

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT TO PHILIPPINE LITERATURE: READER'S RESPONSE TO LAMBERTO ANTONIO'S 'GABI NG ISANG PIYON'

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Abstract:

This study explores emotional engagement with Philippine literature through the lens of Reader-Response Theory. It focuses on how a reader's personal background, cultural context, and lived experiences shape emotional and interpretive responses to *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*, a poem by Lamberto Antonio that portrays themes of labor, fatigue, and sacrifice. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this qualitative case study involved a fourth-year Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English from Southern Negros Occidental. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, and analyzed using Lichtman's 3Cs coding framework (coding, categorizing, conceptualizing). The analysis generated 349 units of meaning clustered into three major themes: (1) Enduring Fatigue and Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries, (2) Sacrifice, Responsibility, and Emotional Burden Across Generations, and (3) Chronic Financial Insecurity and Structural Inequality. These themes revealed a profound emotional resonance with the poem, shaped by the participant's experiences as a young mother and the economic struggles of her laborer husband. Findings affirm that emotional engagement with literature can deepen interpretive understanding, especially when texts reflect the reader's socio-economic realities. The participant's personal identification with the *piyon* transformed the poem into a mirror of lived experience, illustrating literature's capacity to evoke empathy, critical reflection, and motivation. Though limited to a single participant, the study offers meaningful insights for educators and curriculum developers advocating for culturally relevant pedagogy and emotional literacy in literary education.

Keywords: Philippine literature, reader-response theory, emotional engagement, case study, *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*

Introduction:

The inclusion of literature in the curriculum is essential rather than optional, as it allows students to engage with texts that mirror human emotions and struggles. According to Moea (2023), reading literature enables students to explore complex emotional states, fostering introspection. Oatley (2021) further asserts that literature enhances readers' empathy by inviting them to experience diverse perspectives, ultimately strengthening emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Through literary engagement, students not only enrich their understanding of themselves but also of the world around them.

A prime example of such a literary work is *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* by Lamberto Antonio, translated as *Night of a Construction Worker* by Jennifer Betts. This poem captures the inner world of a Filipino laborer whose nighttime reflections evoke themes of solitude, exhaustion, and quiet resilience. Through vivid yet restrained language, Antonio brings to light the everyday realities of economic hardship and labor. Set against the stillness of night, the poem presents a deeply human narrative that resonates with the socio-political climate of the Philippines, providing fertile ground for exploring emotional responses in literature.

Emotional responses to literature refer to the spectrum of feelings elicited by engaging with a text. Antonio's work, grounded in Filipino lived experience, can elicit empathy, reflection, and even discomfort, especially among readers who share or understand such struggles. Antonio (1946) shows how portraying the hardships of Filipino workers evokes powerful affective reactions in readers. As Parente et al. (2020) note, literature functions as a medium for emotional communication, where language and feeling coalesce. Li (2022) also emphasizes that emotional expression in texts allows for a meaningful transfer of experiences between writer and reader.

This emotional exchange becomes even more powerful when literature reflects a community's collective realities. Moea (2023) underscores literature's role as a mirror, allowing individuals and communities to recognize their circumstances and envision transformation. In this sense, texts like *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* are not only artistic expressions but also socio-cultural commentaries. Literature fosters self-awareness and civic consciousness, making it indispensable in educational contexts where learners' personal identities and emotions are central to the interpretive process.

The evolution of Philippine literature itself is steeped in historical and political transitions. As Cruz (2019) explains, colonial encounters introduced new literary traditions, such as Spanish and American influences, which shaped contemporary Philippine narratives. Writers like Lamberto Antonio reflect this legacy, using literature as a platform

to critique social injustices. These historical contexts enrich students' interpretations, enabling them to connect their present realities with the themes embedded in works like *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*.

