A Reading of Nick Joaquin’s the Woman Who Had Two Navels

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The Woman Who Had Two Navels
REGINA T. GARCIA

It seems to be widely accepted that the works of a writer like Nick Joaquin should inspire panegyrics. One recalls the excitement attendant on the publication of Joaquin's first novel among enthusiasts of Filipino literature, as well as the added tag of quality writing affixed to it by the 1960 Stonehill Novel Award. Small wonder then that some students and critics have been so willing to concede, rather vaguely, the excellence of The Woman Who Had Two Navels without understanding what the novel is all about.

Much of that awe may be partly explained by Joaquin's poetic facility with language, by his ability to overwhelm the reader's sense with his "lush, exotic manner of narration," demanding "that the situations be unusual and that the climaxes be violent."¹

There are critics, like Teodoro M. Locsin, who go so far in their admiration of Joaquin as to designate him "the first literary artist of the country."² Rev. James Donelan, S.J., takes a more moderate view when he speaks with great respect of "the dynamic organization of his [Joaquin's] language and his 'great metaphysical seeing.'"³

²Teodoro M. Locsin, cited by Bernad, ibid., p. 53.
Nick Joaquin's work can never be seen in its true light if readers are to continue accepting, at face value, a review's gushing pronouncements on the novel's unquestioned superiority:

One approaches the task of reviewing *The Woman Who Had Two Navel* with great reluctance for here is excellence . . . . It is easy enough to tell its story, for it is a very good story. But to summarize the story is to render poetry into prose. It can be a waste of beauty. For the goodness of this novel is in its story, but its beauty is in its poetry and the two are never clearly separate.4

The unusual nature of the subject matter is undoubtedly teasing enough to stimulate many a person into reading the novel with the avidity reserved for mystery thrillers. It is to be assumed, however, that Nick Joaquin's novel aspires to be more than just a readable book. In fact, if the novel were truly what Miss Constantino claims it to be, ("... a work not only of labor but of sensibility and grace, a wringing of magic from words"), it should be able to survive the test of a relatively detailed analysis the purpose of which would be to clarify how theme is embodied in the novel's structure.

The novel is built upon Connie Escobar's belief that she has two navels. The first scene presents Connie making her outlandish claim to Doctor Pepe Monson:

When she told him she had two navels he believed her at once; she seemed so urgently, so desperately serious—and besides, what would be the point in telling a lie like that, he asked himself, while she asked him if he could help her, if he could arrange "something surgical," an operation.6 (p. 1.)

In affirming the existence of the second navel to Father Tony Monson, Connie is almost vehement: "It's not an idea! And what difference does it make if it's only in my head or actually here if I believe it's actually here?" (p. 94.)

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5 Ibid., 645.
6 All quotations from and page references to the novel are from Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (Manila: Regal Publishing Co., 1961).
A great portion of the novel renders characters and situations in the realistic manner, a treatment that leads the reader to demand a literal explanation for Connie’s obsession with that part of her anatomy. Since the novel does not delineate the exact nature of the neurosis, the reader is left to integrate isolated facts with the explicit statements of the theme in order to understand Connie. A definite fact is then established: Connie’s claim is acceptable, only when considered in the light of the novel’s obvious attempts at symbolism.

Connie’s insistence on the presence of an extra navel betrays a confusion as to her origins, the navel being a symbol of man’s life-source. A series of traumatic experiences has driven Connie into refusing to deal any further with the affairs of the real world. Connie’s initiation into reality symbolically begins when the war destroys the house that has secluded her from the outside world. Reality intrudes into the world of her childhood, as evidenced by the destruction and the weedy decay that the war has brought: “All about them the burned bones of the house climbed the air to no purpose, like the bars of a busted cage” (p. 165). The image of “a busted cage” suggests the liberation from a childhood world of happy illusions to the freedom inherent in a world of moral responsibilities.

