

# Symbolism in Philippine Religious Movies

May Anne T. Jaro, Ph.D.

University of San Agustin, College of Liberal Arts, Sciences, and Education General Luna Street,  
Iloilo City, 5000 Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Philippine-movie Director Laurice Guillen's movies, *Tanging Yaman* and *Santa Santita*, by using the Mythological Approach. Guided by the principles of this particular approach in literary criticism, the study identified the symbols and archetypes found in the selected movies to infer the universal ideas and human tendencies that manifest the cultural and religious realities of the Filipinos. Giving emphasis to Northrop Frye's theory of un-displaced myth, the study found, through a literary analysis of the movies, that two opposing worlds can actually co-exist in one archetype, as seen in the repentant sinners, whose willingness to admit their sins paves the way for them to regain the graces of heaven.

**Keywords:** symbolism, archetypes, religious movie, media text, mythological approach

## INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of its invention in the late 1800s, the movie has never ceased to amaze audiences as its magic spread and developed all over the world. In fact, Steven Spielberg has continually shown the influence of movies (Vincent, 2022), which he considers as the most powerful weapon in the world. However, passive movie viewing can have negative effects on the viewer. Therefore, movies need to be viewed critically.

With the developing preference for audiovisual media over books from the outset of the techno-generation, educators began to lament the disturbing decline in the ability of students to think critically and creatively due allegedly to the adverse effects of modern technology (Vetrie, 2004). In the 1990s, a great deal was being said about the dangerous effects of unguided exposure to audiovisual media, particularly the television, that media scholar Kirsten Drotner (1999) eventually came up with the term "media panic," which was said to "occur each time a medium is implicated in a real-world tragedy" (Perry, 2023).

Drotner may have been referring to overwhelming reactions implicating media, but there is some truth in the negative effects of passive viewing where focus is simply given to the entertainment aspect of materials presented in media; the subtle influences of veiled messages go unnoticed. With proper knowledge on how to deal with media texts like movies, teleplays, and pop songs, students may learn to be vigilant, develop their critical thinking skills, become experts in reading media texts, and gain optimum benefits from learning experiences that go along with audiovisual representations and interpretations of reality. As Ben Fuller, editor of *Media Matters*, put it, "Since we cannot erase visual texts from modern life... we must challenge students to analyze critically the texts they view" (Lund, 1998).

Beliefs and religious principles still account for the many issues concerning human spirituality and morality—gender struggle, corruption, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, absentee and single parenthood, divorce and abortion, environmental problems, and many others—bombarding the world today.

Religion or the lack of it, influences people's decisions, and defines the kind of life that they prefer to have.

Thus, this literary study proceeded with the premise that insights on prevailing issues concerning morality as well as human spirituality could be revealed and analyzed through movies. Moreover, focusing on movies that explicitly relate to faith and religion may provide a deeper foundation in dealing with the issues. In the process, the study would also illustrate a way of viewing movies critically.

Literature has extended its domain to media texts, which include movies. Thus, this study dealt with movies in the same way that written literature is analyzed using a particular literary approach. The Mythological approach, particularly focusing on Northrop Frye's theory of un-displaced myths (Frye, 1957) was chosen to discern the various messages concerning people's spiritual and cultural realities through the movie selections. This theory normally deals with "two contrasting worlds" (the "apocalyptic" desirable world and the "demonic" undesirable world often identified with the religions' existential heavens and hells), thereby, making the Holy Bible as its main point of reference.

The Holy Bible is a source of truth among Christians, and Christianity still prevails in the Philippines. In the New Testament, it is stated that during the time of Christ, people came to Him to seek answers for certain questions. Now, authority to continue his teachings lies in the hands of the Church. As stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

The Church is the depository of the Good News to be proclaimed... the content of the Gospel, and therefore, of evangelization, that she preserves as a precious living heritage, not in order to keep it hidden but to communicate it. The Church has a mission to influence "mankind's criteria for judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration, and models of life" to transform humanity according to "the Word of God and the plan of salvation." (Paul VI, 1975)

The Church now faces a number of issues related to the views and practices of the modern world. As stated by David Lyon (1984), "Modernity sounds religion's death-knell." Some people in today's society have started to perceive religion as irrelevant. The emerging issues dealing with humankind's actions and perceptions about life are manifestations of how this society has become more and more secularized. Thus, it is now in a state where a divorce between divine faith and what people consider as the practical aspects of life predominates. Nevertheless, the Church encompasses all human concerns—all aspects of life in a greater perspective.

