

Bread as Metaphor, Class as Destiny: A Postcolonial and Bourdieusian Reading of N. V. M. Gonzalez's *Bread of Salt*

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doi:10.63593/JRSSH.2026.06.09

Abstract

This study analyzes the short fiction *Bread of Salt* written by N. V. M. Gonzalez (1958) as a literary representation of social class development and colonial cultural influence in the Philippines under American rule. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and symbolic capital, the paper shows that the narrator's unsuccessful courtship of Aida, a pianist from a wealthier family, provides a model of the limitations on the possibility of moving up the social ladder through personal ability and determination. To confirm this thesis, the research involves an in-depth reading of the narrative's key symbols, such as bread and salt, music, cinema, and the house of Don Esteban. The analysis shows that, in the text, Gonzalez proves what sociologists call the myth of meritocracy, since the story ends by showing how this myth can be debunked. Thus, the paper provides a new reading of one of the major Philippine literary works and situates it within existing thought on class reproduction, colonial legacy, and the sociology of aspiration.

Keywords: N. V. M. Gonzalez, *Bread of Salt*, Philippine literature, postcolonialism, cultural capital, social class, colonial mentality

1. Introduction

Do personal ability and hard work have the ability to break the structural obstacles posed by not having enough money and having a low social status, or do those obstacles still exist and persist regardless of the abilities of the individuals? The short story *Bread of Salt* (1958) by N. V. M. Gonzalez raises this question through the way of looking at the things of the son of a poor baker, who joins a local band and falls in love with Aida, a daughter of a wealthy family. Though written in the post-war period, the

narrative takes place during the colonial period of the United States' presence in the Philippines, when American education and entertainment were changing how the citizens of the Philippines lived.

This essay claims that *Bread of Salt* represents not only the disappointment of love in a young man's life, but an example of how class structures have been replicated despite the need to reward capabilities and abilities. Through the prism of postcolonial theory and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the essay argues that Aida's

and her relatives' settings can be seen as preserved cultural capital accessible to the narrator, yet never successfully transformed into belonging. The symbols of the story, including the title, salt, the town's band, the movie house, and Esteban's mansion, are viewed as important examples of the described process. In addition, the essay presents another academic work on the significance of Philippine literature in English for understanding the effects of the colonial past on the present system of class, opportunities, and belonging (Lavezaris-Dajao, 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Philippine Literature in English and the Colonial Legacy*

Philippine literature in English occupies a complicated position within post-colonial studies, as it is produced in the language of the colonizers yet is increasingly seen as a means of articulating Filipino identity and engaging in critique. According to Lavezaris-Dajao (2024), Philippine literature in English combines American and Spanish colonial influences with the indigenous tradition. At the same time, the foreign responses to this kind of literature have often ignored these cultural differences and treated it merely as political literature. This situation can be explained by the history of American colonial rule in the Philippines. After 1898, the English language became the language of education and public life in the Philippines. According to Hsu (2015), the promotion of English was part of the project of coloniality of neoliberal English, which created different levels of cultural and social status. Zeng and Tian (2022) demonstrate that the American colonial authorities used English education to shape Filipinos' views of American culture and its values. Education was provided inequitably. The authors Tran Xuan Hiep et al. (2021) recount that, despite appearing more inclusive than previous Spanish educational policies, American colonial education was similarly characterized by the filtering of opportunities based upon economic class and gender, resulting in enduring inequities in who could access education.

Within this literary context, it is useful to compare Gonzalez's contemporaries. Arong (2018) states that if we read Nick Joaquin's fiction carefully, we will discover a means of resistance against American neocolonialism through the focus on Hispanic culture in his work, which demonstrates that Filipino authors in English

during this time used the narrative form to contend with and negotiate colonial legacies rather than simply depicting them in their stories. The author Mendoza (2012) affirms that access to English and to the form of fiction writing was itself a sign of privilege for early 20th-century writers, and this fact corresponds to the class-determined access to culture of Gonzalez's protagonist.

2.2 *Colonial Mentality and Internalized Class Hierarchy*

Another area of study examines how colonial domination leaves behind a psychological impact and cultural legacy that continue to shape social class long after the official colonial era has ended. According to David and Okazaki (2006), colonial mentality refers to a kind of internalized oppression in the Philippines where people automatically prefer colonizers' culture over their own and view their own culture, or informal culture, as inferior. Further, David (2008) points out that this internalized hierarchy is a source of a shared emotional burden that affects how colonized and postcolonial subjects value themselves and others in relation to Westerners. Docot (2021) applies this concept in her analysis of how a colonial framework for "civilizing" people is used in the Philippines to govern who is entitled to help, respect, or a chance to elevate their social status. All these ideas clarify why the main character in *Bread of Salt* does not see his poverty merely as a financial issue but as a sign of being unworthy in Aida's eyes.