Connie’s doubts concerning her origins are caused by the one major disillusionment she undergoes in adolescence when she discovers a lurid fact about her father. In a dream-sequence, Connie expresses her search for self-identity to her father, Manolo Vidal:

Because I must know what I am . . . and how can I know that if I don’t know what I came from? When I was little . . . I came upon a sword and a pistol, I saw an old uniform hanging beside an old flag. I found some old books and newspapers. I began to form a picture of what my father was. Oh, he was a hero. But then I grew up and began to notice what people were saying, what the newspapers were saying. Now I don’t know which is my real father—the one in the old newspapers or the one in the new ones. But I do know I must find him. (pp. 173-74.)

Manolo Vidal is an ogre (it is said that he resembles Biliken, the lewd-looking carnival god) who does away with un-
wanted babies. Unfortunately, Connie's desire for moral decency expresses itself in a hopeless attempt to escape as a dishwasher in some chop-suey joint. Failing to cope with reality, she retires into a state of masked stoicism:

. . . she seemed to feel nothing, sitting there with her hands folded on her lap and her painted face a blank and that repulsive dress making her look like a cheap taxi-dancer on a dull night. (p. 16.)

A second trauma occurs when Connie discovers, through some old letters, that her husband, Macho Escobar, had been her mother's lover. Feeling unwanted, Connie retires to the carnival-world of her childhood, to Biliken who is referred to once as "an unwanted baby."

Connie's assertion that she is a kind of monster with two navels betrays a longing to be a mere animal, to forsake a world where moral choices have to be made. (Reference is made to "a world where one envied the animals precisely because they did not pray" [p. 109].) Connie's habitual escape into a Chinese temple, where she has set up Biliken, symbolizes her escape into her childhood past which was not really happy since she had been living under the delusion that she had such perfect parents. Connie assumes the nature of that past by living a lie because to her:

. . . lies were safety; were ice cream and movies; were the wall and the gates and the armed guard, and the big house ringed about with orchards. Outside was terror—the crosses on the door, the three hags wandering in the night. (p. 145.)

Life for Connie becomes a continuous attempt to preserve an unreal peace: "I had got back my peace again—the peace I found in a garden, the peace Biliken gave me . . ." (p. 135). Hence, Connie's identification with Biliken (who acquires two bullet holes on his belly, which look like navels) becomes perfectly relevant to the story's theme since she aspires to the stolid, smiling immobility of an idol, a god of another unreal world: the carnival.

Connie's unnatural attachment to Biliken (a "revolting figure sprawling obscenely backward, thighs spread apart, to expose its mutilated belly" [pp. 166-67]) is a compensating factor for her loneliness and possible inability to love:
One moment there she had been in the bedroom, suffering, and the next moment here she was with Biliken—and everything was all right. She was smiling, she was at peace, she had accepted Biliken. He and she were one again. (p. 170.)

The novel’s thematic construction evinces an acute tension between the opposing poles of Connie’s inner conflict. Connie has discovered falseness in those people whom she has learned to trust and to love. Her unmasking of an abortionist father forces her to recognize the lie of a life she has been sharing with her parents. Her father’s rejection of life indicates his own state of “living death.”

Connie chooses to live a real life by marrying Macho. Being almost twice Connie’s age, Macho Escobar stands as a substitute-father for Manolo Vidal. To Connie, he is also the embodiment of that unknown state of real living. The author makes his intention clear through the choice of the name, “Macho,” which is Spanish for “male.” Macho thus embodies essential masculinity and virility. In a dream-sequence, the author identifies his presence with the sensations of living things: “The dark became a cluster of ripening odors: wet earth, cattle, vegetables, the night soil” (p. 146).

Frustrated in her marriage, Connie seeks life anew in her unashamed pursuit of Paco Texeira, a Filipino-Portuguese musician. Paco is implicitly identified with “real life” through the characterization of his wife, Mary, who bears an uncanny resemblance to him: “Pepe Monson noted again how like brother and sister the Texeiras looked . . . —like the stock twins of Italian romances . . .” (p. 11). In fact, the resemblance goes deeper than the physical: “He [Paco] never had to feel his way around Mary: she was so much herself as to seem his twin . . .” (Ibid). There is a quality in Mary’s personality which makes her representative of that freshness and honest freedom which characterize life:

The wind rushed by with a clatter of branches and she [Mary] saw a young girl walking in it—a tall girl in flat shoes, her brown hair lifting in the wind. Behind the girl was the summer sky of Spain and the mountains of Toledo. She always saw this girl in the open air, among mountains; nothing, it seemed, could ever coop her up; and she was in Spain that summer . . . precisely because she would not let
love impair her independence—not caring . . . to be cooped up with her father, who needed her, nor with Paco, who wanted to marry her . . . That girl had never come back . . . [she] was still out in the wind, among the mountains, walking through an eternal summer. (p. 84.)