### **Intent of the Study**

Guided by the Mythological approach in analyzing two religious contemporary movies, the study aimed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Identify the mythic symbols and archetypes found in the selected media texts;
2. Infer the universal ideas conveyed through the media texts with the aid of the mythic symbols and archetypes and the actions, situations, and natural human tendencies of characters in the materials, which manifest the influences of certain cultural realities and religious practices in Philippine society; and
3. Relate the ideas gathered to the cultural and religious realities of the people.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The literary analysis focuses on themes that manifest in recurring symbols and images. Table 1 shows that the criteria for data selection examined to identify archetypes and symbols include plot, character, setting, and symbol.

Table 1: The Conceptual Matrix

| Criteria for Data Selection           | Element of Selected Movies   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Plot Character Setting Symbol (Image) | <p><b>Archetype</b></p> <p>A symbol that has attained a cultural life beyond any particular work of the imagination</p>                      |
| Plot Character Setting Symbol (Image) | <p><b>Symbol</b></p> <p>An image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning</p> |

### Definition of Terms

Archetype, according to Herman Northrop Frye (1957), is a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole. In this study, the term is used to refer to recurring symbols and images found in the selected movies, a symbol that has attained a cultural life beyond any particular work of the imagination.

Myth, as defined by Frye (1957), is a “narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that ‘happen only in stories’; hence, a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or “realism.” “The adaptation of myth and metaphor to canons of morality or plausibility,” is what Frye would call “displacement.” The study takes on the initial definition.

Symbol is a term for “something that stands or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental resemblance, especially a visible sign of something invisible; it is an object or act representing something in the unconscious mind that has been repressed, an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997).

A symbol is a signifier that represents the signified through convention [general custom or customary practice] rather than resemblance (Vitrie, 2004). Likewise, the symbols found in the selected media texts are taken as signifiers that represent the ideas, beliefs, concepts, and practices of contemporary Philippine society—an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality, and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning (Müller, 2001).

“A symbol in its aspect as a verbal unit in a work of literary art,” according to Frye (1957), “[is called] motif.” Likewise, according to him, “A symbol in its aspect as a verbal representative of a natural object or concept,” is known as the “sign” and “a symbol in its aspect as a formal unit of art with a natural content,” is called “image.”

Image is defined in the dictionary as “representation or likeness of a person or thing” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2011). It is “a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing, especially an imitation in solid form, a tangible or visible representation, a mental conception held in common by members of a

group and symbolic of a basic attitude and orientation, an idea, a concept, or a vivid or graphic representation or description” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997). In this study, the term image is used to refer to a visual representation of something—a thing or an idea. It is a cinematic sign equivalent to a word found in a printed literary material. Like a word, it is a signifier that represents what is signified (Vitrie, 2004). As a concept, image is of major concern in this study.

Symbolism is “the art or practice of using symbols, especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations; it is an artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states; it is the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits; and it is “a system of symbols or representations” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997).

Movie, defined in the dictionary as “the motion picture medium or industry” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997) or “a representation of a story, episode, etc. on a film, a strip or sheet of plastic or other flexible base coated with light sensitive emulsion exposure in a camera, which form the illusion of movement” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2011) is a slang that has become a colloquial word; it was the shortened and popular form for moving pictures or motion pictures which was the common name for film. The term movie is used in this study to refer to the motion picture, the cinema, and the representation of a story.

Religious means “relating to or manifesting faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997) and “of, relating to, or devoted to religious beliefs or observances” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1997). In the study the term is used to describe the selected movies, which dwell with people’s beliefs, devotion, and faith in God. The movies selected for analysis in this study are deemed to have religious bases; they develop specific ideas taken from the Scriptures and present concrete realities that manifest a certain level of spirituality prevalent among ordinary people.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study is focused on the two religious movies produced by award-winning Filipino actress and director, Laurice Guillen. Considering relevance to contemporary realities, the movies selected for the study were among those released during the first five years of the new millennium. These movies were *Tanging Yaman* (2000) and *Santa Santita* (2004). They were also considered for their theme and deep, brilliant insights about human life, interesting and meaningful titles, and outstanding craftsmanship as confirmed by the positive response and reviews that they have received from movie critics, and nominations and awards from prestigious award-giving bodies.

The choice of Philippine movies is justified by the fact that in the advent of avant-garde global developments, Filipino learners/educators/movie viewers more urgently need a stronger connection to their roots. The selections were also chosen for their content and relevance to Philippine reality.

The study is mainly an evaluation and analysis of selected media texts (the movies), following the guidelines of the mythological approach used in literary criticism.

