

Sterility and its Implications in Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*

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ABSTRACT

Federico Garcia Lorca is one of the foremost playwrights to have emerged from Spain. His contributions to the theatre of Spain since the days of the Golden era is unparalleled. Apart from being a poet and a dramatist, he is also a gifted painter and a pianist. His popular ballads earned him the title of “poet of the gypsies”. However, the primary thrust of my paper shall be to examine the theme of Sterility in Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. In Lorca's plays, the notion of sterility emerges from a strict code of propriety and honour that is a part of Spanish social mores. My endeavour shall be to examine the notion of sterility as depicted through the women in Lorca's plays. For, it is on the women that the burden of honour is placed. This eventually leads them to tragedy. The first part of my paper shall be devoted to examining the plot of the play and how the sterility of the women and the sterility of the nation at large is played out. Secondly, I shall be briefly examining Lorca's use of language, images and symbolism in his play and thirdly, I shall be cursorily examining the stage directions employed in his plays to heighten the thematic effect.

Keywords: sterility, body, honour, decorum, tragedy.

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In “Life and Death in Lorca’s Rural Tragedies”, Sam Bluefarb states that, “...sterility is the incapability of life to bring itself forth, reproduce itself...” (86). However, in Lorca’s plays, the problem of sterility is not merely the physical incapability to reproduce, but it refers primarily to the social codes of honour and propriety that are a part of Spanish social customs and tradition and the placement of women within these societal mores that make them incapable of reproduction. During the sixteenth century reign of Philip II, Spain had withdrawn from the courses of development which the whole of Europe had embarked upon. Much of the nation’s people seemed to resist progress and seemed to adhere to their strict codes of morality and decency. The private and public lives of the people were controlled and regulated by the Catholic Church. John Crow in his book *Federico Garcia Lorca*, notes that, despite the restrictions imposed upon its people, their creative potentials remained undeterred:

True, in a nation where the great majority were unable to read or write there existed a powerful sense of creativity and of dignity among the masses. The Spanish people continued to produce spontaneous poetry, songs, and other expressions of their naturally artistic popular sentiments. There is no country on earth with a more beautiful body of folk poetry and folk music than Spain. There is no country where the illiterate masses possess greater innate refinement and vitality (253).

Regarding Lorca’s Rural Tragedies, Arturo Barea comments:

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. (63).

Many of Lorca’s plays overtly deal with the strict codes of conduct, propriety and religiosity that form a part of Spanish social mores. The characters do not in the least rebel against these forms of structural oppression. Some of the other paramount themes of Lorca’s plays include

issues of love and its discontents, liberty, and of the plight of the disenfranchised in Spain and the rest of the world.

Sterility, as I have stated earlier, in Lorca's plays stems from a strict code of honour and their adherence to certain belief systems, which make the Spanish society largely tradition bound. John Crow states that, "It might be that the poet felt, subconsciously perhaps, that Spain and his eternal Yerma were one, that the sterility of his country among modern nations was a slight on its great past and a hurt to his own being and sensitivity" (89). Many of the strict codes of honour and belief systems have been internalized by the characters in Lorca's plays and they tend to abide by it. This is reflected in their behavioural patterns. Much of Lorca play's dealing with love and honour and decorum is indebted to the works of the classic Spanish writers which bring out the intricacies of the Spanish society in all its glories and fault lines. Maria Delgado notes that, Lorca felt these emotions were at the root of Spanish social codes and thus he magnified them until the traditional structure stood out with perturbing significance (45). Robert Lima notes that, since women in the Spanish society is merely looked upon as child bearers and the men as tillers of the soil and the fecundation for the women of the future, her role is important in this respect. (202). The Spanish men is revered by the women for his "manly and unyielding" prowess. The man is seen as the protector of the traditions, customs and reputation of the family. He could even go to the extent of killing people to protect the honour of his community. Lorca delves deep into the psychological recesses of women, and disarmingly deals with the aspects of their private lives i.e issues surrounding their sterility and the subsequent frustrations. The plot primarily details the story of the Mother and the Bride. Towards the end of the play, the only consolation that the mother has is that she will never lose another son as she had in the past. Since the traditions and conventions of a patriarchal society loom large in the play, the codes of honour and strict regulatory systems of behaviour are imposed on the women in the public and private spheres. For instance, the Mother is described as "metaphorically sterile". Her husband is long dead and it is only her son who will carry the legacy of her family forward. One of the ways is to turn the barren lands into fertile cultivable lands. It is through her son that the mother can hope to carry the legacy forward. As she exclaims, "Yes, yes — and see if you can make me happy with six grandchildren, or as many as you want, since your father didn't live to give them to me" (6). The Mother keeps on ruminating about the past which

exacerbates her tragic plight. When the Bridegroom offers to let her live with him and his new wife, she insists that she cannot:

No. I can't leave your father and brother here alone. I have to go to them every morning and if I go away it's possible one of the Felix family one of the killers, might die — and they'd bury him next to ours. And that'll never happen. Oh, no! That'll never happen. Because I'd dig them out with my nails and, all by myself, crush them against the wall. (5)

The Mother is very much a part of the strictest codes of honour and marriage that are so much a part of the Spanish system. She questions the reputation and honour of the Bride because of the Bride's previous engagement with another man. Upon discovering that, the Bride was engaged to a member of the Felix family, the mother questions the reputation of the Bride's family: "I wish no one knew anything about them — either the live one or the dead one — that they were like two thistles no one even names but cuts off at the right moment" (13). In her first meeting with the Bride and her Father, the Mother questions the Bride about her duties:

Mother . . . Do you know what-it is to be married. Child?

Bride. I do.

Mother. A man, some children and a wall two yards thick for everything else.

