younger sisters' hope to live a decent life. The same is true with Lita- the younger sister who lost hope and ended her life by killing herself through the rat poison. The play of Florentino directly revealed the society's perception; it is a belief that the text according to George Lukacs (1971) revealed the society's consciousness-the awareness of the protagonist of the play that life is worth living. The alienation and frustration in the character of Lita, revealed the emotion of being envious toward other people who live happily with their families. This self-awareness of the protagonist of the realistic scenario of life brought her to the realization that her life has no way out, that is why there is no other recourse but kill herself to end her sufferings. The inevitability of death of Lita is a self -declaration of her moral looseness and moral decadence. The apt to own good life and a happy family in the future becomes her inner frustration which ended to a tragic end -her ineludible demise. In this play, Florentino pointed the generally called societal ills which are depicted as a common theme in most of his works.

Florentino uses the lyrics of the song "Oh Holy Night" the song was so timely because the setting was four (4) days before Christmas. This is the time when the child Jesus Christ was born and was deprived of a better place to stay instead he was born in the stable of the horses. Similar to other characters in the play, they are deprived with the opportunity to

enjoy the celebration of Christmas because they are thrown away from their known homes or houses in the squatter's area. The lyric of the song depicts the innocence of the children just like the innocence of baby Jesus who was born in the manger. The lyric is not correctly sung by the boy because the boy has not gone to school for formal education; probably, he just heard the song and imitated it. The author has portrayed a realistic characteristic of a child specially when the child has just started to learn the things around them...just like the song...the boy has not captured the real meaning of the song due to his limited knowledge which can also be attributed to the parents who did not have time to teach him. Florentino perfectly used the characters of innocent children in this play who are saddened by their very own wretched situation being thrown out by the demolishing team. Therefore, in this context, the writer has used the faithful setting and characters which developed his theme of "poverty" on his drama.

Table 5. Summary of the analysis in the play Oli Impan

Title	Signifier (Symbols)	Signified (meaning)	Poetic vision/ Themes
Oli Impan	- OliImpan - Toy car made up of empty can - Reading palm	Holy infant- innocent children -hardship in life -deception	- Social injustice -Alienation and frustration -Theme of friendship -Irony of Life -Moral order and social justice -moral looseness/ Moral decadence

The title of the play is a symbol of innocence, the innocence of two children who are the victims of their own time. The title is taken from the word "holy infant" probably Florentino uses it as a baby talk of the word, this becomes "OliImpan" the usage is quite significant in the realization of portraying innocent life such as of the two young boy and girl in the play. According to (Bernard, 1959) OliImpan is a child's way of pronouncing the English "Holy Infant". The scene of the two children who could not understand why their abodes are being destroyed; furthermore, they cannot understand why the policemen are arresting not those who destroyed their dwellings but those who are trying to prevent them. Definitely, Florentino is successful to this effect, portraying the innocence of the young children in his play which is fitting to his title.

The appearance of the toy car - made up of a tin can is a signification of the hardship in life. Florentino tried to show that life can be like a toy car, it can be destroyed any time if not properly handled and can be thrown-away anytime if one doesn't like it. Just like the people in the slums, they are thrown-away by the government like useless toys made of tin can. The

social themes on social injustice are depicted in this play, as these poor families in the slums are thrown-away four days before the Christmas day. The people in the slum are alienated and frustrated because they were being demolished; hence, the father of the girl in the play was one of those defiant who indignantly protested but was eventually captured by the policemen. The use of palm reading as a means of living is actually a sign of deception to the thoughts of the young boy. Palm reading usually is a scam there is no truth at all- the same is true with the real work of the mother of the boy which is not palm reading but prostitution. In any means or any form, man continued to survive, just like the mother of the boy. The conception of deception is hidden to the boy but shown to the reading public that all these things are happening around not only in the plays of Florentino but in the real life. The awareness of these two young individuals brought them to a simple realization that life is difficult. There is a clash between the haves and have-nots in the play of Florentino. The haves tried to claim for what they own because they cannot give it up for the have-nots like the people in the slums who do not own even a parcel of land and home for their own. The negativities of their lives in the squatter's area showed the alienation of characters. They are displaced from world where they are supposed to live; the negativity of the haves the alienation of the characters in the play.

