

*Raquel Taño Manning*  
*Archibald E. Manning*  
East Carolina University

**A FURTHER LOOK AT THE DRAMATIC PARALLELS IN  
GARCIA LORCA AND TENNESSEE WILLIAMS:  
THE POETIC QUALITIES AND SYMBOLISM IN  
*YERMA AND THE PURIFICATION***

LETRAS 13-14 (1987)



This paper is a sequel to a previous work in which the writer pointed out striking similarities between Federico García Lorca from southern Spain and Tennessee Williams from our Southland. These parallels were restricted to biographical details, as well as two of their plays: *Bodas de sangre* and *The Glass Menagerie*. That study was primarily an introductory analysis, and this study will continue by presenting similarities in Lorca's *Yerma* and *The Purification*, an early and lesser known work by Williams. The writer will also relate the symbolism, themes, and corresponding character analysis in both dramas, in which each playwright portrays the Spaniard's quest for "unrequited love and noble purification."

In addition to the symmetry of the cast and characterization in each, both plays give their audience a natural and tragic picture of Spanish country people from a past era, from Lorca's Andalucía and Tennessee Williams' Southwest of this country. Both writers have also become symbolic of their country's theater, especially in regard to their own "South."

Because *Yerma* is more familiar than the Williams play, this writer will begin with a discussion of it. Of all Lorca's plays, it and *Bodas de sangre* were the two plays which established Lorca's reputation as a dramatist. *Yerma* was first presented at the Teatro Español in Madrid in 1934. Lorcan scholars like Carol Cobb at the University of Tennessee attest that he wrote the original draft in New York around 1930, because it contains specific echoes of "The Waste Land" by T. S. Eliot.<sup>1</sup> *The theme, however, indicates a spiritual kinship*

1. Carl W. Cobb, *Federico García Lorca* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 135.

*with Unamuno, who "explored the maternal instinct as a symbol of the desire for immortality."*<sup>2</sup>

Yerma opens with a stylized cradle song, a brief prologue that introduces the theme. The two dream characters, a shepherd and a child, are necessarily symbolic. As the drama commences, we learn that the title character, Yerma, has been married for two years to Juan, a farmer of means; but she is still waiting for a child. Her husband, however, is interested only in his fields and land feeling little or no urge toward fatherhood. When her friend María passes by, Yerma is anxious to question the young, expectant mother about the pain and joys of Motherhood. After María leaves, Víctor comes onstage. He is a shepherd and childhood attraction for Yerma, and she instinctively feels drawn to him as a man who could fulfill her maternal ambitions; but she strongly feels "bound by honor" to be faithful to her husband. Thereafter, in talking with an Old Woman, Yerma first conceives the notion of employing magic to help achieve maternity.

The second act begins with a stylized chorus of Was-women who alternate between gossip and song, all of it bearing on Yerma and her childless plight. When the scene changes, Juan, now suspicious of his wife's conduct, has brought his unmarried sisters into the house to watch Yerma; consequently, their marital relationship becomes even more strained. When Víctor reappears to say goodbye, it is obvious that his leaving is an honorable way of separating himself from Yerma, although he sells all his sheep to her husband, Juan.

In the beginning of the third act, Yerma, still determined to seek supernatural help toward maternity, is returning at dawn from a session in the cemetery with the Old Woman. Juan discovers her before she reaches home, however, and during the scene Yerma's actions border on hysteria. The second scene repeats Yerma's quest in an elaborate, symbolic manner. This stylized scene, surrealistic in tone, is set in the mountains and written in verse form. It is a mixture of Greek Chorus, pagan fertility rite and religious pilgrimage. As before, Yerma cries out for a child; but when "the Macho" appears, the symbol of male fertility, she refuses him; still honor-bound to her

---

2. Cobb, p. 135.

husband.<sup>3</sup> As Yerma comes back to reality, with Juan still not desiring a child, she suddenly seizes him and chokes him to death, screaming, "I myself have killed my son."<sup>4</sup>

In forceful and convincing argument, scholars like Cobb point out that *Yerma* is the most ambitious of Lorca's dramas. The theme is developed at two levels: First, it unfolds as simple, country characters interacting in their normal Andalusian environment; then in alternating scenes, the theme is elaborated in stylized Greek-drama fashion with songs and choruses in this juxtaposing scene in the mountains. Lorca was thus striving to provide a convincing example of poetic theater which his generation of Spanish writers admired but which few actually produced. Cobb also points out that the play's title is rightly *Yermo*, since Juan is apparently the barren one of the couple.<sup>5</sup>

Now let us leave Lorca momentarily and turn to *The Purification*. First, it is interesting to note that the writer's husband introduced her to the play; and they were both amazed at the striking similarities between the script and *Yerma*, as well as in the lives of the two playwrights themselves! Her husband had produced the Williams tragedy as a high school festival entry in Virginia in the late 1950's, and again in North Carolina in 1965. Both productions, incidentally, left the judges "perplexed, embarrassed and confused," and they suggested strongly that "he not fall into the flesh traps of that notorious Tennessee Williams." Twenty years later he still argues that the judges were overly provincial in their criticism; they failed to look beyond the obvious love theme, the incestuous brother-sister relationship, and see the beauty of the poetic symbolism whereas Williams tells the world that he has found true love for the first time in his life. And second, he agrees with those scholars who affirm that this

3. Cobb, p. 136.

4. Federico García Lorca, *Three Tragedies*, Translated by James Graham, Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell with an introduction by Francisco García Lorca, (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 153. Further references to this play are from this editor and page numbers will be indicated in the text.

