

A Critical Discourse Analysis on Carlos Bulosan's "How My Father Goes To Court"

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Abstract

This study employed a qualitative research method, particularly a critical discourse analysis to analyze the short story, "How My Father Goes To Court" by Carlos Bulosan. The study focuses on two research questions which seeks to analyze how the language used in the story reflects the social and economic disparities between the rich and the poor; and to know what role humor and satire play in conveying the story's critique of social inequality. Results showed that the word choices in the discourse between the poor family and the rich man's lawyer, as well as the difference in their behaviors during the court proceedings imply the social and economic disparities. In addition, after analyzing the story, the researcher concluded that humor and satire was employed by the author to underscore the absurdity and injustice of the societal structure.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Inequalities, Economic Disparities, Satire

Introduction

"How My Father Goes To Court" is a short story written by Carlos S. Bulosan, a Filipino-American author. The story revolves around a poor yet joyful Filipino family who lived next to a wealthy landowner. In the story, the wealthy man accuses them of stealing the spirit of his food by inhaling its aroma from their windows. He believes that because of this, he and his children grew to be thin, sick, and unhealthy while the kids of the poor family grew strong and robust. The rich man brings this issue to court, where the father of the poor family uses his wit and cleverness to defend himself and his family. He brings a hat full of coins and shakes it, claiming that the sound of the coins is the spirit of money, just as the aroma of the food was the spirit of the rich man's wealth. With this, the poor father claims he has paid what he owes to the rich man. The judge finds the father's argument amusing and dismisses the case, causing the rich man to collapse in frustration. The story highlights themes of social justice, wit, and the disparity between the rich and the poor.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to critically analyze the discourse in Carlos Bulosan's short story "My Father Goes to Court" to uncover the underlying themes of class struggle, justice, and family dynamics. Specifically, the research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does the language used in the story reflect the social and economic disparities between the rich and the poor?
2. What role does humor and satire play in conveying the story's critique of social inequality?

By examining these aspects, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Bulosan's narrative techniques and language choices contribute to the overall message and impact of the story.

Literature Review

Discourse is defined as a unit of language longer than a single sentence. It was derived from the Latin prefix *dis-* which means "away" and the word *currere*, which means "to run". Therefore, discourse literally translates to "run away" and refers to the way that conversations flow (Nordquist, 2020). To study or analyze a discourse is to analyze the use of written or spoken language in a social context. This takes us to the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis.

According to Farrelly (2019), Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA has already become known since the 1980s. He added that it is a social scientific theory and method for analyzing and critiquing the use of language and its contribution to sustaining social practice and to analyzing how language can contribute to social problems. Similarly, van Leeuwen (2015), states that CDA is an approach to analyzing text and talk that aims to explain and evaluate how language contributes to inequality, injustice, and oppression in society. As cited in the work of Amoussou and Allagbe (2018), van Dijk (2001) states that CDA focuses on social problems especially on the role of discourse in the production of abuse of power.

Critical Discourse Analysis is just fitting to analyze the short story "How My Father Goes To Court" by Carlos S. Bulosan as it allows for a deep examination of the power dynamics, social structures, and cultural contexts embedded in the narrative. In addition, CDA can help uncover how language reflects and challenges the power imbalance between characters and explore how discourse serves as a tool for resistance and agency, highlighting the ways marginalized individuals challenge dominant structures. The court scene in the story is rich with dialogue that reflects the power dynamics between the characters. CDA can then help analyze how language is used to assert dominance, negotiate power, and challenge authority.

Methodology

This study employs the qualitative research method. The story "How My Father Goes To Court" is analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's 3D Model, which involves analyzing the text at three levels: textual analysis (description), discursive practice (interpretation), and social practice (explanation). It analyzes how the language used in the story reflects the social and economic disparities between the rich and the poor as well as what role humor and satire plays in conveying the story's critique of social inequality.

The data used was taken from an electronic copy of the short story by Carlos Bulosan titled "How My Father Goes To Court". This story was published in 1943, in the *New Yorker Magazine*. The story was written while Bulosan was working in restaurants and canneries. After his death in Seattle, Washington, the literary pieces he wrote since 1914, have been kept at the University of Washington Libraries in Seattle (Cardinoza, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Carlos S. Bulosan's short story "How My Father Goes To Court." The findings are organized according

to these three dimensions, providing a comprehensive understanding of how language and discourse in the story reflect and critique social inequalities.

Textual Analysis

This focuses on the linguistic features of the story, including lexical choices and dialogue. By examining these elements, we can uncover how the language reflects social and economic disparities. The story uses distinct vocabulary to characterize the rich landowner and the poor Filipino family.