It applies literary analysis on transcribed lines, primarily requiring close reading commonly used in the formalistic approach, before using the mythological approach that also deals with the images foregrounded in the movies.

The topics in this study, are defined by the objectives and are, therefore, confined to themes revealed through the images and symbols used in the movies.

## Significance of the study

This study exemplifies the analysis of movies using a literary approach, and the analytical process can be replicated with other movies. As a discourse on Philippine movies, it can also be considered a significant record of Philippine literary and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the insights discerned through the analyses may serve to enlighten and enhance the readers' perspective of reality and religion, and consequently, improve their way of life.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adheres to the principles of qualitative research while applying critical analysis in literary studies, specifically making use of the Mythological Approach. Thus, its specific objectives are also based on the fundamental principles of the literary approach.

### 2.1 Materials

The analyses focus on two religious movies directed by Laurice Guillen. They were chosen on the basis of these criteria: (1) film direction by Laurice Guillen, a multi-awarded director; (2) awards and citations received—*Santa Santita* (2004) received 11 nominations from two prestigious award-giving bodies while *Tanging Yaman* (2000) garnered 17 awards out of 30 nominations from five; and (3) subject matter dealing with the spiritual aspect of life.

### 2.2 Research Method

The study made use of the Mythological Approach in literary criticism. The criteria and units of analysis, patterned after Isidoro Cruz's (2000) matrix of analysis, are found in the table below:

Table 2: The Criteria and Units of analysis

| Criteria for Data Selection |                | Units of Analysis   |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---|
| Archetype/Symbol            | Plot           | Series of events in the movie that suggests the recurring narrative or contributes to the development of the mythic element   |
|                             | Character      | Character actor's physical description, speech, and actions related to the archetype  |
|                             | Setting        | Description of relevant time and place; context or milieu   |
|                             | Symbol (Image) | Something that stands or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental resemblance |

### 2.3 Analysis Procedure

The researcher (1) viewed the movies; (2) identified the mythic symbols and archetypes based on (a) plot, (b) character, (c) setting, and (d) symbol; (3) determined connections between mythic symbols/archetypes and movie themes (universal ideas); and (4) related archetypes and themes prevalent in the movies to Philippine cultural and religious realities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The archetypal motifs found in the media texts include (1) the Repentant Sinner, related to the Prodigal Son, the Prostitute, and the Lost Sheep; (2) the Hypocrite related to the Proud and Righteous Brother, and the Pharisees; (3) the Great Mother; (4) the Orphan; and (5) the Water Archetype.

The symbolic images include (1) water, (2) serpent, (3) umbrella, (4) land, (5) desert, (6) sun, (7) blood, (8) white garment, (9) three images of a character, (10) song, and (11) angel.

### 3.1 Archetypes

#### 3.1.1 The Repentant Sinner

The story of the repentant sinner is a recurring narrative found in many stories in the Bible, the ultimate source of un-displaced myth, according to Northrop Frye (1957). The repentant sinners are the prodigal son, the prostitute, the “lost sheep” and almost all “blind” men to whom Jesus had given the gift of sight and enlightenment, and even chosen ones, Jacob and David.

**3.1.1.1 The Prodigal Son.** In *Tanging Yaman*, the Prodigal Son figures prominently in the story of Danilo. Before he met his wife, he had demanded for the inheritance that he was supposed to receive upon his father’s death, even before his father died. He, then, went his wayward way and spent everything he had. Later, he came back regretful.

*“Alam mo, Boy, no’ng hindi ka pa ipinapanganak, no’ng hindi ko pa nagiging asawa ang nanay mo, kinuha ko na ang perang mamanahin ko sa Papa. Di ako tumigil hangga’t di ko naubos. Nagwala ako. Pasensya ka na anak, ha. Naging gago kasi ang tatay mo, eh.”* (You know, Boy, when you were not yet born, when I wasn’t married to your mother yet, I already got all the money that I was supposed to inherit. I spent everything. Sorry, son, your father has been foolish.)

Neither Danilo nor the Prodigal Son in the parable, appear evil or unforgivable. However, as recorded in the Hebrew midrash, a person who asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive, is like a murderer who desires the death of his own father; therefore, the righteous brother’s hatred towards his prodigal brother is justifiable in human perspective. However, God loves unconditionally so that the righteous ones in the movie and in the parable, may be the ones who actually need “a change of heart.”