Connie pursues Paco to Hong Kong which exists as an unreal world since its isolation mirrors Connie’s own state of isolation from the rest of the world. A variant on this theme of isolation is the fact that the Monsons, the Texeiras and Rita Lopez are Filipino exiles isolated from their native land. There is more than a mere geographical displacement in their case since they are ignorant of their national origins, except for the memories of Filipino life, nostalgically sentimentalized by homesick Doctor Monson:

He [old Monson] would describe how their house in Binondo had a large stone azotea behind, with steps going right down to the water, and how you could go out on that azotea and buy everything you needed . . . from villagers rowing into town in small boats . . . The villagers’ voices were what woke you up in the morning and his father would jump up from bed and run to the window . . . His father would snatch a towel and run down to the azotea. On other azoteas, on both sides of the river, other boys would be stripping for an early dip and hallooing at each other. (pp. 9-10.)

Thus, the displacement of these Filipinos also becomes a temporal one, giving their life in Hong Kong “a sense of displaced time.” People without a past to look back to can only live in the present, hardly caring about what the future may bring. Ironically enough, it is down-to-earth Rita Lopez who is largely responsible for the preservation of the “unreality” that has so far marked the placid lives of the Monsons and the Texeirias, since she has kept them sufficient unto themselves in exile:

To that little group of child exiles who had grown up together on the Hong Kong streets Rita had been an imperious chieftain . . . Neither growing up nor the war had stopped her little childhood government; she steered Mary and Paco into marriage, struggled with Tony over his vocation, stored up Pepe on a shelf. The five of them had felt utterly uninvolved in the war, moving through wartime Hong Kong as they had moved, in childhood, through the public playgrounds—

a group apart,—children without a country, inhabiting an enchanted world of their own. (p. 52.)

Such a world ("... as solid as Hong Kong's rock") gets jolted out of its imagined stability when two of its inhabitants visit the Philippines and bring back in their wake, a woman claiming she has two navels. The modern Philippines becomes identified with the Filipino past since it is the existing representation of what the past has become. A visit to the Philippines would mean an attempt to re-visit a past. Removed from the "displaced" world of Hong Kong, Paco Texeira and Doctor Monson encounter reality and frustration. Paco sees falseness in Filipino life which Doctor Monson must have discovered as well since the visit is a traumatic experience for the old man. In Doctor Monson's case, the reality has not coincided with the illusory expectations of his motherland which he has built up in exile from his private memories of a supposedly ideal past. Paco's impressions of Manila objectify what has so disgusted these two expatriates:

He [Paco] had resumed his solitary explorations of the city but what he now saw increased his discomfort: the heat-dazzling panic-edgy streets darkened in his brains with doom, dirt, danger, disease, and violent death. Some venom was at work here, seeping through all the layers, canker ing in all directions. The señora's world of mansions might sit uneasily on its avenues; the hovels of the poor squatted no less nervously on their gutters. . . .

Paco sensed an unreality in both worlds: the people who occupied them did not seem to be living there at all. They denied the locale . . . [with] the aversion of the opium eater. . . . Their drugged eyes . . . denied the heat and the dust and the rats as well as the not quite authentic glitter of the downtown smart shops . . . One smiled and floated away, insulated from all the drab horror of inadequate reality by the ultra-perfect, colossal, stupendous, technicolored magnificence of the Great American Dream. (pp. 31-32.)

While Paco sluggishly claims to have lost his will, Doctor Monson retreats into the peaceful inaction of his own opium-world, into a state of living death. The trips into the past function as a shattering of the illusory world carefully built about the Monsons and the Texeiras by all their years of exile.

