

A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: A Comprehensive Technical and Literary Analysis of Nick Joaquin's Masterpiece

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In the pantheon of Philippine literature, few works command as much reverence and scholarly attention as **A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: An Elegy in Three Scenes**. Written in 1950 by Nick Joaquin, a National Artist for Literature, the play serves as a profound meditation on the collision between the past and the present, the sacred and the profane, and the enduring struggle of the Filipino identity during the transition from the Spanish colonial legacy to the Americanized modernity of the mid-20th century. This technical analysis explores the play's structural mechanics, its linguistic innovations, and its thematic depth, providing an in-depth resource for scholars, performers, and literary enthusiasts.

1. Historical and Bibliographic Context

Nick Joaquin composed *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* during a period of intense national soul-searching. Following the devastation of World War II and the liberation of Manila, the physical and cultural landscape of the nation was in ruins. The play was first published in 1950 and eventually staged in 1955 at the Aurora Quezon Open Air Theater in Intramuros, directed by Lamberto Avellana. The bibliographic data from 1966 editions (MCS Enterprises Inc.) lists the work as a 122-page document, categorizing it within the **Philippine Literary Classics**.

The Significance of the Subtitle: "An Elegy in Three Scenes"

The term "**Elegy**" is technically significant. In traditional literature, an elegy is a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead. By labeling his play an elegy, Joaquin signals that the work is not merely a drama but a funeral song for a dying world—the Hispanic-Manila culture (the *Hispanidad*) that was being systematically erased by the encroaching American industrial and capitalist values. The "three scenes" structure mimics the liturgical progression of a wake or a religious rite, emphasizing the sacredness of the memory being preserved.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Psychology of the Marasigan Household

To understand the mechanics of the play, one must analyze the domestic space of the Marasigan house in Intramuros. The house serves as a **microcosm of the Filipino psyche**. The play's characters represent different facets of a fragmented national identity, struggling to reconcile their heritage with the demands of survival.

The Marasigan Sisters: Candida and Paula

Candida and Paula Marasigan are the play's protagonists, representing the "spinster" class of the old *Ilustrado* families. Their technical function in the narrative is to embody the conflict between **Dignity (the Past)** and **Survival (the Present)**. They live in voluntary poverty, refusing to sell their father's last masterpiece—a painting that symbolizes their integrity—despite the financial pressure from their more "modernized" siblings, Manolo and Pepang.

The Absent Patriarch: Don Lorenzo el Magnifico

Don Lorenzo, the artist mentioned in the title, remains off-stage for the majority of the play. This is a deliberate structural choice. His absence creates a vacuum of authority, forcing the sisters to define themselves in relation to

his legacy. Don Lorenzo represents the **Artist-as-Prophet**, a figure who has retreated into silence because the world no longer understands his language of beauty and honor.

3. Technical Analysis of the Painting: Aeneas and Anchises

The central plot device—and the play's primary symbol—is the painting gifted by Don Lorenzo to his daughters. The painting depicts a young man carrying an old man on his back, both faces being self-portraits of Don Lorenzo. This is a direct reference to the Greco-Roman myth of **Aeneas carrying his father Anchises** from the burning ruins of Troy.

Element	Mythological Reference	Technical Symbolism in the Play
The Old Man	Anchises (The Past/Heritage)	The Spanish-Filipino traditions, the burden of history, and the dying language of Cervantes.
The Young Man	Aeneas (The Future/Preservation)	The responsibility of the next generation to carry the culture forward despite the "fire" of modernity.
The Flames	The Fall of Troy	The destruction of Intramuros during WWII and the erosion of traditional values.
The Dual Faces	The Artist as Father/Son	The recursive nature of identity; the artist as both the creator of history and its primary victim.

Technically, the painting functions as a **MacGuffin**—an object that drives the plot and reveals the true motivations of every character who views it. To Tony Javier, the boarder, it is a commodity to be sold for a commission. To Manolo and Pepang, it is a source of embarrassment and potential inheritance. To Candida and Paula, it is their soul, which they eventually destroy to achieve true liberation.

4. Dramaturgical Workflow and Language Mechanics

Joaquin’s writing style is famously dubbed "**Joaquinesque**."This style is characterized by a high-register English that retains the cadence, syntax, and emotional fervor of Spanish. For a technical writer or director, this requires a specific approach to dialogue delivery.

The Linguistic Hybridization

Joaquin uses English to describe a world that thought in Spanish and spoke in Tagalog. The technical execution of the dialogue involves:**Hyperbolic Rhetoric:** Characters do not merely speak; they declaim. This reflects the *Tertulia* culture (social circles) of the late 19th century.**Religious Allusion:** Constant references to Catholic rituals, particularly the *La Naval de Manila*, which serves as the play's temporal anchor.**Code-Switching:**The juxtaposition of American slang (via Tony Javier) against the sisters' formal, archaic English highlights the cultural friction.

