

**Economic History**  
**through the Lens of Literature:**  
**A Comparison of the Filipina Maid**  
**and her Counterpart in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France**

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The short story "*Un coeur simple*" (A Simple Heart) was written in French by Gustave Flaubert in the 19th century. Set in rural France, it contains many striking parallels with modern Philippines. This is one reason why I decided to make an adaptation of this story in Tagalog. In this adaptation, I sacrificed geographical accuracy with the intent of making the story relevant to any typical locality in the Philippines outside the National Capital Region. Names of people and places were Filipinized.

The principal character epitomizes the image of the Filipina housemaid known all over the world. A modern-day heroine, the Filipina housemaid performs a myriad of household chores, cares for the children of her employer, and supports the relatives she left behind (who depend on her largesse) while all the time relying on her unschooled faith in God to handle setbacks in her personal life and adjust to new surroundings.

**SUMMARY OF THE STORY**

Felicité, the housemaid, is an orphan and a simple rural lass who abandons her hometown after being jilted by her lover. In her new surroundings, she becomes a housemaid for a middle-class widow with two children. She quickly establishes herself as a hard-working and reliable housemaid determined to bury her heartache. She showers affection on the two young children of her employer Madame Aubain, an aloof and distant woman.

For some 50 years, Felicité dedicates her life to serving the same family with devotion and loyalty as she puts their

interests above hers. In my adaptation, this is how Flaubert describes her:

*Sa loob ng halos 50 taon, kinainggitan si Aling Auring ng buong Sitio Muling Pag-asa dahil sa kanyang matapat na kasambahay, si Felicidad. Sa halagang dalawang libong piso bawat buwan, si Felicidad ay nagluto at nag-ayos ng bahay, naglaba, namalantsa, nag-alaga ng manok at baboy, at nanatiling matapat sa kanyang amo na si Aling Auring, isang taong hindi madaling pakisamahan.*

The maid is a silent and stoic witness to the vicissitudes of life including personal losses and the eventual death of her employer, who leaves Felicité a modest inheritance. She is sustained by inner strength, profound spirituality, and blind faith in God. In the end, she dies in her employer's house, deaf and nearly blind, and cared for by someone in the neighborhood where Felicité's reputation for genuine kindness and fierce loyalty is well known.

### **GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S *TROIS CONTES***

Gustave Flaubert wrote "*Un coeur simple*" as one of the stories in the triptych *Trois Contes*. Flaubert, who belonged to a family of doctors, suffered from a nervous disease (believed by some to be epilepsy) and debauched himself in the company of prostitutes. Afflicted with syphilis, he died of brain hemorrhage in May 1880 (Merriman, 2005).

Flaubert is best known for the classic tale of adultery entitled *Madame Bovary*, a novel that inspired moral outrage because of its realistic portrayal of a provincial woman who attempts to escape a boring marriage by philandering. Flaubert counted among his friends such great writers as Emil Zola and the Russian Ivan Turgenev. Guy de Maupassant considered him his principal inspiration and influence. His place in the pantheon of literary greats is indisputable. After all, he is credited with creating the modern novel (Starkie, 1967).

To Flaubert, the novelist should remain neutral and impartial, not attempting to judge, teach, or explain. He was a perfectionist with a spare but exacting style. The use of “*le mot juste*” was one of the hallmarks of his writing (Merriman, 2005). His realistic depiction of Felicité remains relevant today more than a hundred years after it was written, in a world far removed from the original.

The aim of my Tagalog adaptation is to bring Flaubert closer to the typical Filipino reader. By “typical reader” I have in mind not the highly educated ones but the family driver, the market vendor, the street sweeper, and yes, the housemaid. Their lack of facility in the English language should not hinder them from enjoying Flaubert’s classic tale, hence the adaptation.

#### **PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER**

In this paper, however, I want to point out the “disconnect” between overseas Filipina housemaids who are hailed as heroines, and the maids working in their own country who are almost completely ignored. To do this, one must know the economic context of the short story.

#### **ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN FRANCE**

Flaubert’s depiction of the place where the events take place is silent on the economy. But the reader is aware that it is a rural setting where livelihood is largely farm- and sea-based. Madame Aubain, Felicité’s employer, earns rent from two modest agricultural properties. The story also mentions that the return of boats laden with freshly caught fish is a major “*divertissement*” that attracts the rural folk and distracts them from their humdrum existence.

*Ang tanging libangan sa Manggahan ay ang pagbalik ng mga barko. Dumadausdos ang mga barko sa alon hanggang sa piyer kung saan binababa ang angkla. Naglulundagan ang mga marino sa table; dito nangingisay ang mga bagong huling isda. Ang mga marino’y sinasalubong ng mga dalaga.*