Living in one's world of illusions is pretty much impossible. People living in the isolation of their private dream-
worlds only succeed in destroying one another, especially since an illusory world is not compatible with actions executed in the ordinary world of affairs. Since people must necessarily affect one another, some amount of tragedy results from their blundering, imperfect efforts to help each other. The implications of a human dilemma dawns upon Father Tony when he tells Rita Lopez:

A moment ago... you were telling me it was just plain cowardice not to do what one has to do for fear of hurting other people. I can see now you're right. We're all so involved in one another we can hardly draw a breath without making somebody suffer somewhere. In the end we all have to be rather callous and ruthless to be able to act at all. It's the everyday courage we need to live. (p. 211.)

The drama of inaction, in "a world of will-deprived ghosts," is played to the full in Connie Escobar. In the discussion of Connie's problem, the other characters gain an insight into the problem of isolation. Bereft of the comfort of illusions, they learn to accept their inadequacies even as they are grateful for the fact that Connie should be the instrument of their own individual growth. Father Tony sums up the beneficial effects of the three days of confusion that Connie's bid for attention has initiated: "And maybe we all needed this to happen, so we can grow up. We have been happy and harmless children too long; maybe it was time we were shaken up" (p. 214).

So much of man's inhumanity to man may be explained away by man's fallen nature—by his very humanity. Such a realization is dramatized in the chapter, "The Chinese Moon," where Connie is regenerated through four kinds of death. People are not really as monstrous as she has made them out to be. They are merely human. They only become monstrous when they refuse to choose between good and evil, when they comfortably fall back on the excuse that they have two navels. The fact is brought home to Connie by her own father in her "death-by-air."

... you can't go around forever looking for swords and flags. You want heroes—and when you don't get heroes you make up devils.

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8 Casper, loc. cit.
We're just people. And you'll have to learn to accept us as we are. (p. 175.)

Connie's re-birth is projected in the fact that the other characters (and even the reader) are momentarily deluded into concluding she has committed suicide. But Connie Escobar is able to jump from the car that goes hurtling down a cliff. Since every human action involves a kind of moral responsibility, one must learn to face the fact of using the free will: of choosing between the irreconcilable alternatives of a human dilemma. Connie's refusal to face reality has been a kind of imprisonment. Real freedom comes when she chooses to live: "No, she had not wanted to die after all. Clenched in the fist of death, she had broken away, she had torn loose—and with a passion that had burst through lock and steel" (p. 201).

Regenerated in new wisdom, Connie chooses to run away with Paco Texeira with the knowledge that she is committing adultery. She chooses sin with the assurance that she is at least affirming her humanity. She explains her action in a letter:

Please tell Father Tony I'm sorry I didn't find the courage to do the right thing, but he knows that for people like me it takes a lot of courage to do anything at all, even wrong, and having found the courage to do this now I may yet find the courage to do the other thing too. (pp. 209-10.)

The theme of inaction points out the need to recognize the past if one is to come to terms with his own identity. Hence, the novel's constant recapitulation of the past lives of the characters. The theme of moral responsibility is echoed in the treatment of the different crises that force the other characters to accept the reality of the past and to learn how to act in the present.

Señora Concha de Vidal best reflects that inability to change for the better. Besides sharing the name, "Concha," with Connie, La Vidal is often identified with her daughter as in the following assertion made by Connie to Father Tony:

... I was dreaming I was my mother but I was also still myself. It was very confusing. She and I have the same name. I didn't know which one I really was. I had somehow become both of us... (p. 95.)
In a dream-sequence, there is an explicit identification made between mother and daughter when Connie hits back at her mother:

Why should I pity you, Mother? I'm not your pity, . . . I'm your vanity and your malice and your cruelty and your lust. I'm the fruit of all the evil you carry in you. That was what you bore when you bore me. And I am what you'll have to swallow until you die. (p. 160.)

Since La Vidal is partly responsible for Connie's neurosis, it is perfectly logical to refer to her as a kind of Medusa who freezes others into immobility and inaction: "... she [Connie] barely saw her mother's face poised before her, the drowned hair rearing up like vipers and the eyes horribly open, the white face glittering as in a mirror ..." (p. 163).