5. Comparative Evaluation: Stage vs. Screen Adaptations

The play has undergone numerous adaptations, most notably the 1965 film by Lamberto Avellana and the 2017 musical film *Ang Larawan*. The following table compares these versions based on technical and thematic focus.

Format	Key Technical Focus	Representation of the Painting	Core Audience Impact
Original Play (1950)	Dialogue and intellectual discourse.	Purely imaginative/off-stage focus.	High-literary, intellectual engagement.
Avellana Film (1965)	Cinematic Noir and atmosphere.	Visualized with high-contrast lighting.	Historical preservation of 1960s theater acting.
Ang Larawan (Musical, 2017)	Emotional resonance via libretto.	Symbolic center of musical numbers.	Popularized for a modern, younger demographic.

6. Detailed Analysis of Scene III: The Climax and Resolution

The technical climax of the play occurs when Paula, in a fit of rebellion and realization, destroys the painting. This act is often misinterpreted as a defeat. However, from a structural standpoint, it is the **Catharsis**. By destroying the physical object, the sisters no longer need to be its "guardians." They internalize the painting's message.

As the **La Naval de Manila** procession passes by outside their window, the sisters rejoin the community. The technical movement of the play shifts from **Stasis (Isolation)** to **Flow (Participation)**. The elegy concludes not with a death, but with a transformation. The past is no longer a burden to be carried (like Anchises) but a spirit to be lived.

7. Field Guide for Educational Implementation

For educators and theater practitioners, the following step-by-step procedure is recommended for analyzing or staging the text:

1. Contextual Mapping: Research the history of Intramuros (The Walled City) and the 1945 Battle of Manila. Understand the geography of the Marasigan house in relation to the city walls.
2. Character Profiling: Map the motivations of the "Vultures" (the outsiders who want the painting) versus the "Victims" (the sisters).
3. Language Drills: Practice the delivery of Joaquin's long monologues, focusing on breath control and the "musicality" of the 19th-century rhetorical style.
4. Symbolic Inventory: Identify the recurring motifs: the rats in the ceiling, the light of the candles, the sound of the trumpets, and the "bitter" taste of the sisters' chocolate.

8. Troubleshooting Common Misinterpretations

When studying this work, several common errors often arise in critical analysis. This section addresses these failure modes with concrete solutions.

- Error: Viewing the play as purely anti-American. Solution: While the play critiques the crassness of American commercialism, it also critiques the stagnation of the Filipino elite. The problem isn't just the new culture; it's the inability of the old culture to adapt without losing its soul.
- Error: Seeing Candida and Paula as weak victims. Solution: Their refusal to sell the painting is a radical act of resistance. In a world where everything has a price, their poverty is a technical "feature" of their moral superiority.
- Error: Misunderstanding the "Artist" in the title. Solution: The "Artist" refers not just to Don Lorenzo, but to the Filipino people themselves, who must "paint" their own identity from the ruins of their history.

9. Structural Implications and Cultural Legacy

The enduring power of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Filipino* lies in its ability to function as both a technical masterpiece of playwriting and a socio-political manifesto. Joaquin utilized the Aristotelian unities—action, time, and place—with surgical precision. The entire drama unfolds within the confines of the Marasigan living room, yet it encompasses the entire history of a nation.

The play challenges the audience to consider: **What do we keep and what do we discard?** As the sisters stand at the window during the final scene, watching the procession of the Virgin of La Naval, they represent the synthesis of the old world's faith and the new world's resilience. The "elegy" becomes a celebration of survival. In the technical sense of literary evolution, Joaquin successfully transitioned Philippine literature from colonial imitation to authentic self-representation, making this play the definitive "portrait" of a people in flux.

The work remains a vital study in **human psyche formation**, demonstrating how history, mythology, and memory are not just academic concepts but the very pillars by which human beings make sense of a chaotic world. Through the preservation of this literature, the "Noble and Ever Loyal City" of the mind continues to stand, long after the physical walls of Intramuros have crumbled.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [A Technical and Analytical Deep-Dive into Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun': Structural Frameworks, Socio-Economic Dynamics, and Literary Legacy](http://alghafgolden.com/technical-analysis-a-raisin-in-the-sun-lorraine-hansberry.pdf)

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- [The Structural and Sociological Architecture of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House: A Comprehensive Technical Analysis](http://alghafgolden.com/technical-analysis-henrik-ibsen-dolls-house-nora.pdf)

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