Globally, emotional engagement with literature has been widely documented. For example, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* has been analyzed for how it evokes readers' reflections on guilt, memory, and human frailty (Wen et al., 2025). Comparably, local literature such as *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* resonates with Filipino readers by presenting culturally specific yet universally human emotions. Lopez-Gonzalez (2023) argues that analyzing global and local texts together reveals a shared emotional thread across cultures, whether one is reading Shakespeare or a local folktale.

Despite growing interest in reader response theory and emotional engagement (Keen, 2007; Oatley, 1994), limited research explores how Filipino students emotionally respond to native literary works. This study aims to bridge that gap by focusing on how a student's personal background shapes her emotional engagement with *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*. By analyzing the interplay between personal experience and literary interpretation, this research highlights the subjective yet powerful ways literature is internalized by readers.

Reader response theory provides a useful lens for this exploration. Fish (1980) suggests that interpretation is never objective; rather, readers bring their emotional and cultural baggage into their engagement with texts. Green and Appel (2024) reinforce this by stating that emotions in reading are shaped by the reader's social and emotional landscapes. These insights validate the central assumption of this study—that individual experiences influence not just what readers feel, but how and why they feel it.

Motivated by this framework, the current study investigates how a fourth-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) English major emotionally responds to Antonio's poem. It specifically examines the emotions the reader associates with the themes of the poem, how her personal background shapes interpretation, and what elements of the poem resonate most with her lived experience. This case study highlights the significance of emotional engagement in literary pedagogy and the potential for culturally relevant texts to deepen students' emotional and intellectual learning.

In sum, this research affirms that literature, particularly culturally rooted works like *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*, serves as a powerful medium for emotional expression, reflection, and education. By documenting how personal background informs emotional response, the study offers insights not only into the richness of Philippine literature but also into how literature can be a transformative force in the classroom and beyond.

Methodology:

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the emotional engagement of a fourth-year BSED-English student with Lamberto Antonio's poem *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*. Case study research enables an in-depth understanding of complex human experiences within their real-life context (Burnard, 2024). Focusing on a single participant allowed the researcher to capture the intricacies of emotional responses, revealing how personal background and socio-cultural factors shape literary interpretation.

The case study design aligned with interpretivist principles by emphasizing subjectivity and meaning-making. It allowed for the collection of rich, contextual data through interviews and reflective journals, shedding light on how the poem's themes—such as labor, hardship, and dignity—resonated with the reader's personal experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018; William, 2024). The method supported detailed inquiry into how the reader's identity and cultural framework influenced their response.

Philosophical Paradigm

Guided by Interpretivism, the study approached knowledge as constructed through personal and cultural experiences. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding meanings behind human behavior and values subjective perspectives (William, 2024). The paradigm's suitability was grounded in its alignment with the study's objectives: to explore, interpret, and understand the participant's emotional and interpretive response to *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*. Interpretivism allowed the study to probe how the reader's emotions and background informed her engagement with the poem. It facilitated analysis of why certain lines or themes elicited strong emotional resonance and how prior experiences shaped interpretation. As William (2024) states, this paradigm supports qualitative methods that aim to understand meaning within social and cultural contexts.

Participant Profile

The participant was a fourth-year female BSED-English student from Southern Negros Occidental. She volunteered after being informed of the study's purpose and gave written consent. Her academic exposure to Philippine literature and personal familiarity with themes in Antonio's poem made her an ideal informant. Her insights were grounded in lived experiences of economic struggle and aspiration.

The participant was selected based on her academic background, demonstrated interest in Filipino literature, and prior engagement with the poem. She had shown strong emotional reactions to the text in class discussions. Inclusion required voluntary consent, prior reading of the poem, and the ability to contextualize its themes within personal and cultural frameworks.

The selection of a single participant in this qualitative case study is justified by the principle of thick description, as articulated by Geertz (2008), which emphasizes the value of in-depth, context-rich narratives in understanding human experience. Rather than seeking breadth, the study aimed for depth of insight, focusing on the participant's emotional and interpretive engagement with the poem *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*. Through repeated interviews, reflective journals, and emotional observations, the study achieved thematic saturation—a point at which no new insights or patterns were emerging from the data (Lichtman, 2013). The participant's richly layered responses, grounded in her lived socio-economic realities, allowed for a nuanced exploration of reader-response dynamics that might have been diluted in a larger, less focused sample. In this context, a single case offered sufficient complexity and narrative density to support robust thematic analysis, aligning with qualitative traditions that privilege depth over generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2013).