Flashbacks into La Vidal's past reveal a world where "... even animals were ceremonious and shared men's ancient pieties" (p. 108). It is a world which Concha Vidal claims was ideal because older people acted as references and guides to action. Of old Doctor Monson, La Vidal says: "When I was a little girl people like your father were my conscience walking around in elegant clothes ..." (p. 13).

On the other hand, a review of that past hints at a society overly concerned with proper appearances. Concha Vidal has unknowingly played false as a young girl in love, concealing her passion for Esteban Borromeo because she would not offend her parents. With Esteban's death, she drifts into a "mild affair with a man for whom she felt more pity than passion" (p. 119). Concha Vidal then reverts to her childish hypocrisy when her lover commits suicide and she discovers that she is bearing his child:

Panic left her sure of only one thing: that her father was not to know, that her father's old age was not to be dishonored. She was again the young Conchita Gil who had put on an elaborate act and had kept it up for almost a year. . . . (p. 120.)

Concha Vidal chooses evil when she chooses the abortion of her baby. What is worse, she resigns herself into sharing her life with a man who denies to human beings the right to exist.
Small wonder then why La Vidal seeks regeneration through her affairs with younger men. Parties and a coterie of companions are her only surety against a miserable reminder of her state of "living death:" "Intimate with no one, she yet needed a crowd always around her; the door shutting at dawn on the last guest oppressed her like a coffin's lid" (p. 29).

Although La Vidal dies without displaying any obvious sign of repentance, the novel suggests how much pain she must have endured. In the dream-sequence of Connie's "death-by-water" is an insight into the complexity of the motives that had driven La Vidal into action:

Connie, listen to me. I did a terrible thing when I married your father but when you were born I swore to myself not to let you suffer for what I had done. I tried to be the kind of mother other children have. Yes, it was all a lie and a pretending—but what else could I do? I thought you needed me, Connie, and I didn't want to break your heart too soon. . . . So at last I had to give up pretending. . . . I knew you would hate me but that was part of my penance and I thought that by hating me you would free yourself from me and be saved.

Now I see I have failed all the way. . . . But how clean are your hands? Oh Connie, you don't hate me because I lied to you, you hate me because I stopped lying. . . . You wanted all that sham world of your childhood back and I was to be kept there, dancing to your tune, blackmailed into submission, because you must have somebody between you and the real world. (pp. 160-61.)

One of Concha Vidal's major mistakes has been her well-intentioned arrangement of Macho and Connie's marriage:

Once upon a time . . . she had given up Macho when it was almost a giving up of life itself, only to see him corrupted far more by her renunciation than by her lust. Wanting to save him still, and wanting to save her daughter, she had given them to each other—the two people she loved and feared most, two ruthless babes in the world who . . . would be happy together because they could be trusted with each other. (p. 82.)

Like Connie, Macho Escobar is "Telemacos" in search of a real father. The father Macho knew distorted the paternal role by disciplining his son to enjoy nothing else but the major vices. A flashback into Macho's past reveals how an aimless
life had dulled him into a state of "living death", a fact which is not immediately obvious since there is so much physical violence in that life:

And he would turn an eager face towards something ever expected, would run towards it—although "it" always turned out to be just one more party, another midnight swim, the usual violence the morning after, when, tired and drunk and sleepy but still keyed up, one felt like smashing windows or racing cars or beating up a rude waiter. (p. 73.)

Reared to live a purely sensual existence ("Father and son . . . hunted, drank and whored together . . .", [p. 71]) Macho makes a stab at real living through the satisfaction of his passion for La Vidal. Macho is not a mere animal. A breakthrough of feeling occurs early in his life:

On his fifteenth birthday his father had presented Macho with a woman. . . . Macho's girl was the daughter of a tenant farmer . . . and came as payment for her father's debts. . . . When she became pregnant his father sent her away. Macho was told that she had fallen sick. Then he learned that the baby had been born dead and that she had been shipped off to Manila as a servant-girl. Enraged, he had driven a car across a sugarcane field, ruining both the cane and the car. When his father tried to whip him the boy had fought back and was driven from the house. (p. 74.)

