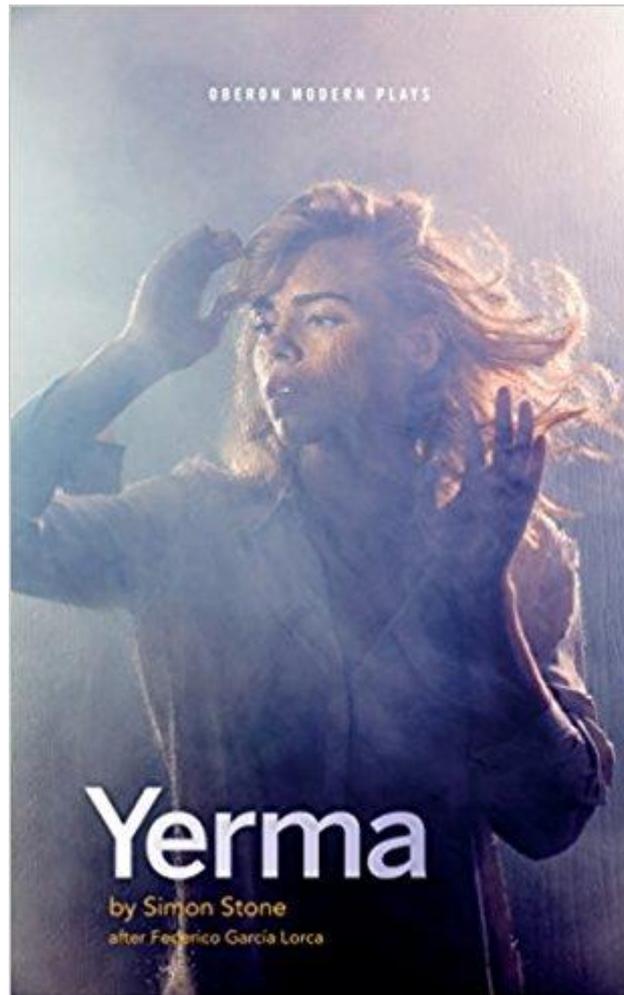


**Yerma as a Victim of Social Mores and Code of Honour in
Lorca's *Yerma***

R. Renuka Devi & Dr. A. Selvalakshmi



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Yerma-Oberon-Modern-Plays-Simon/dp/1786822636/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1526790091&sr=1-1&keywords=yerma

Abstract

Literature not only reflects the society, but it also portrays life and guides people in the right path. It not only delights the people but also educates them. Federico Garcia Lorca is one of the most important writers in modern Spanish literature. Lorca is the product of his culture. He reflects every strength and weakness of the culture, both as an artist and as a human being. This paper entitled “**Yerma as a Victim of Social Mores and Code of Honour in Lorca's *Yerma***” analyses the influence of Spanish society and tradition upon her life, which leads to an obsession and *Yerma* is the

reflection of honour culture which has prevailed in Spain for centuries. Lorca is a progressive writer whose criticism of society is not just meant to reveal a diehard attitude but also to encourage and recognize the change or improvement in the society. This paper will critically analyse this point.

Keywords: Spanish culture, Frederic o Garcia Lorca, *Yerma*, honour culture, Spanish traditions, Spanish women

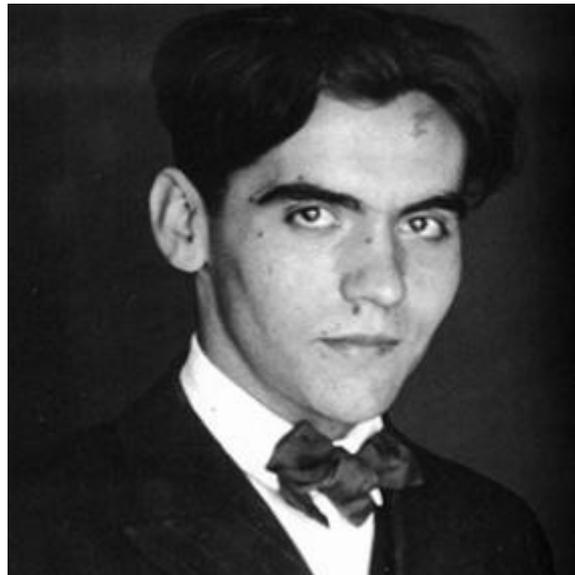
Introduction

“To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves”. - - Federico Garcia Lorca

The function of a theatre, in any age, is to reflect the times, the course of events and the behaviour of the people. If logically constructed plays fail to portray the times and the people genuinely, they cease to be authentic and tend to be obtrusive. Plays, as a prism of life, through which human experiences are refracted, become images of the condition of man in a particular age and society, differing in accordance with the playwright’s perceptions and interpretations of the world and of the moral and social values of the time they represent. Federico Garcia Lorca is one of the most important writers in modern Spanish literature. Garcia Lorca drew upon elements of Spanish life and culture to create works at once traditional and modern, personal and universal.