Data Gathering Techniques

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling. Semi-structured interviews offered both structure and flexibility, encouraging open dialogue while allowing the interviewer to follow emergent themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Conducted by a trained psychologist, interviews were audio/video recorded with consent and held in a safe, comfortable environment.

The participant kept a reflective journal throughout the study. Journaling allowed for spontaneous, personal reflections on how the poem resonated with her experiences (Bolton, 2006; Moon, 2006). Guided prompts supported depth without imposing structure, encouraging sincere emotional expression. These entries were essential for triangulating findings and tracking evolving responses.

Data Explication & Qualitative Rigors

All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The process began with repeated readings for familiarization, followed by manual coding of significant units related to emotional engagement. Codes were clustered into categories and eventually synthesized into conceptual themes aligned with the study's objectives and theoretical framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation of interviews and journals, and member checking. Transcripts were reviewed by the participant alongside audio recordings. Verbatim data, translation/back-translation (Van Nes et al., 2010), and independent transcript review supported authenticity and ensured the participant's voice was faithfully captured.

Thick description was employed to detail the participant's background, educational context, and emotional reactions, enabling readers to judge applicability to other contexts (Geertz, 2008). Verbatim excerpts and reflective memos preserved narrative richness and enabled analytic generalization within similar cultural or academic settings (Yin, 2013).

Dependability was reinforced through triangulation across data sources (Patton, 1999) and temporal engagement. The researcher collected data over several sessions, comparing interview and journal responses for consistency. An audit trail, verbatim transcription, and methodical documentation ensured that findings could be traced and confirmed.

To ensure confirmability, reflexive memos and an audit trail were maintained. Verbatim quotations linked findings to data, while independent translation review preserved meaning. The consulting psychologist's feedback and procedural logs strengthened methodological transparency and minimized researcher bias.

To ensure credibility and challenge interpretive bias, peer debriefing was conducted with a qualitative researcher familiar with literary studies. Discussions focused on affective dimensions—pride, guilt, resilience—and ensured findings were grounded in the participant's lived experience rather than the researcher's assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality observed via pseudonyms, and participation was voluntary. Sensitive content was handled with care, and psychological support was available if needed. The study upheld the principles of justice, respect, and beneficence, with the goal of contributing to culturally responsive literature teaching.

Findings and Discussion:

Participant Vignette

The participant is a 22-year-old fourth-year Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English and a young mother from Southern Negros Occidental. Balancing motherhood, academic life, and the realities of economic hardship, she shares her life with her husband—a government utility worker who also does construction work on weekends to support their small family and an extended network of dependents. Her lived experience echoes the very themes depicted in Lamberto Antonio's *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*, making her engagement with the poem not merely analytical, but intensely personal. She identified deeply with the piyon's weariness and resilience, often relating the poem's imagery to her husband's quiet sacrifices and relentless labor. For her, the laborer was not just a character, but a reflection of the man she loves and the life they are trying to build together.

During the interviews, she described being emotionally overwhelmed by the poem's depiction of fatigue and invisibility. The line, "Sa dilim ng gabi, ang piyon ay tahimik na nagbabantay," reminded her of her husband's unacknowledged vigilance even after a long day's work. She connected the laborer's enduring strength to her partner's role in their home—working not only for survival but out of love and duty. Her interpretation was shaped by her firsthand experience of structural inequality, where stable wages remain insufficient, and labor is undervalued. The poem became a catalyst for her to express long-suppressed feelings of gratitude, guilt, admiration, and quiet sorrow. Each stanza opened space for reflection on her life as a young mother, wife, and student—juggling aspirations with the weight of inherited responsibilities.