The novel suggests that Mary might eventually have something to gain from Connie's action. Even if one part of Mary had been willing to sacrifice in marrying Paco, there was another side of her which she left behind in Toledo. Father Tony expresses the blessing that may result from Paco's running away with Connie: "Oh, maybe this thing is not as one-sided as we think. Maybe Mary needed this too, needed to lose him, so she may have a chance to find herself" (p. 214).

Since Connie Escobar can finally accept reality, she is likewise able to forgive the past. Seeking for identity, she finds the father she has been in search of in the person of Doctor Monson, the hero of her mother's childhood. This hero has not quite lived up to the ideals expected of him, and he has to plead for forgiveness from the younger generation. Doctor Monson realizes that he had been:
willing to die, not for a great public future, but a small private past... not for a flag or a people, but for just one town, one street, one house—for the sound of a canal in the morning, the look of some roofs in the noon sun, and the fragrance of a certain evening flower. (p. 220.)

Unwilling to accept the fact that his private past could not possibly exist forever, the old man had adamantly refused to accept the present and had deprived his sons of their national identity. Two generations come to an understanding:

She [Connie] felt his [Dr. Monson's] hand blessing her and knelt up and crept to his breast and he flung his arms about her and embraced her, embracing in her the grief of all the generations he had failed to know, whose passion he had refused to share. Kneeling clasped in each other's arms, the young girl and the old man mutely implored each other's forgiveness. (p. 205.)

Old Doctor Monson dies, but not before he is able to come to an understanding of the present generation. Macho chooses to kill La Vidal and afterwards, to commit suicide. It may be noted that all these deaths are variations on the theme of regeneration, projected in Connie's story.

Paco, Connie, the young Monsons and Rita Lopez choose life. Self-knowledge implies a recognition of one's humanity and a refusal to forsake the idea of living. Joaquin is at his moralizing best when he speaks through the old priest in Connie's dream-sequence:

Because it is so hard to keep the world going there is always the temptation to abandon the effort altogether. For there is always the sowing and the harvesting, the building and the repairing, the falling down and the rising up again. Every day, everything has to be done all over again. In our world, it is always Monday morning. (p. 181.)

At this point, it would be well to investigate the "pattern" or the coherent organization of various literary techniques used by the author to make a meaningful work of art of his material. The Woman Who Had Two Novels treats of life; but it does not concentrate on the historical or chronological interest of human events. The novel aims to convey the complexities of human experience and the confused state of mind of its characters. The primary techniques used are the revolving point of view, the dream-sequences and omniscient narration.
The presentation of different points of view throws light on the problem of Connie especially since her confusion compels her to make up wild stories about herself, stories which often conflict with what La Vidal says concerning certain events in the past. The revolving point of view also serves to dramatize the interrelationships between the characters. One recalls Father Tony's remark on the inevitability of people affecting one another. Besides, Connie's problem is a human problem shared by the others.

The flashbacks stress the need for a re-discovery and an acceptance of the reality of the past. The treatment of time gives an impression of its relative quality. Constant shifts between past and present project the idea that the present is a result of the past, that decisive spurs to present action are necessarily affected by past actions.

The novel alternates between the illusionistic manner and the objective presentation of scenes. Hong Kong represents the world of illusion into which the characters escape. Since the novel dramatizes actions in the present, events that occur in Hong Kong are presented in a realistic manner. There is a quality in the illusory world which makes it pass for reality. On the other hand, it is in Hong Kong that the characters discover the nature of reality.

The past as well as memories of events in Manila, are presented in an unrealistic fashion. Obviously, the unreality serves to assert the vagueness of memory and the subjective elements which each character infuses into his remembrance of events.

The structure of the novel objectifies the thematic variations on the drama of inaction since Nick Joaquin divides his book into five sections, each section extending into a flashback into the lives of the five major characters.