For example, the landowner's lawyer uses formal and legal terms which emphasize his authority and wealth. In contrast, the father's speech is marked by simpler, everyday language, reflecting his humble background and marginalized status. An example of this is the scene in the courtroom.

... "Do you or do you not agree that while the complaint's servants cooked and fried fat legs of lamb or young chicken breast you and your family hung outside his windows and **inhaled the heavenly spirit** of the food?"

"I agree." Father said.

"Do you or do you not agree that while the complaint and his children grew **sickly and tubercular** you and your family became **strong of limb and fair in complexion**?"

"I agree." Father said.

"How do you **account** for that?" ...

The lawyer uses formal language such as, "inhaled the heavenly spirit", "sickly and tubercular", "strong of limb and fair in complexion", and "account", which depicts his authority, superiority and sophistication. This relates to the rich man's power and social hierarchy. Meanwhile, the poor father uses words that are simple and straightforward, such as "I agree", and his immediate agreement to the questions show his humility and inferiority. Basically, the lawyer's accusatory and formal language contrasts with the father's calm and informal responses, highlighting the social divide.

Another example would be when the father called the children of the rich man to the stand.

Father could not say anything at first. He just stood by his chair and looked at them...

This shows hesitancy on the part of the poor father, which makes inferiority even more evident in his character. He was also very polite in his dialogues, using the words, "May I..." to ask permission to the judge, and "Thank you..." after his request was granted. His direct statement, "Then you are paid..." shows simplicity and straightforwardness.

Humor and satire was also employed all throughout the story. From the joyous and lively characterization of the poor family, up to the satirical and witty response by the father during the court proceedings. The natural funny characterization of the Filipino family was shown in this scene:

There was, for instance, the day one of my brothers came home and brought a small bundle under his arm, pretending that he brought something to eat, maybe a leg of lamb or something as extravagant as that to make our mouths water. He rushed to mother and through the bundle into her lap. We all stood around, watching mother undo the complicated strings. Suddenly a black cat leaped out of the bundle and ran wildly around the house. Mother chased my brother and beat him with her little fists, while the rest of us bent double, choking with laughter.

Another time one of my sisters suddenly started screaming in the middle of the night. Mother reached her first and tried to calm her. My sister cried and groaned. When father lifted the lamp, my sister stared at us with shame in her eyes.

“What is it?” Mother asked.

“I’m pregnant!” she cried.

“Don’t be a fool!” Father shouted.

“You’re only a child,” Mother said.

“I’m pregnant, I tell you!” she cried.

Father knelt by my sister. He put his hand on her belly and rubbed it gently.

“How do you know you are pregnant?” he asked.

“Feel it!” she cried.

We put our hands on her belly. There was something moving inside. Father was frightened. Mother was shocked.

“Who’s the man?” she asked.

“There’s no man,” my sister said.

“What is it then?” Father asked.

Suddenly my sister opened her blouse and a bullfrog jumped out. Mother fainted, father dropped the lamp, the oil spilled on the floor, and my sister’s blanket caught fire. One of my brothers laughed so hard he rolled on the floor.

When the fire was extinguished and Mother was revived, we turned to bed and tried to sleep, but Father kept on laughing so loud we could not sleep any more. Mother got up again and lit the oil lamp; we rolled up the mats on the floor and began dancing about and laughing with all our might. We made so much noise that all our neighbors except the rich family came into the yard and joined us in loud, genuine laughter. It was like that for years.

Bulosan also employs humor and satire to critique the absurdity of the rich man’s accusation. This can be seen in the courtroom scene.

The sweet tinkle of the coins carried beautifully in the courtroom. The spectators turned their faces toward the sound with wonder. Father came back and stood before the complaint.

“Did you hear it?” he asked.

“Hear what?” the man asked.

“The spirit of the money when I shook this hat?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you are paid,” Father said.

The father’s act of shaking a hat full of coins to pay with the “spirit of money” is a clever and humorous response as the rich man accused them of stealing the “spirit of food”. With this, the researcher interprets the humor and satire as a way of the father to undermine the authority of the rich man and expose the ridiculousness of his claim. The father’s clever defense highlights the power imbalance and critiques the social inequality that allows the rich to manipulate the legal system.

Discursive Practice

The author, Carlos Bulosan, uses descriptive language to highlight the economic struggles of the narrator’s family.

When the day came for us to appear in court, father brushed his old Army uniform and borrowed a pair of shoes from one of my brothers. We were the first to arrive. Father sat on a chair in the centre of the courtroom. Mother occupied a chair by the door. We children sat on a long bench by the wall...

