**CHAPTER 14**

**EL FILIBUSTERISMO: CONTINUING RELEVANCE**

// Talks about the social significance of El Fili as a novel, how the situation of society portrayed in the novel is still prevalent today.

// This chapter will focus on the important themes tackled by Rizal in his second novel. Through these themes, the national hero’s views and ideas about the different aspects of society can be examined.

**Learning Objectives**

* Discuss the summary and the important themes in El Filibusterismo;
* Explain why a knowledge of history is important in reading a historical novel; and
* Examine the conditions of the Philippine society through Rizal’s El Filibusterismo.

**Vocabulary**

**Reform –** improvement or change to a better state (social, economic, and political institutions)

**Revolution –** a violent attempt to overthrow a government

***Principalia class*** – the ruling and usually educated upper class in the nineteenth century Philippines

One hundred twenty years after Rizal’s execution, his writings remain socially relevant. The ills that he rallied against – inept leadership, corruption, abuse of women, and the influence of the Catholic Church over political and social affairs – are still persisting in the Philippine society today. A thorough understanding of the historicity of his novels is important as it serves as the background of the story. In reading historical novels like El Filibusterismo, one must be knowledgeable about the social milieu of the period when it was written. In this way, history can be used as a tool for interpreting a literary work like El Fili (Nuncio, 2014).

As with Noli Me Tangere, Rizal’s main objective in writing El Filibusterismo is to expose the Philippine situation as the witnessed during his time. In reading this novel, one can see the nation’s past and present situations which make this literary work enduringly significant. Renato Constantino (1971, p. 137) wrote about the relevance of Rizal’s teachings where he said:

“*The importance of Rizal’s ideas for our generation has a twofold basis-first, the applicability to present-day problems, and second, their inspirational value. Rizal holds a mirror to our faces and we see ourselves, our vices, our defects, our meanness. Because the conditions he describes are the very conditions we see around us, and the characters he portrays are people we continued to meet, we readily respond to his earnest desire for basic changes in our society and in ourselves. One hand holds a mirror to shame us and the other points the way to our regeneration. Yet, the truth is that the mirror was not meant to reveal our image, but the image of the people and the society of Rizal’s time.”*

By going back to the themes that Rizal tackled in *El Fili,* one can see the importance of the novel at present. Themes are the main ideas that flow through the narrative which can be used to evaluate Rizal’s views and ideas on different social issues.

**Revolution as a means of Social Change**

In the novel, Simoun is the *filibustero* who encourages the *principalia class* to abuse the poor so that the latter would be driven to revolt against the government. His character may be interpreted as someone who represents the Filipino revolutionaries that supported the idea of a bloody revolution against the Spanish colonial government. Simoun’s death in the story made some readers conclude that Rizal was against the idea of a revolution. Simoun’s failed uprisings in the narrative, were interpreted as Rizal’s abhorrence of violence and bloodshed. They failed to see that Rizal, together with other reformists like Marcelo H. Del Pilar, regarded reform and assimilation as a first step towards Philippine Independence. In his letter to Blumentritt on June 19, 1887, he said:

“*I assure you that I have no desire to take part in conspiracies which seem to me very premature and risky. But if the government drives us to the brink, that is to say when no other hope remains but seek our destruction in war, when the Filipinos would prefer to die rather than endure their misery any longer, then I will also become a partisan of violent means. The choice of peace or destruction is in the hands of Spain, because it is a clear fact, known to all, that we are patient and peaceful, mild, unfeeling, etc. But everything ends in this life, there is nothing eternal in the world and that refers also to our patience” (Ocampo, 2012).*

Rizal’s words in the aforementioned letter are significant because they proved that he was not against the idea of violence if necessary. Historian Ambeth Ocampo (2012) wrote: “Simoun failed – not because Rizal was against the revolution, but because he reflected on the anger and bitterness in his heart following the agrarian dispute in Calamba, and realized that one must start with a good intention to succeed.

**On Leadership and Governance**

*El Fili’s* message is very clear – the inept leaders, corrupt officials, and system of government in the Philippines could lead to Spain’s downfall. When Simoun said: “*What is a man to do when he is denied justice? Take the law into his own hands or wait for Spain to give him rights…?”* he stressed that if the demands of the people would not be granted, they would be driven to oppose the system and organize movements to fight for their rights.