Despite this concentration on one character in every section, Connie keeps the focal position. She becomes the "Chinese Moon" (title of the fourth section which dramatizes her regeneration)—the symbol for "moments of decision," "for time to pay old debts."
The first section describes "Paco", who represents the force that inspires Connie to desire life. In the beginning, Connie’s pursuit of Paco is her way of escaping from the pain of reality. Ironically enough, her escape into illusion results in her discovery of reality itself. The second section focuses on "Macho" who figures in Connie’s immediate past and who embodies Connie’s earlier bid for happiness. The third section concentrates on "La Vidal" whose own past sheds light on Connie’s problem. At this point, the themes of illusion, reality and moral responsibility gain a new perspective with the generalization that the older generation has to come to grips with its own conscience in order to help the present generation. "The Chinese Moon" marks the climax with Connie’s salvation from frustration. The last section is entitled "Doctor Monson". He represents the generation before Concha Vidal, a generation which Connie hardly knows because people like Manolo and Concha have rejected the traditions of truth and goodness and have kept these traditions from the young. Thus, the novel begins with the confused situation in the present, regresses into the past lives of Macho and La Vidal, rises to a climax in Connie’s unmotivated regeneration, and fades peacefully into understanding and forgiveness as old Monson comes to terms with Connie, a representative of the younger generation.

The realistic treatment of events is an indication of Nick Joaquin’s intention to make his story credible. The book suffers because his careful manipulation of events is acutely felt in certain parts. The dream-sequences are perfectly incredible when treated on the literal level. So is the melodramatic encounter between Connie and old Monson who are perfect strangers to each other:

Recognition had flashed in her eyes too—here, at last, was the ghost from her childhood; the hero they had all betrayed—and a weight lifted from her breast as she walked towards him, dropped to her knees at his feet, and said:

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

Two generations that had lost each other here met in exile. (p. 204.)

At this point, the story lapses into allegory because characters, acting hitherto as ordinary human beings, are sum-
marily transformed into abstract representations. In the latter part of the novel, Nick Joaquin implicitly states the theme in the moralistic pronouncements of the "strange old priest with luminous eyes" (p. 178), in the attempts made by the Monsons and Rita Lopez to understand the problem, and most especially, in the awkward welding of Connie's story with that of Doctor Monson.

The author has tried to include his many preoccupations about Filipinos in this one novel. Connie's problem is sufficient unto itself without the imposition of the historical and sociological themes. The fact is made evident when Nick Joaquin succumbs to the temptation of writing short "essays" on the Philippine South and the naivety of certain Filipinos like Kikay Valero.

It has been noted how certain scenes become incredible when considered on the literal level. However, an air of unreality characterizes the other events, an atmosphere created by Joaquin's prose style with its hypnotic enumeration of details:

Fog bulged against the windowpanes, as though elephants were wedging past. Hawkers, four stories below, sounded miles away, or whispering halfheartedly. Pepe Monson was grateful for the elephants and the hushed hawkers but would have preferred the usual view at the window—of the harbor, gay with junks and ferryboats; of the downtown buildings standing up in white ranks across the water, in the noon sun, the island's rock delicately ostentatious behind them. . . . But there was a fog and no view, and the lights were on in the cold room, but the cold was only a mist her mouth made to the woman sitting before his desk, insulated in black furs to her ears, her hat's brim cutting an angle of shadow across her face, and pearls gleaming at her throat when she leaned forward. (pp. 4-5.)

Nick Joaquin betrays his fondness for misleading his readers in the episode where Pepe Monson, the horse-doctor prepares to examine Connie's avowed two navels. The third section ends with a lengthy description of Pepe steeling himself against any possible shock and with the inconclusive last sentence: "The twilit room seemed extraordinarily still as he walked slowly towards the door" (p. 140). Suffice it to say that Pepe Monson never speaks of that physical examination.
In the section, “The Chinese Moon,” Nick Joaquin portrays Connie’s spiritual death and regeneration in a melodramatic portrayal of her death via the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. The narration assumes a cinematic effect as events from the past are juxtaposed with imagined encounters created by the author to project his theme in full force. Any reader may well discern the author’s obvious display of verbal virtuosity.

Connie’s “death-by-earth” re-objectifies her childish desire for Biliken, as well as the anguish of her married life. Depicted as a train accident with Macho, the death is pure fantasy:

As she [Connie] reached for the bag she felt it snatched away and herself hurried upward, roof and darkness dissolving as she shot through them into light, a blinding hot light with thunder rumbling behind it and earth suddenly swarming across it, earth blowing through her hair, into her face, down her bosom, earth thickening her mouth and stopping her ears, earth falling now in a wild shower through which, her eyes clearing, she saw her husband staring back at her in the white light, became conscious of his arms still urgent around her and, herself feeling nothing, read in his face the stages of their simultaneous destruction. (p. 151.)