**3.1.1.2 The Lost Sheep.** In *Tanging Yaman*, Grace is the only mother who is not presented as an ideal. While Celine, Danilo’s wife, is the courageous one, who inspires respect from her children, and Nanette, Arturo’s wife, is the humble one, whose wisdom serves to complement her husband’s pride, Grace is the nagger who puts ridiculously great value on financial security.

On their anniversary, Grace gets mad at her husband for giving her a necklace. Her daughter, disgusted with her reaction, tells her, “It’s supposed to make you happy. Can’t you just, at least, say thank you?... I just don’t understand why you always have to fight about money!” She indiscreetly argues with her husband over money. In fact, when Arturo told her about their mother’s Alzheimer’s disease, she worried more about the possibility of losing her inheritance rather than about her sick mother.

However, she cares for her children naturally. After she eloped at a young age and experienced hardship to support a family, the fear of seeing her children suffer in the same way made her lose sight of what’s more important in life.

**3.1.1.3 The Prostitute.** In *Santa-Santita*, Malen, short for Magdalena, is a young girl with an angelic face, but obnoxious character. She enters a petty argument with a sales lady, wears inappropriate clothes inside the church, profanely dips the scapulars in the holy water, and cruelly kicks and maligns a blind person who fell after colliding with her.

Blind Man: *Alam na ngang bulag ang tao, eh.* (You know, I'm blind.)

Malen: *'Yon pala, eh. Haharang-harang ka pa. Tabi!* (So, you know. Yet, you're still blocking my way. Scram!) [kicks the blind]

Malen is a prostitute in the figurative sense of the word. She does not have sex for money, but she gives in to the desires of the flesh, for superficial affection and material things. She is like Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke, who was said to have been possessed by seven demons—pride, greed, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, and sloth—which Jesus drove away. Taking her mother's place as intercessor, her "insincere" prayers were always answered. However, God's greatest miracle, shown through her, is her own conversion.

Mike, a man involved with Malen, is a prostitute in the literal sense, because he drives a car-for-rent, but furtively gives "extra" services—momentary pleasure—to his clients, for a fee.

### 3.1.2 The Hypocrite

The term refers to a person who sees other people's mistakes and regards himself better than anyone else, but remains blind to his own shortcomings. The hypocrite is usually the antagonist who makes the central character's life miserable, but contributes to the fulfillment of this character's mission.

**3.1.2.1 The Proud and Righteous Son.** Arturo, the obedient son in *Tanging Yaman*, is a successful man who financially supports his mother. Danilo's son admires him, but his own son despises him; he is domineering and insensitive, and also despises his own brother. He is a justice-maker who cannot accept that their father could easily forgive his terrible brother, because he believes that sinners only deserve punishment, while those who do good should always be rewarded.

Art: (To Loleng) *"Wag na n'yo siyang pagtakpan. Nakuha na n'ya (Danilo) ang dapat ay sa kanya."* (Don't cover up for him. He [Danilo] has taken what was supposed to be his.)

However, the Bible, the main source of un-displaced myths, reveals that Jesus came for the lost sheep and the prodigal sons. Certain passages also speak of God's mercy and love as free; they are gifts from God to his people, and not payment for "sacrifices and holocaust offerings." Furthermore, God is the one who chooses whom to save, not a person who saves himself. However, intelligent people cannot understand this, and Arturo, who is well-educated, is blinded by his judgments and prejudices. In his pursuit of justice, he is unconsciously destroying his son and alienating his wife.

Loleng: (To a priest) *"Matigas ang kanyang (Art) puso. Sing tigas ng bakal na unti-unting kinakain ng kalawang. Parang sakit na nakakaawa. May lunas pa kaya rito?* (His heart is hard. As hard as iron slowly eaten by stain, like a pitiful illness. Could there be a cure for this?)

Christians believe that persecutors are saved by the sacrifices of the persecuted. Christ taught his disciples to love the enemy, forgive him, and even to pray for him to have his heart's desires. In the movie, the wife that Arturo takes for granted, continues to love him. She tells her son that love is "not based on feelings..." but on "doing good to those who do not do good to you."

**3.1.2.2 The Pharisees.** When Malen converts and starts caring for people, like Pharisees, the other

intercessors judged her as if they themselves were perfect.

The word “Pharisee” is synonymous to the word “Hypocrite.” Hypocrites, like Pharisees, are usually people who look down upon others, because they think highly of themselves, and boast of their virtues and good deeds. They judge others with the law in their hands. Yet, they modify the law according to their own convenience.