During the reign of Philip II in the sixteenth century, Spain seemed to withdraw from the path that the rest of Europe had taken. It developed its own society and set of values. Her people’s education fell far behind the rest of Europe and Spain lagged in its development. She seemed to resist progress. The government and, through it, the Catholic Church controlled the schools; the people outside the metropolitan areas were illiterate. Culturally, however, the people developed a spontaneous type of art that is highly characteristic of their nation and heritage. This was the world that produced Lorca.

Federico Garcia Lorca



Federico Garcia Lorca

Courtesy: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/federico-garc%C3%ADa-lorca>

Federico Garcia Lorca is the product of his culture. He reflects every strength and weakness of the culture, both as an artist and as a human being. Art is not a mere escape or entertainment, and Lorca believes that the art can be a catalyst for change. It could be rightly explained in the words of the American dramatist Edward Albee, “The job of the arts, is to hold a mirror up to us and say: Look. This is how you really are. If you don’t like it, change it”. (Suneetha 170) Lorca is truthfully bitter in his attack of a social system which fails in its duty of creating a better society. The young, sensitive poet reached his adolescence in one of the more provincial areas of Spain – Granada. The provinces with their desolation, poverty and adherence to the strict Catholic codes provided the background materials for his plays. In writing of *Dona Rosita, The Spinster*, Barea says:

‘He re-created his own city of Granada about 1900, but it was more than a regional period piece that he gave. The asphyxiating atmosphere of prejudice, bigotry, hypocrisy, fear, malice, and genteel behaviour in which the unfortunate girl Rosita withers away, was only too well known to the great mass of the theatre-going public. And Lorca made the people of that society come alive, in all their mortifying, deadening way of living. (29)

Here is where the unfecundity starts – in a Spain that is no longer a world power, in a Spain that hasn’t really reached the modern industrial era of the twentieth century, in a Spain that is Tradition -bound to the concepts of honour and sex that have dominated her for hundreds of years.

The Spanish Women

The woman in the Spanish society is merely a bearer of children. It is she from whom the land prospers because her sons are the fillers of the soil and the fecundation for the women of the future. Her role is important in this respect. The male’s role in this system is not nearly so severe or as unyielding as that of the female’s. A true double standard of morality is maintained in this country as in other countries of the world. The man’s procreative powers are revered by the women, for without a man, she is unable to fulfil her mission in life. He is the strength and the power by which the woman survives.

‘This moral conviction that men and women must be fecund and that the man and husband is the master because he is the instrument of fecundation has the deepest possible psychological and social roots’. (Barea 36)

Lorca examined the state of the folk women of Spain. He reveals tremendous knowledge about the problems and frustrations of the Spanish women. Perhaps during his visit to New York and the new insights he obtained there, prompted this interest in the women of his own country. Manuel Duran suggests that,

The insight into the psychology of women is an important part of his writing, but it must be remembered that the Spanish woman is the one who bears the load and burden in the severely codified system of morality. Consequently, the woman would be the more powerful force of the two in the considerations of the conflicts necessary for good drama. (49)

Theme

The theme and the symbol of unfecundity in the plays of Federico Garcia Lorca is not in finding them, but in discovering the reasons for them and substantiating them as a key to interpretation. Sam Bluefarb’s definition of the lack of fecundity with reference to Lorca’s works is:

‘... unfecundity, the incapability of life to bring itself forth, reproduce itself...’ (119)

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In Lorca the problem of unfecundity is not, as implied by the above definition, the physical incapability to reproduce life; it is the social mores and obedience to a strict code of honour and sex that makes the women in Lorca's plays incapable of reproduction.

Lorca uses unfecundity in his three major tragedies -- *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* – a theme of unfecundity that stems from a strict code of honour and sex that is so much a part of Spanish social mores. This theme is expressed primarily through the women in these plays for it is on them that the burdens of the codes are placed. This theme underlies much of his drama but is particularly dominant in the play *Yerma*. This unfecundity leads to a frustration and desperation in the Protagonist of the play and leads her to tragedy.

Yerma

Yerma has an appropriately symbolic title, because its central theme is that of frustrated motherhood. The word 'Yerma' means 'uninhabited, deserted, uncultivated, not productive', and is applied principally to sterile land. It may also be used to mean 'uncultivated ground' - Yermos. In Lorca's tragedy *Yerma* is the protagonist- a tragic figure precisely because she carries within herself the tragic mark. At the end of the tragedy she considers herself to be the final instrument of her own desolation. Her struggle to overcome her fate has been in vain. Her fate is more powerful than her desire to become a mother, which remains unfulfilled forever.

