

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## And Quiet Flows the Dawn

L.M. Grow

*Philippine Studies* vol. 45, no. 2 (1997): 287–291

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## And Quiet Flows the Dawn

L.M. Grow



**Without Seeing the Dawn.** By Stevan Javellana. Boston: Little, Brown, 1947.

In spite of its ranking as a landmark in nearly every history of Philippine literature in English, Stevan Javellana's *Without Seeing the Dawn* has had a rather quiet reception in the literary community, as Reyes (1979, 71) noticed: "Only Leonard Casper has written on *Without Seeing the Dawn* in *New Writing from the Philippines*. No other serious study has been made of the novel." Although the latter remark is an exaggeration—at least two serious, in-depth studies had been published by 1970<sup>1</sup>—Reyes' impression that too little had been done holds true, in spite of laudatory comments by early critics and reviewers, in both the United States and the Philippines. In the prestigious *Encyclopedia of the Philippines, Volume I*, Manuel A. Viray wrote that "*Without Seeing the Dawn* is a moving and beautiful book. Javellana possesses a style that is equal if not superior to some first American novels. Artistically, it is notches above *His Native Soil* and *The Winds of April*" (97). Florencia Flores (1949–50, 109) credited Javellana with "complete mastery over matter and medium" (109) and concluded that "The style shows subtlety of treatment, and in the handling of the dramatic situations, the writer shows restraint and mastery of technique" (111).

American readers were no less impressed.<sup>2</sup> A *New Yorker* (1947, 94) review says that "The first part of this very interesting novel . . . flows quietly, smoothly, and almost indolently" and describes it as "A vivid, bitter tale." Walter Edmonds (1947, 123–24) finds it "an extraordinary vivid book, worked from the fabric of Philippine life—quiet, laughable, exalting, bitter, and horrifying; but it is written almost gently, with an undertone of lightness. . . . its simplicity makes it universal. It belongs, perhaps, in the category of the great Scandinavian novels of the growth of the soil."

It may well be that the artistic nuances of *Without Seeing the Dawn* (hereafter referred to as WS) have been overlooked because the novel has been grouped with such war stories as Edilberto Tiempo's *Watch in the Night* (cf., the treatments of Polo and Cabanos-Lava), action adventure tales of minimal literary worth. Certainly, Javellana's curious dedication does nothing to disabuse readers of the erroneous notion that this is just another combat saga:

"To the fighting men of America this story of a people whom they delivered is gratefully dedicated."<sup>3</sup> But WS, in spite of the Rizal allusion of the title, is far from being merely a chronicle of guerillas battling to expel a foreign invader. The book is an exploration of the vagaries, inconsistencies, disloyalties, irrationalities, and brutalities of human nature in the bucolic pre-war environment only to a lesser degree than in the shattering, oppressive, fear-riddled circumstances of the Japanese Occupation. The numerous and sharply etched ironies, so pervasive in the text, highlight the polarization of human potential and human performance.

The first irony lies in the dedication to Book One: "Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be two in one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Ricardo Suerte does not cleave to his wife Lucing for long after he catches her in a compromising position with Luis Castro; in fact, he takes up with taxi dancer-prostitute Rosita. The infidelities are proof enough of the disloyal side of human nature. Carding never does reconcile with Lucing; instead, at the end he marches off to almost certain death on the battlefield.<sup>4</sup> A subtle enhancement is provided to this irony by the chapter title "A Marriage Is Made," the only title rendered in a complete sentence. If only the marriage were as complete, as whole, as the sentence announcing it.

It is not long before the reader is struck by the overblown, florid figures of speech that may as much parody as present the idyllic details of the setting; e.g., "Night, the weak old woman, trembled and blew a cold breath and loosened her mop of black hair which wrapped in darkness tree and stone and flowing river, and the silver strands in her dark hair were the faintly twinkling stars" (WS 7). At times, these hyperbolic figures create near-comic effects:

"My love for you is clear as a teardrop standing at the tips of a young girl's eyelashes, as clear as a dewdrop trembling on a *dagmay* leaf. My love is as mellow as a love song sung at twilight, to the strains of a soft guitar, as sweet as the odor of the *ilang-ilang* in the evening breeze," he had avowed in his husky voice (WS 19).

If it can be countered that this seems silly from the perspective of the sophisticate but represents the norm in barrio courtship, the answer is not only that the book's readers are, at least comparatively, the sophisticates but that, furthermore, a great many figurative passages are clearly ironic from anyone's perspective, to wit:

... why did Nanay Pia sit there without a word to say while her daughter was being bargained away like a sack of salt? (WS 20)

... his daughter had been a barrio fiesta queen and was so comely that the staircase of their house had been quite worn away by the feet of countless suitors ...

"It is but natural," said Manong Marcelo, "that ants flock to a house where sugar is kept." (WS 21)

The sheer inelegance of these comparisons undercuts human stature, reducing their subject to the level of an insect or an inanimate object.