Bridegroom. Is anything else needed?

Mother, No. Just that you all live — that's it. Live Long! (19)

These illustrate the nature of roles prescribed for women within the Spanish family structure which is inseparable from its codes of decency, morality and propriety. The Mother keeps on harping the role of the son in rendering the soil cultivate, thus exhibiting her son's ability to ensure the fertility of land and the women. As the mother states:

Mother. And some daughters. Men are like the wind. They're forced to handle weapons. Girls never go out into the street.

Father. I think they'll have both.

Mother. My son will cover her well. He's of good seed. His father could have had many sons with me. (27)

The Mother continues to obsess with the past, it is death which defers procreation, she suggests:

Mother. But it's not like that. It takes a long time. That's why it is so terrible to see one's own blood spilled out on the ground. A fountain that spurts for a minute, but costs us years. When I got to my son, he lay fallen in the middle of the street. I wet my hands with his blood and licked them with my tongue — because it was my blood. You don't know what that's like. In a glass and topaz shrine, I'd put the earth now moistened by his blood.

Father. Now you must hope. My daughter is wide-hipped and your son is strong .

Mother. That's why I'm hoping. (60)

Throughout the course of the play the mother is hopeful of the procreative powers of her son which alone can end the sterility of the women and the nation. Soon after, when the Bride runs away with Leonardo, the Mother sends her son to bring his wife back to save her family's honour. To send her son off is certain death for him, annihilating any hope for the future for which she has planned, but at the same time, to keep him with her would annihilate the family honour and name. Her choice is made almost instantly in favour of death, knowing that only her honour will be left. In the final scene of the play (Act III, Scene 2), she has nothing left of her dynasty, her hopes, or her fertility. She has only the hope that she will not have to experience the death of another man in her family:

Mother. I want to be here. Here. In peace. They're all dead now: and at midnight I'll sleep, sleep without terror of guns and knives. Other mothers will go to their windows lashed by rain, to watch for their sons' faces. But not I. And of my dreams, I'll make a cold ivory dove that will carry camelias of white frost to the graveyard. But no; not graveyard, not graveyard: the couch of earth, the bed that shelters them and rocks them in the sky. (63)

The Mother is left with lamentation and sorrow. As Vera Roberts observes that, during this time the earth is her companion because in it lies the ones born of her womb. The earth, the land is the only consolation, because “it changes the blood of the dead into a new fountain of life” (172). The Mother soon realizes that this girl was only a means to an end, without the Bridegroom, the Bride is nothing.

But what does your good name matter to me? What does your death matter to me? What does anything about anything matter to me? Blessed be the wheat stalks because my sons are under them; blessed be the rain because it wets the face of the dead. Blessed by God, who stretches us out together to rest. (64)

The sterility of the Bride is apparent from the very beginning. She is brought up in a barren wasteland with extreme heat which could be indicative of her passion. In the play, the Bride is only referred to in terms of her ability to reproduce. Her identity is dependent upon her husband- The Bridegroom. When the Bride runs away with Leonardo, the Mother and her son are taken aback for it is only the Son who can turn the sterile Bride into a fertile woman. The agricultural symbols used throughout the play referring to the productive abilities of the soil and the land. And, it is upon the Son who can render the land arable. The vineyards of the Bridegroom becomes indicators of fertility, for the Bridegroom has nourished them, thereby exhibiting his procreative powers. The bouquet of orange blossoms which the groom gives her, are even indicative of her sterility for these flowers generally a symbol of fertility are wax.

Bridegroom. Did you like the orange blossoms?

Bride. Yes,

Bridegroom. It's all of wax. It will last forever. (19)

The deaths of the young men are foreshadowed almost from the beginning of the play. The Mother horrifically talks about knives, since the knife is a sterilizing force, which has the power to kill the men who is seen as the procreative force. She says: “Knives, knives. Cursed by all knives; and the scoundrel who invented them” (5). And, then again: “Oh, is it right — how can it be — that a small thing like a knife or pistol can finish off a man, “and”. . .it goes down through the whole evil breed of knife wielding and false smiling men” (19). In a duel, the two men stab each other with a knife. And, in the Mother's lamentation in the third act, she again points to this sterilizing force — the knife:

With a knife. With a tiny knife that barely fits the hand, but that slides in clean through the astonished flesh and stops at the place where trembles, enmeshed, the dark root of a scream. (55)

In contrast to the first where the major metaphors and symbols are of fertility, the last scene turns these same symbols into symbols of sterility: “Over the golden flower, dirty sand,” “But

now my son is an armful of shrivelled flowers,” and even the earth becomes only a place to bury the dead: “... the couch of earth, the bed that shelters them and rocks them in the sky” (65). The visual metaphors heighten the theme of sterility in Lorca’s play. The setting’s colours are apparent in every act and scene. The first two scenes are coloured: the yellow of the opening scene suggesting the colour of the wheat with which the mother compares the fertility of her son. The rose colour of Leonardo indicates his passion and fertility. The white of the Bride’s home indicates her purity whereas the wasteland suggests her barrenness. The forest becomes a place of fertility for here the Bride could become fertilized and fulfilled by Leonardo.

In the final scene of the play, the women are sterile and again the set is entirely white. The sheer absence of men in the final scene suggest the perpetually sterile states into which the women are left. Thus, through Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, the theme of sterility is brought about by adhering to certain traditional and hidebound codes of honour which is extremely stringent. The role of the Spanish woman is to be bearers of children and make them tillers of the soil and ensure that this legacy is carried forward in keeping with the tradition of Spain. *Blood Wedding* suggests the commensurate skill of Lorca as a playwright, artist, theatre director, and a poet of the first order.

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