Her emotional response to *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* revealed literature's power as both mirror and catharsis. Through the poem, she gave voice to her struggles and found validation in its portrayal of dignity amid exhaustion. She recounted moments when her husband broke down from the burden, and how Antonio's lines articulated those unspoken pains. Yet, alongside sorrow, she found strength and resolve: the poem fueled her desire to break the cycle of generational labor, to finish her studies, and to offer her family a life where rest is not a luxury but a right. Her story affirms that literature, when grounded in lived experience, becomes not just a text—but testimony.

Data Coding

The data coding process distilled 349 units of meaning from the participant's emotional and narrative responses to *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* into 12 coded clusters, which were refined into 7 first-level codes and grouped into 3 overarching themes. These major themes are: (1) Enduring Fatigue and Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries (124 units), reflecting the relentless nature of labor and emotional exhaustion; (2) Sacrifice, Responsibility, and Emotional Burden Across Generations (117 units), highlighting inherited obligations and intergenerational struggles; and (3) Chronic Financial Insecurity and Structural Inequality (108 units), emphasizing persistent economic hardship and systemic undervaluation of labor. Together, these themes revealed how the participant's lived experiences were deeply mirrored in the poem's portrayal of quiet suffering and resilience. The literary engagement became more than textual analysis—it became a powerful vehicle for articulating personal and collective realities, positioning literature as both reflection and resistance.

Themes	Second-Level Coding	First-Level Coding	Coded Clusters	Units of Meaning
Enduring Fatigue and Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries	1	3	5	124
Sacrifice, Responsibility, and Emotional Burden Across Generations	1	2	2	117
Chronic Financial Insecurity and Structural Inequality	1	2	5	108
Total	3	7	12	349

Emerging Themes

Theme 1: Enduring Fatigue and the Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries

Thematic analysis in this study followed Lichtman's (2013) 3Cs model—coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. This approach revealed three central themes rooted in the participant's lived experience and her emotional responses to Lamberto Antonio's *Gabi ng Isang Piyon*. Anchored in Reader-Response Theory, the themes reflect how personal, familial, and socio-economic contexts shaped the participant's interpretation and emotional resonance with the poem. The most dominant theme, Enduring Fatigue and the Blurring of Work-Life Boundaries, emerged from consistent narratives about the physical and emotional toll of labor. The participant described her husband's unending cycle of work as a government employee and part-time laborer, which resonated with the poem's depiction of a restless, exhausted worker. Across interviews and journal entries, the participant highlighted how exhaustion did not end after a workday but extended into the night. She saw her husband's tired body and stressed demeanor as parallel to the *piyon* in the poem, reflecting a life where rest was never truly attained.

She discussed how their family life was often disrupted by work obligations, leading to a lack of quality time, rest, or emotional intimacy. This erosion of personal space illustrated how the boundaries between labor and life are often indistinguishable, especially for the working poor. These tensions translated into three core codes—work exhaustion, work-life imbalance, and relatability to the poem—which were synthesized into the category "Personal/Life and Literary Connection," emphasizing how emotional experience shaped and was shaped by literary interpretation. The participant articulated a strong connection between her lived experiences and the poem's tone and imagery. Her interpretation was not analytical but embodied—her husband became the *piyon*, and the poem, a vessel for her empathy, sorrow, and admiration. The poem validated emotions she often repressed—guilt for not doing enough, pride for her husband's strength, and frustration over the unfairness of their circumstances. This reflects Rosenblatt's (1994) aesthetic reading stance, where literature evokes deep personal introspection. Both her reflective journal and the psychologist's notes confirmed the authenticity of her emotional engagement. Expressions such as crying, trembling voice, and face-covering during interviews emphasized the depth of her connection with the text.