### 3.1.3 The Great Mother

The archetype of the Great Mother is present in both movies in the persons of Loleng in *Tanging Yaman* and Chayong in *Santa-Santita*. They are loving, sacrificing, and selfless persons. In *Santa-Santita*, Chayong prays hard for her daughter despite this daughter’s rebellious behavior. She says, “*Diyos ko tulungan mo akong maiayos ang buhay ni Malen... Kung kailangang ibigay ko sa ‘yo lahat, pati buhay ko, gagawin ko, ‘wag lang mapahamak ang anak ko...*” (God help me put my child’s life in order... I’ll give everything, even my life, just to save my daughter.) After her death, her daughter’s life changes. In *Tanging Yaman*, Loleng offers herself to God upon realizing that there is nothing she can do to put her children’s lives in order. She says, “*Hindi ko na alam kung ano ang gagawin ko* (I no longer know what to do).” After she prays to God to completely take over, and abandons herself to his will, she succumbs to an old age disease of oblivion known as Alzheimer’s disease, and begins to live in her separate world, seemingly indifferent to people around her. When the movie ends, she looks up to heaven, smiling as her children come home with her rescued grandson. Arturo reconciles with Danilo, and Grace goes back to her husband knowing that love, concretely manifested in the family, not money, is the greatest wealth of all.

### 3.1.4 The Orphan

In *Santa-Santita*, Malen’s bitterness may be attributed to her longing for a father. In a quarrel with her mother, she says, *Dasal ka nang dasal... Nakinig ba ang Dios sa iyo? Ha? Binalikan ba tayo ng tatay?* (You keep on praying...Has God ever listened to you? Huh? Has father returned to us?) Days after that, she also loses a mother.

In psychology, the orphan as an aspect of a person’s personality has its lights and shadows (Burgess, 2015). Recognized, it helps bring out generosity and kindness; denied, however, it can be a source of insecurities that are detrimental to developing healthy relationships with other members of society.

It is interesting to note that the death of a beloved mother has been part of many stories including *The Legend of Mount Mayon* where Daragang Magayon, the only daughter of Makusog, tribal chief of Rawis, loses her mother shortly after she is born. Among the *Ang mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang* collections, *Mariang Alimango*, who seems like the Filipino version of *Cinderella*, also loses her mother whose soul enters the body of a crab. The German folktale, *Snow White*, turned into a fairytale, also starts with the death of a mother upon giving birth to the central character. *Cinderella*, whose story originated in France, also lost her mother. Likewise, the Manobos, one of the Philippine tribes, also have *The Story of the Orphan Girl* who meets an orphan boy. It can be said that “losing a mother” who is very protective, allows characters to start the journey of finding themselves, or fulfilling their purpose.

Mike, like Malen, is also an orphan, and he neglects his own son because he must have been neglected, too; his denial of this, led him to repeat the cycle. As he shouts, “*Walang Diyos! Kung meron mang Diyos, wala siyang pakialam sa akin!*” (There’s no God! If God exists, then he doesn’t care for me!), he reveals how neglected he has always felt.

In *Tanging Yaman*, Arturo reveals the orphan in him when he speaks about his own resentments against his father—the root of his antagonism towards Danilo. Likewise, when Grace eloped, she went away feeling



like an orphan. She recalls her mother's angry words telling her about how young she was to be falling in love. She must have felt abandoned, too; without a mother to support her decision, she becomes bitter, and the suppressed orphan in her leads her to see only the hardships in life, and overlook the treasures that she already has—a loving husband and caring children. Thus, as realization dawns on her, she is re-acquainted with the beautiful things in her life.

### 3.1.5 The Water Archetype

Arturo, in *Tanging Yaman*, has the worst argument with his son, which leads the boy to leave the house during a rainy, dark night, driving his car on the road along the river, which is flooded to the point of becoming impassable.

Regarding water as *a symbol of death*, the movie shows quite obviously how one of the characters gets almost killed by drowning. It shows how a father almost lost hope while soaked in disappointment against God, who, to him, was unfair like his own father.

As *a symbol of life or rebirth, of purification, and redemption*, the water, particularly the river, becomes a reason as well as a witness to the reconciliation of the brothers. It is also a cause and a witness to the enlightenment of Arturo who has been blinded by envy. His son, who almost drowns in the river, also gains a new life.

The water archetype is said to stand for creation, birth-death-resurrection, purification, redemption, fertility, and growth (Guerin, 1992). In the movie, several scenes draw the audience's attention to this element as a symbol—when a jeepney passes by puddles on the road, when heavy rain falls on the night Arturo's son runs away, when the river overflows because of the rain and almost drowns Arturo's son, and when Grace's daughter momentarily disappears with a young man to have a date by the river.