Rizal himself was admired as a good leader. His colleagues in the Propaganda Movement respected him because he showed a kind of leadership that was not motivated by personal interest. The call for a good leadership could be gleaned from *El Fili* when he stressed the importance of national sentiment to guard the society against all kinds of injustices and oppression.

Rizal condemned the friar-led officials for their greed, corruption, and exploitation of the natives. On the other hand, he also criticized his fellow Filipinos who did not respond to the challenges under the abusive leadership of the Spaniards. The character of Basilio, for example, who , despite the extreme sufferings that he and his family experienced, did not support Simoun’s plan of overthrowing the government. He only joined the revolutionary group after being arrested and imprisoned, followed by the death of his sweetheart, Juli. There was also one character, Señor Pasta, who abandoned his noble ideas to serve only the interest of those who hired him.

While Rizal exposed the injustices done by the colonial government, he also challenged the Filipinos to guard their rights as one of their main responsibilities. Good leadership and governance bring about social, economic, and political reforms in the country. All this can be achieved if the leaders have moral fiber, and are ready to give up their personal interests for the welfare of their constituents.

**On Education and Language**

At the time that Simoun was planning to launch the revolution, students including Basilio were also fighting for the establishment of a school that would allow natives to learn the Spanish language. Simoun strongly reacted against the project advocated by the students. For him, it would mean the death of national identity and the institutionalization of tyranny. In Chapters 6 (Basilio) and 7 (Simoun), Simoun expressed his disapproval of the student’s program, convincing Basilio to join him in his plan of revolution instead. He questioned the student’s advocacy and said:

“*What will you be in the future? A people without character, a nation without liberty. Everything in you will be borrowed, even your very defects. You are asking to be Hispanized and you do not blanch with shame when it is denied you! Even if it is condeded, what would you want? What would you gain? At best, to become a country of pronouncements, a country of civil wars, a republic of rapacious and the discontented, like some republics of South America. Why do you now come with your teaching of Spanish, a pretension that would be ridiculous were it not for its deplorable consequences? Do you wish to add another idiom to the more than forty already spoken in the islands so that you may understand each other, each time, less…?”*

Still about the language issue, Simoun added:

“*You allow yourselves to be misled by big words and you never get to the bottom of things to examine the effects in their ultimate manifestations. Spanish will never be the common language in the country; the people will never speak it because for the ideas of its mind and the sentiments of its heart there are no words in that idiom. Each country has its own, as it has manner of feeling. What will you gain with Spanish? The few who speak it? To stamp out your originality, subordinate your thoughts to other minds and instead of making yourselves free, make yourselves truly slaves! Nine out of ten of those among you who presume to be enlightened, are renegades to your motherland. Those among you who speak that language are indifferent to their own tongue, so much that they neither write nor understand it. How many have I seen who pretend not to know a single word of it!”*

Basilio, on the other hand, believed that through education, he would be able to alleviate the lives of his fellow Filipinos. He did not believe that revolution could be an effective means to achieve freedom. For him, education and science would save the country from its present situation.

**On the Filipino Youth**

“*Where the youth who will consecrate their golden hours, their illusions, and their enthusiasm for the welfare of their country? Where are they who would generously shed their blood to wash away so much shame, so much crime, so much abomination? Pure and spotless the victim has to be for the holocaust to be acceptable!... Where are you, youth who will incarnate in yourselves the vigor of life that has fled from our veins, the purity of ideas that have been soiled in our minds, and the fire of enthusiasm that has been extinguished in our hearts?... We wait for you, O youth! Come, for we await you!”*

Such were the words of Jose Rizal through the character of Padre Florentino, a patriotic Filipino priest in *El Fili.* Rizal saw the youth as the future of the country because this generation would one day lead the nation. Their actions today would shape the path of tomorrow.

Rizal stressed the important role of the youth in challenging the government as seen in the efforts of students like Basilio and Isagani to organize themselves and unite to call for reforms. For Simoun, it was a way of embracing the Hispanization of the country. On the other hand, it could also be seen as Rizal’s way of showing what the youth could do if they wanted reforms from the government.