The participant's deep identification with the *piyon* in *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* illustrates how literature can mirror the lived exhaustion of marginalized workers. Her reflections on her husband's relentless work routine and the erosion of personal time reaffirm the insight of Keen (2007), who emphasized how emotional resonance in literature can foster reader empathy and self-recognition. Internationally, Green and Appel (2024) described this as "narrative transportation," wherein a reader's emotional involvement in a text is so intense that it shapes their self-concept and worldviews. This study offers empirical support to that framework, as the participant's emotional engagement went beyond empathy to include physical and affective responses such as crying and trembling, confirming the *embodied* nature of her reading.

Comparatively, in Wen et al.'s (2025) case study on Chinese readers of *Atonement*, emotional responses were also found to be influenced by personal contexts, but the digital platform environment added a layer of mediated detachment. In contrast, the analog, face-to-face reading context in this study led to an emotionally saturated response—unfiltered and deeply introspective. Locally, this theme echoes the findings of Moea (2023a), who examined the Philippine literature curriculum and found that when texts reflect students' socio-economic realities, they elicit stronger personal connections and cognitive engagement. This suggests that the exhaustion described by the participant is not merely anecdotal but part of a shared lived experience among the working poor in the Philippine context.

Theme 2: Chronic Financial Insecurity and Structural Inequality

The second emergent theme focused on the economic precarity and systemic inequality that defined the participant's life. Despite her husband's multiple jobs, their income remained insufficient—a reality mirrored in the poem's portrayal of undercompensated labor. The participant described how her husband's government salary was stretched thin to cover the needs of multiple dependents, including ill siblings and elderly parents. For her, the *piyon*'s low wages and persistent toil were not just literary metaphors; they were a lived reality.

She shared vivid narratives about budgeting for daily survival, supporting extended family, and lacking financial security. These accounts were coded as financial strain and linked to her empathetic reading of the *piyon*'s silent suffering. The poem highlighted how structural inequality keeps laborers trapped in cycles of work without rest or reward. As she read and re-read Antonio's verses, her tears surfaced not only from empathy but from recognition. She saw the systemic invisibility of workers like her husband, and through the poem, she was able to name the injustice of their condition.

These narratives formed the basis of the category "Financial and Systemic Inequalities." This category captures both the personal burden of economic scarcity and the structural forces that perpetuate it. Beyond personal hardship, the

participant reflected on the larger divide between rich and poor, identifying how rest and security are privileges denied to laborers like her husband. This awareness was critical and aligned with Beach's (1993) concept of critical aesthetic reading. Following Rosenblatt (1994), the participant's interpretation was transactional—the poem became a mirror of her reality, not through symbolic analysis, but through visceral recognition of shared truths about poverty and overwork.

The second theme reaffirms a core insight in both global and local literature studies: that literary engagement is often shaped by material conditions. The participant's empathetic reading of the *piyon* was informed by her own financial hardship, reflecting Rosenblatt's (1978, 1994) view that readers draw meaning from texts based on their transactional encounters—where personal experience shapes textual interpretation. This resonates with findings by Pulla and Carter (2018), who argued that an interpretivist lens in social research is vital in unpacking how economic precarity affects meaning-making.

Locally, Cruz (2019) examined how Philippine colonial experience continues to influence Filipinos' cultural production and consumption, particularly around themes of labor and inequality. The participant's response parallels the broader postcolonial narrative of systemic undervaluation of Filipino labor, demonstrating how literature like *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* becomes a cultural site for voicing collective struggle. Compared to international literature, where financial insecurity is often abstracted (e.g., in Oatley & Duncan, 1994), this study presents a raw, unmediated depiction of economic struggle—adding to the growing body of literature that underscores the need for culturally grounded literary instruction in developing countries.

Theme 3: Sacrifice, Responsibility, and Emotional Burden Across Generations

The final theme emerged from the participant's reflections on inherited sacrifice and duty. Her husband's history—leaving school to support siblings, now providing for multiple generations—echoed the intergenerational labor depicted in the poem. Two codes—intergenerational labor and emotional resonance to labor struggles—formed this theme. The participant's account of her husband's long-standing responsibilities, as well as her own as a student-mother, highlighted how labor burdens transcend individual experience.