The choice of words such as “old Army uniform” and “borrowed shoes” emphasizes their modest and humble means. The family also arrived first before the rich man, and this highlights their respectful demeanor as a sign of their determination, innocence, and dignity. The detailed seating arrangements also suggests humility and discipline. The contrast with the more affluent appearance of the rich neighbor, which the author did not put into fancy detail, underscores the social and economic disparities.

Social Practice

The story is set in a Filipino context, reflecting the cultural values of community, family, and humor. The language and actions in the story reveal the power dynamics between the rich and the poor. The rich man’s reliance on legal action to assert his authority is contrasted with the father’s clever and humorous defense, which subverts the power dynamics and critiques social inequality. The story challenges societal norms and values related to wealth and poverty by highlighting the resilience and dignity of the poor family.

Conclusion

This Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how Carlos Bulosan uses language, humor, and satire in the short story “How My Father Goes To Court” to critique social and economic disparities. The research questions have been answered; the linguistic features highlight the power dynamics and social disparities, while the humorous elements underscore the absurdity and injustice of the societal structure. By presenting these findings, the researcher effectively demonstrates the depth and significance of Bulosan's social commentary in the story using critical discourse analysis.

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APPENDIX

My Father Goes To Court

By Carlos Bulosan

When I was four, I lived with my mother and brothers and sisters in a small town on the island of Luzon. Father's farm had been destroyed in 1918 by one of our sudden Philippine floods, so several years afterwards we all lived in the town though he preferred living in the country. We had as a next door neighbor a very rich man, whose sons and daughters seldom came out of the house. While we boys and girls played and sang in the sun, his children stayed inside and kept the windows closed. His house was so tall that his children could look in the window of our house and watched us played, or slept, or ate, when there was any food in the house to eat.

Now, this rich man's servants were always frying and cooking something good, and the aroma of the food was wafted down to us from the windows of the big house. We hung about and took all the wonderful smells of the food into our beings. Sometimes, in the morning, our whole family stood outside the windows of the rich man's house and listened to the musical sizzling of thick strips of bacon or ham. I can remember one afternoon when our neighbor's servants roasted three chickens. The chickens were young and tender and the fat that dripped into the burning coals gave off an enchanting odor. We watched the servants turn the beautiful birds and inhaled the heavenly spirit that drifted out to us.

Some days the rich man appeared at a window and glowered down at us. He looked at us one by one, as though he were condemning us. We were all healthy because we went out in the sun and bathed in the cool water of the river that flowed from the mountains into the sea. Sometimes we wrestled with one another in the house before we went to play. We were always in the best of spirits and our laughter was contagious. Other neighbours who passed by our house often stopped in our yard and joined us in laughter.

Laughter was our only wealth. Father was a laughing man. He would go in to the living room and stand in front of the tall mirror, stretching his mouth into grotesque shapes with his fingers and making faces at himself, and then he would rush into the kitchen, roaring with laughter.

There was plenty to make us laugh. There was, for instance, the day one of my brothers came home and brought a small bundle under his arm, pretending that he brought something to eat, maybe a leg of lamb or something as extravagant as that to make our mouths water. He rushed to mother and through the bundle into her lap. We all stood around, watching mother undo the complicated strings. Suddenly a black cat leaped out of the bundle and ran wildly around the house. Mother chased my brother and beat him with her little fists, while the rest of us bent double, choking with laughter.

Another time one of my sisters suddenly started screaming in the middle of the night. Mother reached her first and tried to calm her. My sister cried and groaned. When father lifted the lamp, my sister stared at us with shame in her eyes.

"What is it?" Mother asked.

"I'm pregnant!" she cried.

"Don't be a fool!" Father shouted.

"You're only a child," Mother said.

“I’m pregnant, I tell you!” she cried.

Father knelt by my sister. He put his hand on her belly and rubbed it gently.

“How do you know you are pregnant?” he asked.

“Feel it!” she cried.

We put our hands on her belly. There was something moving inside. Father was frightened. Mother was shocked.

“Who’s the man?” she asked.

“There’s no man,” my sister said.

“What is it then?” Father asked.

Suddenly my sister opened her blouse and a bullfrog jumped out. Mother fainted, father dropped the lamp, the oil spilled on the floor, and my sister’s blanket caught fire. One of my brothers laughed so hard he rolled on the floor.

When the fire was extinguished and Mother was revived, we turned to bed and tried to sleep, but Father kept on laughing so loud we could not sleep any more. Mother got up again and lit the oil lamp; we rolled up the mats on the floor and began dancing about and laughing with all our might. We made so much noise that all our neighbors except the rich family came into the yard and joined us in loud, genuine laughter. It was like that for years.