5. Cobb, p. 136.

play, along with *The Glass Menagerie*, was a “vehicle” for Williams to work out his own deep feelings for “Miss Rose,” the sister he loved more than anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

Even in early treatments of the love theme in his plays, it was Williams’ belief that “sexual pleasure is closely related to true religious experience.”<sup>7</sup> The “perfect life” for him was a love so strong between two people that even Time isn’t allowed to pass, not even Death.<sup>8</sup> An *The Purification* is a graphic enactment of that commitment to love, as personified in his summer romance with a handsome, young Canadian dancer on Cape Cod in 1940. There in Provincetown on his battered, portable Royal, he composed this, his only verse play, inspired by this “first love.”<sup>9</sup> The one act, triple scened but continuous action drama was the foundation for his later surrealist work, *Camino Real*; or so this writer and her husband attest. But *that* must be explored in a future study. . . .

*The Purification* takes place over a century ago (circa 1820) in an area around Taos, New Mexico, then Mexican territory. The setting is in an improvised courtroom where an informal trial is conducted by a group of ranchers; even the Judge is a fellow rancher. It is the dry season and “the rains are long overdue.” Through the play’s poetic dialogue, the story-line reveals that The Rancher from Casa Roja is on trial for slaying his beautiful, young wife. The wife, Elena, is perceived by her husband like the desert, “a dry and lifeless being.” On the other hand, her brother envisions her through the archway as Elena of the Springs, a blue-gold fountain. The brother, apparently demented by his sister’s death, is poetically incoherent in his testimony, but he does reveal through symbolic dialogue that he and his sister had engaged in an incestuous love affair for some time, a relationship that continued even after she married the Ran-

---

6. Dotson, Rader, *Tennessee: Cry of the Heart* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1985), Comment under the photo of Tennessee with his sister Rose on the page opposite to p. 231.

7. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 242.

8. Williams, p. 248.

9. Williams, p. 55.

cher accused of murdering her. Her husband swears that she was never a real wife to him; his testimony supported by Luisa, his Indian servant woman and former mistress. In his defense, Luisa testifies that when she discovered the illicit lovers in the barn loft one moonlit night, she notified her master thereby precipitating his brutal slaying of Elena.

At the play's conclusion, both men attain "noble purification" by stabbing themselves: the Son, when his sister, Elena of the Springs, returns for him; the Rancher, when he is allowed to go offstage to honorably perform his act of purification. Luisa begs that he be stopped, but is forcibly held in the open doorway by guards, themselves Indians, so that she may witness her master's suicidal act. The play concludes with Greek Chorus overtones, the Indian women dancing and chanting, "Rojo, rojo, rojo de sangre es el Sol."<sup>10</sup> The advent of rain terminates the seasonal drought; and the Judge announces to the courtroom and the audience, "Mañana es otro dió (sic). The play is done." (p. 62) The plot and cast of characters are distinctly "Lorca and Benavente" in tone, action, and climax, the catalytic "glue" of this study. . . .

An "on point" study of the parallels found in *Yerma* and *The Purification* can best be established with a comment from Lorca's close friend, Angel del Río, "As is so often the case in Spanish literature, Lorca's dramatic work is inseparable from his poetry and is a natural emanation from it."<sup>11</sup> This writer also affirms that Lorca's literary efforts prior to the 1930's were academic and emotional preparation for his writing dramas like *Yerma*. As for Tennessee Williams, plays like *The Purification* were creative stepping stones for his later masterpieces.

Del Río continues in reference to Lorca's dramatic finesse, "Here are the essential elements of tragedy: beings who are scorched by a

---

10. Tennessee Williams, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* (Connecticut: New Directions, 1953), p. 58. Further references to this play are from this edition and page numbers will be indicated in the text.

11. Manuel Durán, editor, *Lorca: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 140.

deep passion against which it is futile to struggle."<sup>12</sup> Yerma, the wife, is dealing with a love that is frustrated because her husband fails to respond to her womanly passion, and the dramatic situation develops in the framework of frustrated motherhood. Consequently, passion becomes intimate and even spiritualized, as well as becoming "pagan forces struggling against her moral sense of duty."<sup>13</sup> This results in her killing her husband, the father of her yet-to-be-conceived children. Again, we can see a similar situation with the Rancher from *Casa Roja* in the little Williams tragedy: the Rancher desires that Elena be a real wife to him, but "pagan forces" struggle against him with the incestuous affair between his wife and her brother; and there is a multiple violation of the Spanish and Christian code of honor, *which must be atoned!*