The figurative passages are supported by nonfigurative shafts of irony, often thrown in casually, as sentence terminators by the narrator:

Carding's father nodded solemnly in agreement to the lengthy enumeration of Lucia's perfection of beauty and womanhood and her many accomplishments, among which was her finishing sixth grade in intermediate school. (WS 21)

Inday Picat smiled enticingly at the young men who stood at the doorway, hoping that they might beg a dance from her. She held a fan of blue feathers coquettishly over her mouth lest she dazzle them too much with her three gold teeth. (WS 45)

Trivial shortcomings and goings-on like these set the stage for treatment of more serious human follies. The same may be said of the sometimes extensive patches of local color, such as the one that opens Chapter 6 in the Day section. We are given a glimpse of life as it could be in the form of a pastoral, only to be returned to the reality of what life is in depictions of utter squalor and degradation, like that which opens Chapter 10 in the Day section. Life in the country, as we have seen, is uncouth, and peasants there work backbreakingly hard to eke out a tenuous existence, as Ricardo discovers when he is displaced from the land he thought he would always work. Life in the city can be equally brutal, as Ricardo quickly finds out in Chapter 11, Day section, when he is attacked by the union members. Brutalization and death come from both internal and external sources. Chapter 2, Night section, acquaints us with the internal (native) version in the form of the rampages of the bandit Morada and his gang; much of the rest of the section is concerned with the external invader version of the Japanese Occupation, described with particular concreteness in Chapter xiv, Night section, as the Kempeitai torture Carding.

Even inside the mind there is no relief from cruelty and death, as we are made painfully aware in Chapter 11, Night section, where Carding plans to murder his baby. This is really the culmination of the fecundity suggested in Chapter 17, Day section, with its obvious parallelism between the growing garden and the pregnant wife. The outcome of life is death, as the stillborn state of the third son attests. There may well be a veiled rejection of Christian expectation of the ultimate truth of life being triumphant over death, a possibility strengthened by bitterly ironic juxtaposition as his wife is about to deliver the stillborn child that he has planned to destroy: "Like

an unbeliever who had witnessed an awful miracle, he dropped on his knees and looked up at the painting of the Virgin with the Infant Jesus, just as the stairs creaked under the feet of Nanay Pia and the midwife" (WS 307). The concluding note of the novel also points in this direction: "She was still praying when she heard the first shot from the direction of the town" (WS 359).

Nor does the passing of time offer even the hope of amelioration. In an allusively ironic manner, this point is made in the Day section, Chapter 17, in the discussion of what to name Carding's second son. The schoolteacher, Miss Villanueva, proposes "Crisostomo Ibarra." After some debate stemming from the fact that Lucing does not know who Jose Rizal was (an ironic contrast to Rizal's erudition), the baby is named "Crisostomo," an ominous foreshadowing that Carding, like Rizal, will meet his end by a bullet for being connected with a resistance movement against an occupying foreign power. But Carding—adulterer, murderer and brute—is no Ibarra, described by Miss Villanueva as "a clean, upright, intelligent young man" (WS 169). And neither Lucing nor, arguably, any other WS female character, remotely approaches the virtue of Maria Clara.<sup>5</sup> The parallels between the idealism trumpeted in Rizal's work and the practices ascribed to Javellana's characters are only too graphic a reminder of the degenerated state of humanity.

The world of WS is filled with people ranging from the weak-willed to the vicious, from the repatriate Uncle Jaime who advocates temporising rather than resisting the Japanese, to the bloodthirsty opportunist bandit Morada. Only the prostitute Rosing (at least among the main characters) rises above the level of the antihero. Javellana has painted an unremittingly bleak picture of human existence and human prospects, principally through verbal and situational irony. Reyes' title is apt: Javellana's universe is one of "Night Without Day;" in any case, it is significant that in the novel, day precedes night, not the other way around. Like Sholokhov,<sup>6</sup> we can only hope that somewhere lies an end to despair, turbulent violence, and hopelessness, that at some point, quiet as some readers have thought WS flows, after the terror and ravages of the night, quiet would flow the dawn.

### Notes

1. Elena P. Polo, *Themes and Meanings in the American and Filipino Novels of the Second World War in the Pacific* and Josefa Cabanos-Lava, "The Guerilla Novels."

2. Though not all. Elizabeth Johnson (1947, 24) thinks that "in 'Without Seeing the Dawn' there is nothing new to catch the interest, save an earnest fury which mistakes unabated action for life—like portraiture." And, in terms of lasting impact, Reyes (1979, 71) is right: "It caused hardly any ripple on the literary scene."

3. Unless this is intended sarcastically, as a rebuke aimed at the Americans' dilatoriness. The novel barely mentions the American forces except for a few speculations about when they might return.

4. It could hardly be coincidental that, as Polo (1970, 115) points out, "Carding [is] ironically surnamed Suerte meaning luck or fortune."

5. We can, I think, safely leave aside, at least in this context of WS, the oft-debated possibility that Maria Clara is a caricature.

6. Or, as now seems likely, Fyodor Kryukov, whose ms. seems almost certainly to have been appropriated by Nobel Prize winning Mikhail Sholokhov. A clear synopsis of the authorship debate surrounding the *Don* trilogy appeared in the 16 September 1974 issue of *Time* magazine.

### References

- Cabanos-Lava, Josefa. 1955. The guerrilla novels. *The Diliman Review* 5.3: 255-97.
- Edmond, Walter. 1947. *Without seeing the dawn*. In *Atlantic Monthly* July:123-24.
- Flores, Florencia. 1949-50. Review of *Without seeing the dawn*. In *Literary Apprentice*, 109-11.
- Javellana, Stevan. 1947. *Without seeing the dawn*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. 1947. *Without seeing the dawn*. *The Commonweal*, 16 May.
- Polo, Elena P. 1970. Themes and meanings in the American and Filipino novels of the Second World War in the Pacific. Diss. Michigan State University.
- Reyes Soledad S. 1979. Night without day: Javellana's *Without seeing the dawn*. In *Essays on the Philippine novel in English*, ed. Joseph A. Galdon S.J., 71-95. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Viray, Manuel A. Contemporary Filipino literature in English. 1950. In *Encyclopedia of the Philippines, Volume I*. Edited by Zoilo M. Galang. 3rd edition. Manila: McCullough.
- New Yorker*. 1947. *Without Seeing the Dawn*, 26 April.