Through the poem, the participant was able to name and confront her emotions. Her engagement with the text was both cathartic and motivating, as she expressed a renewed determination to finish her studies and break the cycle of hardship. Lines such as "Though he may not be king, in his own world he is king" gave her strength and affirmed her husband's role, not as a defeated man, but as one quietly resilient in his responsibility. These reflections showed how the emotional burden of caretaking and providing was deeply entrenched in their identities.

The poem catalyzed her realization that these burdens were not simply personal, but part of a larger, intergenerational story of resilience and invisible labor. Beyond personal reflections, the participant emphasized the importance of fair treatment for laborers. She acknowledged moments of guilt when taking her husband's work for granted and affirmed the poem's value as an eye-opener for social empathy and justice.

This theme reflects the deeply ingrained nature of familial responsibility and inherited sacrifice in Filipino culture. The participant's narrative about her husband leaving school to support his siblings, and now carrying intergenerational financial burdens, aligns with Lopez-González's (2023) concept of "emotional creativity," wherein individuals reinterpret hardship through narrative to make meaning and gain resilience. Compared to Western studies, where individualism often frames personal sacrifice, this study reaffirms collectivist cultural values, where emotional burdens are shared across generations and reflected in literature.

In educational contexts, Moon (2006) and Bolton (2006) advocated for reflective learning journals as tools for students to make sense of their lived realities. This study supports that practice. The participant's reflections reveal how literature does not merely reflect life but *transforms it*—motivating her to complete her degree and break the cycle of inherited struggle. Her interpretation of the poem affirms the argument of Parente et al. (2020) that literary creativity and meaning are not static but evolve through readers' socio-cultural positioning.

Thematic Triangulation

Data from interviews, reflective journals, the researcher's observations, and the psychologist's notes confirmed the emotional coherence of her responses. Across all sources, her interpretation of the *piyon* was not abstract but deeply embodied, emotional, and ethically informed. Each theme corresponded to the study's research objectives: emotional engagement (Theme 1), resonance with life struggles (Theme 2), and interpretation shaped by personal background (Theme 3). Collectively, they demonstrate how *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* became more than a text—it became testimony. The participant's engagement with the poem illustrates Reader-Response Theory in action. Her reading was affective, ethical, and deeply situated in real-life struggle. Literature, in this case, functioned not just as art but as recognition—a means for emotional survival, understanding, and resistance.

The findings triangulated through interviews, reflective journals, and psychological observation contribute to existing evidence on how literature facilitates self-understanding and social critique. Compared with large-scale survey studies of reader empathy (e.g., Green & Appel, 2024), this single-case approach offers thick, contextualized data that capture the complexity of emotional engagement. Moreover, the findings suggest that local texts like *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* serve as powerful cultural mirrors, capable of illuminating systemic issues that resonate across similar postcolonial, working-class communities worldwide.

General Statements:

This study affirms that literature, when read through the lens of personal experience, becomes more than an academic exercise—it transforms into a deeply human encounter. The participant's emotional engagement with *Gabi ng Isang Piyon* demonstrates how a literary text can resonate so profoundly that it reflects one's own struggles, hopes, and truths. Her interpretation, shaped by her socio-economic background and lived realities, exemplifies Reader-Response Theory's core assertion: meaning is not fixed in the text but emerges through the reader's interaction with it. The poem became a mirror of invisible labor, a source of empathy, and a spark of motivation. It validated the participant's pain while also giving her a renewed sense of purpose—to transcend generational hardship and reclaim dignity through education.

Ultimately, this study highlights the transformative potential of literature, particularly when student-readers are invited to connect their lives with the texts they encounter. When educational settings encourage personal reflection and emotional engagement, literature becomes a tool for critical awareness, self-discovery, and healing. It is not only about analyzing stories but also about uncovering the lived stories of readers themselves—stories that deserve space in the interpretive process. In this way, literature instruction can empower students to find their voice, confront systemic realities, and see themselves as active participants in meaning-making, rather than passive recipients of fixed interpretations.

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