2.3 *Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital and Class Reproduction*

In the present paper, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of cultural capital provides the framework for understanding why talent alone does not bridge the gap between the narrator and Aida. According to Stempel (2018), Bourdieu argues that the ruling classes maintain their position not only through economic capital but also through cultural capital —knowledge of behavior, taste, and abilities that are socially constructed, together with symbolic capital, which is the ability to determine acceptable types of behavior. Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund (2017) confirm the applicability of the theory through the use of current survey data suggesting that taste and class still correlate even in theoretically egalitarian societies, thus supporting Bourdieu's hypothesis that culture divides people. Gunn (2005) concludes that

cultural capital was crucial for establishing the British middle class and its legitimacy, being passed down through families and education and embodied in the body of a person, which is similar to Aida's family's access to the piano and capability to play it, something the narrator is unable to achieve.

Vassenden and Jonvik offer an additional perspective on the influence of cultural capital, noting that it functions as an asset "hidden" by its holders in class encounters. The importance of this aspect is particularly reflected in the fact that this class difference between the narrator and Aida is stated only indirectly throughout the narrative. However, it is felt in the narrator's stunned reaction to the amount of silver and China in Don Esteban's house. Literary applications of this framework evidence that it is particularly relevant for literary studies. Etherington and Zimble (2014) suggest that postcolonial literary criticism should combine Bourdieu's concept of field with Adorno's notion of the material, arguing that the form of writing must be understood as a reaction to the available modes of writing.

2.4 Meritocracy Myths and the Limits of Individual Effort

The last strand of literature offers a more sociological critique of the notion of meritocracy as shown throughout the story. The study by Mijs, Daenekindt, and de Koster (2022) notes that belief in meritocracy tends to be reinforced by even small experiences of upward social mobility, while downward social mobility does not seem to lower that belief — which helps illuminate why the narrator continues to hope despite his ongoing unstable position in the band, as well as the precariousness of his connection to Aida's world.

In their study, Deng and Wang (2025) experimentally demonstrate that stories about self-made success have a positive impact on belief in meritocracy, linked to increased individual motivation and effort, especially in environments with limited mobility. This provides a sociological explanation for the narrator's actions, as he chooses to deepen his commitment to music rather than question the system that limits his efforts. Lee (2022) also discusses the theme of social mobility in contemporary American literature and offers the interesting idea that stories that seem to attack the idea of a classless society can serve to reinforce beliefs in

individual merit that the authors want to criticize. As compared with this line of reasoning, the ending of Gonzalez's work can be perceived as an understated yet powerful way of rejecting the idea of meritocracy because the narrator does not experience a burst of passion against the forces that control him; he loses his interest in the character of Aida and thus realizes that talent will not bring him success in the drumming career.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this project is qualitative close reading, achieved by examining the work through the lenses of postcolonial literature and Bourdieu's sociology of culture. In accordance with Etherington & Zimble (2014), the approach taken does not differentiate between literary elements such as imagery, symbols, point of view, and storytelling and the context in which the text was created. The focus of this analysis is on the work of Gonzalez titled *Bread of Salt*, which has been analyzed in terms of the use of symbols present in it and in terms of how the narrator represents social differences.

Then these texts were analyzed considering the literature analyzed above: the effect of postcolonialism and historical literature about the Philippines in the era of American dominance was utilized to contextualize received information, and sociological words from the theory developed by Bourdieu were used to understand the nature of the narrator's relationship with Aida and her family that were previously described above. The notions of colonial mindset and meritocratic beliefs were also used to interpret the narrator's inner world, particularly his perception of himself in light of Aida and his final realization about the nature of the life he lived.

4. Historical and Cultural Context

Bread of Salt is set during the American colonial period, when the archipelago's economy, education system, and popular culture were being reorganized around American institutions and consumer forms. The period's most consequential legacy for a story like Gonzalez's is not military or administrative but cultural: the installation of English-medium schooling, American-style entertainment, and Western artistic training as markers of modernity and respectability (Zeng & Tian, 2022; Hsu, 2015). Access to these markers, however, was never evenly distributed.