The water archetype also recurs in *Santa-Santita* as Malen gets wet under the rain on the day she becomes intimate with Mike, and gets sick, unconscious with high fever, as she is prayed over. Several days later, she regains consciousness, and her life changes.

Water, associated with an illness, obviously refers to *death*. Malen soaked with rain water engages in pre-marital sex, a violation of the original purpose of sexuality based on the doctrines of various religions as observed in Philippine society. It is, therefore, a sin, and even in pagan myths, the consequence of sin is death. Thus, the old Malen dies.

## 3.2 Symbols

### 3.2.1 Umbrella (fallen)

In *Santa-Santita*, Malen leaves the house to find Mike after an argument with her mother. *Aling* Chayong tries to stop her daughter, but the latter is stubborn. The poor mother is hurt, but she continues to pray in church until she begins to feel very sick, and finally, on her way home, dies. Her umbrella falls down to symbolize her death. Malen loses her shelter and protection from the storms of life—the mother who kept her out of the rain (problems), and the scorching heat of the sun (hard work). However, “symbolically, an umbrella is more inclined to reveal a timid refusal of the principles of fecundation, either in physical or spiritual shape (Burris, 2002). Chayong is a loving mother, but her protectiveness is a hindrance to Malen's conversion.

### 3.2.2 Serpent

Mike bears an image of the serpent. He has, on his back, a tattoo—the figure of a cobra, which, as he moves

above Malen while they make love, seems to cover the girl's whole being.

The serpent may stand for *evil, sensuality, mystery, and destruction*, and as Malen, succumbs to temptation with the one bearing the sign of the serpent, the act that they do together, symbolizes the victory of the devil over the woman, parallel to the temptation of Eve in the Book of Genesis.

The serpent is just a symbol of the enemy—the devil, which tempts and deceives Adam and Eve, and causes people's consequent sufferings, but the real devil is hard to recognize or even detect, because it can also work from within the heart of every person.

### 3.2.3 Land

A piece of land, about 80 hectares, is mentioned in the movie. It is the farmland visible from the family's ancestral home, which stands for the wealth of the family. It was probably the family's main source of income when the siblings were still growing up. However, it began to lose its value as a farmland when the siblings began to earn from various other means of livelihood. The land is a symbol of *material wealth, economic stability, as well as a place where one belongs*.

When someone approaches Danilo offering to purchase the land, he sees an opportunity for him to solve his financial problems. However, Arturo has no need for money. Grace, on the other hand, who has been detached from the land long ago, finds the selling of the land as a great opportunity to break away from her exhausting life in the United States. She tries to convince Arturo, until the latter agrees with a proviso that Danilo will not have an equal share in the income, since he had no more claim to anything that the family owned.

### 3.2.4 Song

The movie opens with a song—*Tanging Yaman*—from the choir in church. When Loleng, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, was in Arturo's house, feeling surrounded by strangers, the song of her granddaughter, Chona, was the only thing that gave her a sense of awareness. It offered some sort of cure for a malady whose major symptom was forgetting, like the song of the *Ibong Adarna*, the only cure for the king's illness.

A song is like a language—a medium of communication between God and mortal beings. Communication between God and believers is called prayer. As the song of her granddaughter stirs Loleng from her world of oblivion, it manifests that her consciousness only responds to a language that speaks to the spirit. Thus, the song, in the movie, is also the language of the spirit that belongs to God.

### 3.2.5 Angel

Another symbol that signals a beautiful ending for the characters in the movie is the image that appears in the water to save the drowning young man. When Rommel lets go of the rock that kept him from drowning, a figure appears with outstretched arms offering to help him.

The image that appears like an angel to Rommel is an explicit mythic symbol. In most contemporary movies, angels, which are normally taken as special beings sent by God to watch over men and ensure their safety, take the form of a friend or any other normal character. In the movie, however, it is like a vision in white that mystically appears to the drowning boy.

Rommel is holding on to a rock to keep himself from drowning, but after he lets go, the angel saves him. The angel is an image of God's love, going under the water (death) to save a man's life. It is as stated in the

Bible, “The Lord died; in dying, he destroyed death. And he was resurrected; in rising, he restored life” (Mt 20:17-19).

### 3.2.6 The Dream (Malen’s Calling)

**3.2.6.1 Desert.** While Malen is unconscious for several days, she dreams of herself wearing a white garment walking in the desert with wounded hands and feet. There are three images of her, which seems closely linked to the concept of the Holy Trinity—the three persons of God. As Fr. Tony told Malen, experiencing Christ’s suffering—a stigmata, which, not even saints are allowed to experience, is a great honor given to Malen.