Yerma is essentially Spanish. The Spanish woman possesses what one might call an exclusivist or exaggerated idea of maternity. She not only wants to have a child, but several, a lot of them. To be childless constitutes a kind of ostracism which has no remedy. It is not only a private tragedy, but social too, it is imposed by the society, as evidenced by the remarks of the laundresses, who consider childless *Yerma*, a most unfortunate woman. The structure of the Spanish society, with all the powerful force of tradition, has imposed upon its women a duty, a mission; before all else she is to be a mother. Her place is static and predetermined:

JUAN. You know how I like Things to be. The sheep in the pen and women at home
(*Yerma* 53)
says *Yerma*'s husband Juan.

Matrimony is the Spanish rural woman's occupation, and her only horizons the walls of her house. *Yerma* is also essentially social because of the problem of honour. If maternity is her only problem, *Yerma* at any cost could easily have sought the love of a man other than Juan. But this is impossible, precisely because society has assigned her relationship with a man, which is fixed and immutable.

Code of Honour

Yerma appears to be a strong link in this chain of Spanish tradition; it is an honour play, to a certain extent, and it would remain as an important organization in the society, till the traditional codes of honour is alive in the Spanish provinces. In the rural place the tragedies arise out of honour rather than in the city. *Yerma*'s husband must be assured that people are not talking about him and his wife. He brings two sisters to his home to watch *Yerma*; he doesn't like her to leave the house. Juan then would like to take revenge on *Yerma* by divulging her supposed shame, but he doesn't, since it would redound to his own honour. Later rumours begin; now the family honour is in danger.

Yerma contains a fusion of two concepts of honour – reputation and private virtue. *Yerma* will not surrender to her desire because she is a heroic woman, of real quality, of the caste (casta) above temptation and others' opinions. She maintains her purity and accepts the tragedy of her

frustrated maternity. For Yerma, a woman of intrinsic quality – *casta* – the code of honour is inexorable, and it is just as impossible to break its laws as it is to break those of Nature:

YERMA. Do you think I could go with another man?" she declares. What would become of my name? Water can't turn back, nor the moon appear at midday. Leave me. I'll go on as I am. Do you really think I could turn to another man? (*Yerma* 97).

Rural Tragedies

Yerma is one of the rural tragedies of Lorca in which the characters are specific, local and cosmic. The cosmos becomes manifest in the elemental, dark, and primitive forces which shape man's destiny. Honour with its apparatus of external conventions influences the direction of events. But the tragedy arises with the conflict between the direction taken by events and the one taken by personal inclination.

Inclination

Inclination means in *Yerma*, the inclination of the blood – biological life force. In *Yerma* blood refers to maternity. To frustrate maternity is to poison the blood and consequently to provoke tragedy. For Yerma, her blood will be remembered as a curse which she calls,

YERMA. Yes, a curse! A pool of poison over the wheat heads. (*Yerma* 95)

To follow the inclination of the blood in *Yerma* is to accomplish the greatest mission, to reproduce oneself as all nature does. And all nature is a great invitation to Yerma to realize her mission as mother, but she must hang her head in defeat and consume herself in a hopeless waiting.

Yerma's moral greatness rises above the conventional arrangements of her society, and though she could be impure, to avenge herself on her husband and on the gossip mongers, though She could be impure in order to resolve the great tragedy of her life, she chooses renunciation.

Triumph of Honour

The triumph of honour, however, does not prevent her final revenge in a moment of delirious obsession, and so with her own hands she strangles the one who someday might have been able to give her a child. The two concepts of honour are the principal elements in *Yerma*. Frustrated maternity could not be understood as tragic apart from the code of honour.

It should be added that this is a tragedy among country people, and that the two concepts of honour are as valid for them as for the nobility. Lope de Vega was the first great standard bearer for the honour of the lower classes, and *Yerma* is one more triumph for this democratic spirit which has prevailed in Spain for centuries.

The barrenness of Yerma is brought about by her adherence to a strict system of morality and honour which is extremely stringent. By her interpretation of these codes she kills her husband, the life force which could make her fecund and vital. She becomes for all practical purposes metaphorically sterile. She is totally capable of bringing forth children in a physical sense but through the destruction of her life force she becomes sterile.

Conclusion

Spain is faithful to its own cultural traditions, and according to the dictates of the Spanish theatre, Lorca has interpreted the Spanish tradition through his rural drama. The family which is the

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source of safety and security has been the source of struggles and psychological tensions. By placing the Spanish rural family at the heart of his works, Lorca has created a picture of the Spanish society and the Spanish way of life. Lorca presents his characters who must strip themselves of all pretence if they want to survive as respectable individuals. Lorca is a progressive writer whose criticism of society is not just meant to reveal a diehard attitude, but also to encourage and recognize change or improvement in his society. Perhaps one can best sum up Lorca's reputation and his intension to change the society by the remark of Edward Albee, "till the society changes, plays will be written criticizing the way of life". (64)

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