Tran Xuan Hiep and colleagues (2021) argue that

while American colonial education extended educational access when compared to the Spanish era, it still distributed opportunities along social class and family income lines, resulting in a middle and upper class that possessed cultural competence (access to English, Western musical heritage, access to cinema, etc.) that poorer families, including that of the narrator, could only partially access in a delayed manner. The narrator, a son of a baker, belongs to this category of people who could enjoy some aspects of colonial musical and film culture but lack the ancestral wealth required to function in Aida's lane life.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 *Bread and Salt as Symbols of Labor and Sacrifice*

The connection between bread and salt in the story's title depicts the working-class struggle. Bread, or *pandesal*, represents the family's means of livelihood, and the narrator's work involves observing the bakers at their jobs with their shovels. Salt stands for the difficulties of this kind of work and reminds us that it is seasoned with hard labor rather than fun. Viewed through Bourdieu's lens, bread-making is a highly abundant form of labor with no currency, producing economic subsistence but not cultural capital that would matter in the context of this essay (Stempel, 2018; Gunn, 2005). The story ends when it is noted that it is not five and the bread is not cooked yet, and the narrator returns to the same economy of labor and waiting, which proves that his short visit to music and romance does not affect his situation at all.

5.2 *Music as Aspirational Capital*

By joining the town band, the narrator tried to gain the cultural capital that Aida already had as a trained pianist. His active practice of Alard's violin exercises indicates real talent and dedication. According to the meritocratic ideology, these skills should allow him to succeed (Mijs, Daenekindt, & de Koster, 2022). However, Bourdieu's perspective on cultural capital demonstrates that this effort will not be enough to reach the intended goal. Gaining cultural capital through hard work late in life differs from obtaining it at an early age (Gunn, 2005; Flemen, Jarness, & Rosenlund, 2017). Aida's piano accompaniments are connected with her family's leisure and elegant life, whereas the narrator's playing signifies that he will have to work hard.

5.3 *Aida and Don Esteban's Mansion: Cultural*

Capital and Class Boundary

In this tale, Aida and her family's patriarch, Don Esteban, are perfect examples of inherited privilege. The way the narrator reacts to the silverware, crockery, and availability of food in the house is such that it indicates, according to Bourdieusian ideas, that the narrator has felt the cultural and symbolic capital of the mansion that is so naturalized among its owners that its presence needs no explanation — while an outsider might be perplexed by it (Vassenden & Jonvik, 2018).

Importantly enough, in the story, there is no direct conflict between the narrator and this world; the border is maintained through the ambiance, comfort, and unvoiced assumptions rather than open exclusion, which is in line with the finding by Vassenden and Jonvik (2018) that people in possession of cultural capital tend to keep the functioning of such capital hidden rather than revealed, especially in cross-class interactions. The narrator's own calling attitude towards his inadequacy in this context echoes what David and Okazaki (2006) describe as colonial mentality. This internalized hierarchy makes the colonized or people with low incomes see their own culture, work, and background as lesser.

5.4 *The Meritocratic Illusion and Its Collapse*

The emotional climax of the story — the narrator's realization that he has lost all feelings for Aida — signifies the collapse of a meritocratic dream rather than Aida's rejection of him. Gonzalez cleverly does not present the failure as a punishment for inadequate work, which would imply the correctness of the meritocratic approach, but rather as the narrator's realization that talent and effort will be of no use in a world ruled by inherited wealth.

The story's avoidance of melodrama — there is only waning emotion and no moment featuring humiliation — is a formal choice that aligns with Etherington and Zimble's (2014) assertion that the author's craft should be interpreted as an intentional response to the social context portrayed: for Gonzalez, limitation is the right way to communicate disappointment that is structural in nature and cannot be expressed by one dramatic incident.

6. Conclusion

Bread of Salt presents an argument about class and colonial legacy by depicting a boy's unrequited

love for a girl. The argument asserts that merit and hard work in personal endeavors are not enough to challenge the existing class system, which is characterized by cultural capital. *Bread of Salt*, when read alongside literature on Philippine literature in English, colonial mentality, Bourdieusian sociology, and meritocratic belief, reveals that the symbols found in the piece, such as bread and salt, the town band, and the mansion, constitute a system that encapsulates how American colonialist class systems survived in day-to-day life. It is interesting to note that the disillusionment experienced by the narrator is consistent with the trend identified in sociological literature where instances of social mobility being restricted lead to individual efforts to change one's situation rather than criticism of the social structure itself (Mijs, Daenekindt, & de Koster, 2022; Deng & Wang, 2025).

This analysis indicates that Gonzalez's plot is still relevant today, despite the historical context from which it originated. Modern-day problems such as wealth disparity, access to education, and the persistence of meritocratic ideas have brought back essential questions raised by the plot: what influences one's opportunities apart from one's effort, and to what extent the hidden barrier that the narrator feels in Don Esteban's mansion still exists in today's world. Perhaps future studies can expand this framework by identifying similar processes of the transmission of cultural capital or colonial mentality in other English-language short stories from that time in the Philippines.

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