Connie’s “death-by-water” portrays her confronting her mother on a ship which sinks and drowns both of them. Connie desires re-birth, a return to her mother’s womb since she pleads with La Vidal: “Then bear me again different! Want me now and bear me again different” (p. 162).

In Connie’s “death-by-air,” she is seen aloft in a plane with her father. Manolo Vidal is associated with “air” because his rejection of life has made him an ineffectual husband and father. He is a hazy figure whose character emerges only from the factual narration of events as well as the attitude of the other characters towards him.

It becomes doubly strange that in this dream-sequence, Manolo Vidal proves to be the most realistic in his admission of past mistakes and his anxiety over Connie. Hence, he tries to convince Connie that the hero of her childhood is a mere personification of Biliken: “Haven’t you found out that was
only Biliken?... pulp and paste—a hoary buffoon, a discarded idol?” (p. 175.) In her despair, he harangues her:

... If you must go down, go down raging. Do not lose that ability, like I did. Take things hard, make a fuss, and refuse to accept what we are—no, not even now. Rage, rage against us... you must not make any peace with us. (p. 176.)

Complete knowledge comes when the old priest accuses Connie:

You have been going around destroying everybody's faith and confidence.

You come creeping among us, whispering: “Come to our Sabbath, come to our carnival... Abandon the effort, relax let everything come to a stop...” (pp. 180-81.)

Accused of being a witch who should burn at the stake, Connie defends herself by insisting that “... one doesn't merit burning for telling a silly lie, for keeping a silly doll” (Ibid). But, the priest retorts:

And they [the witches] too, began just as innocently: a silly little lie, a silly little doll. But the lie becomes a fact; the doll grows a fist and becomes master. Your Biliken has found you. (Ibid.)

Connie drives her car towards the precipice but she jumps out before it crashes. The description of her “death-by-fire” delays the conclusion since the reader is almost sure at this point that Connie gets killed:

... and then it happened, the blast, the hot blaze, the illumination; and fire sprang up about her... fire enveloped her; she was clothed with fire, crowned and aureoled with fire, and she rose, transfigured, on wings of flame, on a chariot of fire; she was the rockets blazing up to hail the moon, the fireworks and firecrackers bursting with joy in the air; she was fire itself; beautiful, blessed fire, the purifying element, the element of light; burning splendidly, burning exultantly, between the moon and the sea. (p. 184.)

The burning and the illumination culminates in the fusion of Connie with the moon:

... as the car leapt over the cliff's edge, a thrilling sensation of weightlessness—for she was riding now upon air, into the moon; she was in the moon itself now, drawn into its circumference she saw it luminous all about her and flung her hands to touch it... (Ibid.)
Connie is not only the witch silhouetted against the light of the full moon. She is also like the moon which causes lunacy, as some people believe. Connie does create confusion akin to madness, although she utters a truth when she defends herself: "Then I'm right . . . to destroy your little faith . . . to make you all aware of your lies with my lie" (p. 183).

As the moon dispels part of the night's darkness, so Connie acts as an illuminating principle, serving as an instrument in the re-organization of the lives of the other characters. She is, in fact, an instrument of "conscience." In a passage, Nick Joaquin presents the image of the moon as "conscience".

The eyes [of the old priest] burned down upon her; came closer and closer, detaching themselves from the face and growing steadily larger and more luminous as they approached, magnified into blinding moons flooding her with light, urging her to confess, confess, confess. (p. 183.)

*The Woman Who Had Two Navels* will continue to fascinate readers if only for its subject matter, its air of mystery, its melodrama and its moral. A reader is more likely to ignore the technical lapses because Nick Joaquin demonstrates capability at creating suspense, and whetting the reader's curiosity to read through to the end. Reading the novel becomes doubly pleasurable when one is patient enough to connect the pieces in this jig-saw puzzle of events and motivations.