As time went on, the rich man’s children became thin and anaemic, while we grew even more robust and full of life. Our faces were bright and rosy, but theirs were pale and sad. The rich man started to cough at night; then he coughed day and night. His wife began coughing too. Then the children started to cough, one after the other. At night their coughing sounded like the barking of a herd of seals. We hung outside their windows and listened to them. We wondered what happened. We knew that they were not sick from the lack of nourishment because they were still always frying something delicious to eat.

One day the rich man appeared at a window and stood there a long time. He looked at my sisters, who had grown fat in laughing, then at my brothers, whose arms and legs were like the molave, which is the sturdiest tree in the Philippines. He banged down the window and ran through his house, shutting all the windows.

From that day on, the windows of our neighbour’s house were always closed. The children did not come out anymore. We could still hear the servants cooking in the kitchen, and no matter how tight the windows were shut, the aroma of the food came to us in the wind and drifted gratuitously into our house.

One morning a policeman from the presidencia came to our house with a sealed paper. The rich man had filed a complaint against us. Father took me with him when he went to the town clerk and asked him what it was about. He told Father the man claimed that for years we had been stealing the spirit of his wealth and food.

When the day came for us to appear in court, father brushed his old Army uniform and borrowed a pair of shoes from one of my brothers. We were the first to arrive. Father sat on a chair in the centre of the courtroom. Mother occupied a chair by the door. We children sat on a long bench by the wall. Father kept jumping up from his chair and stabbing the air with his arms, as though we were defending himself before an imaginary jury.

The rich man arrived. He had grown old and feeble; his face was scarred with deep lines. With him was his young lawyer. Spectators came in and almost filled the chairs. The judge entered the room and sat on a high chair. We stood in a hurry and then sat down again.

After the courtroom preliminaries, the judge looked at the Father. "Do you have a lawyer?" he asked.

"I don't need any lawyer, Judge," he said.

"Proceed," said the judge.

The rich man's lawyer jumped up and pointed his finger at Father. "Do you or you do not agree that you have been stealing the spirit of the complaint's wealth and food?"

"I do not!" Father said.

"Do you or do you not agree that while the complaint's servants cooked and fried fat legs of lamb or young chicken breast you and your family hung outside his windows and inhaled the heavenly spirit of the food?"

"I agree." Father said.

"Do you or do you not agree that while the complaint and his children grew sickly and tubercular you and your family became strong of limb and fair in complexion?"

"I agree." Father said.

"How do you account for that?"

Father got up and paced around, scratching his head thoughtfully. Then he said, "I would like to see the children of complaint, Judge."

"Bring in the children of the complaint."

They came in shyly. The spectators covered their mouths with their hands, they were so amazed to see the children so thin and pale. The children walked silently to a bench and sat down without looking up. They stared at the floor and moved their hands uneasily.

Father could not say anything at first. He just stood by his chair and looked at them. Finally he said, "I should like to cross – examine the complaint."

"Proceed."

"Do you claim that we stole the spirit of your wealth and became a laughing family while yours became morose and sad?" Father said.

"Yes."

"Do you claim that we stole the spirit of your food by hanging outside your windows when your servants cooked it?" Father said.

"Yes."

"Then we are going to pay you right now," Father said. He walked over to where the children were sitting on the bench and took my straw hat off my lap and began filling it up with centavo pieces that

he took out of his pockets. He went to Mother, who added a fistful of silver coins. My brothers threw in their small change.

“May I walk to the room across the hall and stay there for a few minutes, Judge?” Father said.

“As you wish.”

“Thank you,” father said. He strode into the other room with the hat in his hands. It was almost full of coins. The doors of both rooms were wide open.

“Are you ready?” Father called.

“Proceed.” The judge said.

The sweet tinkle of the coins carried beautifully in the courtroom. The spectators turned their faces toward the sound with wonder. Father came back and stood before the complaint.

“Did you hear it?” he asked.

“Hear what?” the man asked.

“The spirit of the money when I shook this hat?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you are paid,” Father said.

The rich man opened his mouth to speak and fell to the floor without a sound. The lawyer rushed to his aid. The judge pounded his gravel.

“Case dismissed.” He said.

Father strutted around the courtroom the judge even came down from his high chair to shake hands with him. “By the way,” he whispered, “I had an uncle who died laughing.”

“You like to hear my family laugh, Judge?” Father asked?

“Why not?”

“Did you hear that children?” father said.

My sisters started it. The rest of us followed them soon the spectators were laughing with us, holding their bellies and bending over the chairs. And the laughter of the judge was the loudest of all.