3.0 Conclusion

The five select plays of Alberto S. Florentino reflect the social ills as gleaned from their characterization, setting, signifier-signified relationship and themes. As a whole, the five plays of Florentino revolved in the following poetic vision: (1.) Social injustice, this can be traced in the five plays. The inequality, deprivation and discrimination of equal opportunity among the poor; (2.) the alienation and frustration, all the five plays depict the sense of alienation and frustration of the protagonist of the play. They are frustrated with the kind of life they have-they wanted to go out but there seemed to be no way out. They are alienated to their own world, if there could have been a choice but there is none; (3.) the theme of friendship in the plays "The World is an Apple" and "Cadaver" is also seen, the friends who are always there, for better and for worst; (4.) irony of life- this is the outcome of event which is contrary to what would normally happen. Like for example in "The Dancers"-the pillar of the family should be the bread and butter; defender of the family but it was the opposite in the play. All the five plays suggest the same social themes on the irony of life- everybody in the play works for the good of their family but all their efforts are in vain, everything becomes futile because the time did not agree with what they hoped and wished for; (5.) social protest, to quote Sison (1959) the short plays of Florentino is a clenched fist of

social protest. He continued that Florentino is a poet of the city's slum area who has seen and worked out the symbolic value of the squatter." The significance of his works is strongly social, Sison (1959); (6.) moral looseness/ moral decadence is the degradation of quality of man's character or virtuous nature, this theme is also found in all the five plays of Florentino, where his characters in all of his plays especially the protagonists in the plays where all founded lowering their virtuous nature due to frustrating lives they have experienced. Other characters ended with death, others with loafing, and others with prostitution and among others all of those are lowering the good nature of man; (7.) the inevitability of death, in the play of "Cadaver" and "Cavort with Angels", this poetic vision is portrayed. No one can say no when it is already your time to go back to the creator, that is why death is inevitable in man's life.

4.0 Recommendation

Based on conclusion of the study, the following are hereby recommended: (1.) the inherent features of a literary work such as; characters, settings and symbolisms of any literary genres such as; poetry, short story and essay be analyzed as their poetic vision; and (2.) analysis of social themes and symbols may be used for inclusion in the course syllabus, curriculum design and instructional materials development for literature classes.

References:

- Ang, J.G. (2009). *Kritika selected readings in Philippines Lit. from Colonial to Post – EDSA*. Mindshapers Co. Inc. 61 Mindulla St. Intramuros, Manila.
- Bernard, M.S.J. (1959). "Squatters in Alberto S. Florentino" *the world is an Apple and other prized plays*. Cultural Publishers, Manila Philippines.
- Carney, T. F. (2014). *Content analysis: A technique for systematic inference from communications*. Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press
- Clarke, R.L.W. & Lucien, G. (2014). *The genetic structuralist in the history of literature*. LITS3303 Notes 03B.
- Clarke, R.L.W. (n.d.) *Literary representation the mimetic approach to criticism*.
- Dharam, M. (1959). "Arena summer plays in Alberto S. Florentino". *The world is an apple and other prized plays*. Cultural Publishers, Manila Philippines.
- Lukacs, G. & Clarke, R.L.W. (1971). *Art and objective*

- truth. LITS3303 Notes 04A. Retrieved on August 15, 2014.
- Sison, J.M. (1959). "*The Filipino theater in Alberto S. Florentino*". *The world is an apple and other prized plays*". Cultural Publishers, Manila Philippines.
- Tan, A.B. (1995). *Introduction to literature*. 3rd Ed. Academic Publishing Corporation, Second Floor, Rudge I, Bldg. 17 Shaw Boulevard, Pasig City, Metro Manila.