The desert in Malen’s dream stands for *spiritual emptiness, death, and hopelessness*. Malen, a worldly woman, never shares her mother’s piety. She lost her father, and felt greatly affected by this loss. She does not believe that prayers can actually work as shown by her outburst—*Dasal ka nang dasal... Nakinig ba ang Dios sa iyo? Ha? Binalikan ba tayo ng tatay?* (You keep on praying...Has God ever listened to you? Huh? Has father returned to us?) These words, the proof of her bitterness, also reveals her hopelessness, and implies that she must have believed in prayers as a child. Yet, seeing no result in these prayers, with her father never coming home, she becomes disillusioned with the act of praying, and possibly, with the concept of anything spiritual. Having grown up with the idea that praying meant asking God for something, she begins to think that prayers are useless, because they cannot give people all they want.

Malen dreams of herself in the desert. She is in the desert of her life to realize that she is chosen by God, which is an honor, but that as a sinner, she is unworthy, and therefore, has no reason to be proud. God has to manifest himself concretely to her while she is in the desert of her life, just as He reveals Himself to Moses through a burning bush, to make her know that she has a Father, who is present in all the events of her life, and that this Father is giving her a mission.

**3.2.6.2 Blood.** In Malen’s dream, she walks while blood trickles from the wounds on her hands and feet, moistening the desert sand.

Blood commonly symbolizes *life*. In this scene in the movie, it signifies suffering, which like Christ’s suffering, actually brings with it, hope and remedy for spiritual emptiness.

Blood, according to K.C. Hanson (1993), is “a dynamic symbol of life and death, which draws to issues of sacred and profane, purity and pollution, deliverance and judgment.” He stated that “blood symbolizes the moral order in terms of cult (purity and pollution; Lev 16:18-19; 1 John 1:7), law (culpability, Exodus 22:2-3; Acts 5:28), covenant/contract-making (participation, Exod 24:8; Matt 26:28), and power (God’s possession; Gen 9:6; Ezek 44:7), and its physical properties are manifested in terms of its liquid quality (Deut 12:16; Rev 16:3-4); its ability to stain (Isa 63:2-3); its color (2 Kgs 3:22; Rev 6:12); and its symbolism of life-force (Lev 17:11; Matt 16:17), birth (Sir 14:18; Heb 2:14), menstruation (Lev 20:18; Mark 5:25), wine (Deut 32:14; Mark 14:23-24), and cosmic food (Ezek 44:7).”

Hanson (1993) explained that blood is “neither a positive nor a negative substance” if put in the context of ancient Israelite and Christian tradition. Its connotation is based on “where it is, who touches it, and how it is utilized.” He concluded, that “it can therefore be described as either *in place* or *out of place*, pure or defiled... [and] also an active substance—it has an effect on the things it touches: it can be either a pollutant or a detergent.”

**3.2.6.3 Sun.** The sun in Malen’s dream does not seem to give off burning heat nor blinding light but appears as somewhat like a recognizable sphere providing just enough light so that one may be able to see and be guided.

Christ, the source of truth and enlightenment for Christians, “is the true sun that illumines the renewed world” (Leon DuFour, 1995). In the Gospel, St. Luke speaks of “the tender mercy of our God, who, from on high, will bring the rising *Sun* to visit us, to *give light* to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

Light usually stands for enlightenment, truth, reason, goodness and righteousness. In Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, the first book in the trilogy of the *Divine Comedy*, a commentary found in Mark Musa’s edition of this book (Alighiere, 2002) states that “the silence of the sun in the wood is analogous to the absence of God’s voice (his *light*) in the mind of the repentant sinner.”

The sun is a universal symbol representing God’s light—His guiding, illuminating presence. In the Philippine creation myth, which mentions the origin of the heavenly bodies, the sun is indicated as a source of positive energy based on the characteristics of Liadlao.

**3.2.6.4 Three (Images of a Person).** Three images of Malen appear in her dream. The images stand in three various points, which would form a triangle when connected. A triangle stands for the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Three is the heavenly number, which stands for “the soul.” According to the Dictionary of Symbolism (Protas, 2001), it also signifies “fulfillment.”

**3.2.6.5 White (The White Garment).** In her dream, Malen wears a white garment. Among the Hebrews in the early years of Christianity, the baptized that emerged out of the baptismal pool was given a white robe (Rev 3:5) that symbolized *purity* as well as *victory* and *joy*. Stripped of his/her material ornaments that stood for worldly goods and idols, and, s/he is submerged in the water to signify the dying of the old man, the sinful man. The white garment worn as the baptized came out of the water, indicate a new life.

A few days after Malen’s recovery from her illness, Mike comes to take her away. She is still very much in love with him, but contrary to her usual self-centeredness, she hesitates and thinks about the people who need her. She tells him, “*Kailangan ako dito ng mga tao, Mike.* (The people need me here, Mike.)” Mike finds it hard to believe her. Moreover, dressed in more decent clothes, it is concretely shown that she has changed.

### 3.3 Philippine Cultural and Religious Realities

It is difficult to separate culture from religion. A person’s religion defines the way s/he lives and deals with other members of society including the family. A person’s knowledge about divine faith is manifested in how s/he reacts to every situation in life.

Family and tradition, however, may be distinguished more clearly as part of a people’s culture. Close family ties and respect for elders more clearly emphasized by titles like *lola* or *lolo*, *nanay* or *tatay*, *mama* or *papa*, and *ate* or *kuya*, are distinct characteristics of Philippine culture. A mother’s sacrifice is a universal idea, but the way the mother sacrifices, distinguishes the Filipino—Chayong offers her life to God for the conversion of her daughter, and Loleng offers her illness for the reconciliation of her children—whose sacrifices go with total abandonment to God’s will.

As manifested in Philippine literature, natural religiosity was already prevalent among the Filipino ancestors. Natural religiosity takes roots in paganistic worship. It seems strongly embedded in the Filipino

psyche so that despite the Catholic faith, which is still most widely observed in the Philippines, natural religiosity persists. Thus, the issue that *dechristianization* prevails within the Church emerged as seen in the women intercessors who judge others while they pray, in people who let others pray for them, in people who pray kneeling or walking on their knees from the church door to the altar, and in people touching or wiping religious images with a handkerchief and keeping this handkerchief as if it has become some kind of an *anting-anting* or talisman. God is regarded like a genie who grants wishes, and when people do not get what they want, they stop believing in God. These are realities shown in the movies—manifestations of the level of Christianity most Filipino Catholics have, which is yet a long way from the state of mature Christians.

## CONCLUSION

The recurring narrative of the repentant person comes in different shapes and sizes, but they all tell the same story—God’s unconditional love.

The story of the repentant sinner shows that hopelessness, a life that lacks direction, anger, and frustration are negative elements of life that stem from the absence of love or the feeling of being unloved. Without love, there’s only death—ontological death: failure, loneliness, poverty, problems, and other crosses—that are inevitable part of life.

Particularly, the religious movies of Laurice Guillen illustrate the Word that refers to the will of God, fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Her religious movies are inherently kerygmatic—God wants to save mankind. Thus, as each movie speaks about man’s struggle and triumph against evil, it reiterates the history of salvation.

The Orphan echoes humankind’s ignorance about the love of the Great Parent; the Great Mother, with her love and sacrifice, leads the Orphan towards enlightenment. The Hypocrites are those who idolize themselves, and judge others believing themselves better than anyone else. The water archetype, which usually precede a turning point in the lives of certain characters, implies the death and resurrection of every character who needs to change. The cycle of birth-death-rebirth is what the water archetype stands for. As an archetype and as a symbol, water still stands for both life and death. It implies that mankind lives in a world where both life and death come from one source; the cause of man’s pain may be the cause of his joy as well. Likewise, life is not all joy and all pain, not just success or failure. It is a balance between two opposite worlds, a cycle that gives fullness to a person’s existence.

In scenes showing the characters undergoing a crisis of faith, there appear the symbols of darkness and lack of illumination—serpent, dark night, and desert. The desert stands for spiritual emptiness. The serpent and the dark night both refer to the demonic forces that try to win over humans to their side. They imply the constant presence of the enemies of faith that calls for greater vigilance on the part of people who desire to be reunited with Christ.

The two un-displaced worlds, the apocalyptic and the demonic, which Frye (1957) refers to as forms of “metaphoric organization,” co-exist as manifested in the movies, in the struggles of the characters to overcome their unavoidable conflicts. Just as Frye emphasizes that literature begets literature, this co-existence of the two opposing worlds recurs from ancient myths to contemporary works of literature. Myths were answers to questions concerning ancient people’s spirituality; archetypes found in today’s works like Guillen’s movies, manifest issues concerning belief, faith, and religion in contemporary times.

In the archetypal motifs found in the media texts, the possibility that two opposing worlds can actually co-exist in one archetype may be seen in the repentant sinner whose willingness to admit his sins, paves the way for him to regain the graces of heaven.

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