When Lorca first appeared on the Spanish literary scene, the theater still belonged to Jacinto Benavente, the Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1922. Benavente's plays were largely unpopular with Lorca's generation of writers; however, his *La malquerida*, a rural drama of primitive people with primitive emotions, was undoubtedly a theatrical model for the young Lorca. Too, the older playwright represented success for him, since Benavente, like Lorca, strove to write for a "living theater."<sup>14</sup>

A striking parallel can be drawn here between Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neal, a Nobel Prize winner in 1936. Williams' regard for O'Neal was a classic "love-hate relationship", as related in Dotson Rader's recent biography, *Tennessee: Cry of the Heart*. Williams detested being compared with any other writer, especially with Eugene O'Neal, but he always kept a picture of O'Neal in the breakfront behind the dining table. He confessed to Rader that he had been insanely jealous of O'Neal all his life.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately for Spanish literature, Lorca was not "drunk" or

---

12. Durán, p. 149.

13. Durán, p. 152.

14. Cobb, p. 118.

15. Rader, pp. 254-256.



“addict” as were O’Neal and Williams; both Americans eventually becoming living examples of the mother and father in O’Neal’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Nevertheless, this writer regards the work of all three playwrights to be “emotionally autobiographical”, a label that Williams gave his plays shortly before he died.<sup>16</sup>

This writer also agrees with Lorca’s analysis of his own work before he died in 1936. Lorca declared that for him, theater is “poetry that rises from the book and becomes human”.<sup>17</sup> Poetry for him felt like fire in his hands, yet he understood it and could work with it perfectly<sup>18</sup>, as could Tennessee Williams. Lorca’s theater, like his poetry, explores the specific areas where human instinct struggles desperately for expression. Williams’ craft is no different, especially in *The Purification*.

Perhaps this would be the time to compare some of the dialogue from each play, as spoken by Yerma in that play’s last scene, and by Elena in her last stage appearance in *The Purification*. Yerma speaks to the Old Woman just before Juan’s last stage entrance:

*Hush, hush! It’s not that. I’d never do it.  
I can’t just go out looking for someone.  
Do you imagine I could know another man?  
Where would that leave my honor?  
Water can’t run uphill, nor does the full moon  
rise at noonday.  
On the road I’ve started, I’ll stay.  
Did you really think I could submit to another man?  
That I could go asking for what’s mine, like a slave?  
Look at me, so you’ll know me and never speak to  
me again.  
I’m not looking for anyone. . . .  
I’m like a dry field where a thousand pairs of  
oxen plow,*

---

16. Williams, p. 249.

17. Cobb, p. 119.

18. Durán, p. 46.

*And you offer me a little glass of well water.  
Mine is a sorrow already beyond the flesh. (p. 151).*

And now Elena's last words to her husband:

*I have no coolness for you:  
These are my gifts:  
    The cactus, the bleached grave-cross  
    with the wreath of dead vines on it.  
Listen, the wind, when it blows,  
Is rattling dry castanest in the restless grave yard. . .  
The sisters come out in a quick and steady file  
And their black skirts whisper dryer and dryer and  
    dryer,  
Until they halt,  
Before their desperate march has reached the  
    river.  
The sisters crumble; beneath their black skirts  
    crumble,  
The skirts are blown and the granular salty bodies  
Go whispering off among the lifeless grasses. . .  
I must go too,  
For I, like these, have glanced a burning  
    city. . . . (p. 52)*

These two monologues show striking creative similarities in the older Lorca in the early 1930's and the younger Williams less than a decade later. It is also interesting to note how he was introduced to Lorca's plays, also in the 1930's. His mother Edwina Williams, relates in her biography of her son:

*At the university Tom met a young man named Clark Mills  
McBurney and they worked together on plays in the cellar of  
Mrs. McBurney's house, which they called 'the literary factory'.  
Here Tom read Rimbaud, Lorca, Rilke, Melville, Hart Crane  
and. . . all of D. H. Lawrence.<sup>19</sup>*

---

19. Edwina Dakin Williams, *Remember Me To Tom* (New York: B. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 72.

(This is the only recorded reference this author could find of Williams' knowledge of Lorca).

Looking at the two monologues again, anyone can see that the older Lorca has learned conciseness as compared to the young Williams. But by 1945, he, too, had acquired dramatic brevity; one has only to witness a performance of *The Glass Menagerie* to realize the perfection of the imagery and the poetic symbolism in this "soul sister" to *Yerma*.

*Yerma's* greatness is internationally applauded; yet there are dramatic weaknesses in it, and scholars like Carl Cobb point out that its most outstanding feature is the characterization of Juan. "Lorca's attitude toward normal manhood made it difficult for him to create male characters who are not ineffectual or even burlesqued. Apparently he did not intend for Juan to be sterile, but we cannot really know".<sup>20</sup> This farmer-husband of *Yerma* appears to be a sober, decisive individual; yet he makes clumsy protestations in avoiding love and desire for a child, almost ironical in one sense. *Yerma* blames Juan for her childless state, and the audience is supposed to feel pity for her because her maternal yearnings are unfulfilled. "And yet", continues Cobb, "we pity Juan instead, a man masking problems as profound as his wife's".<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, when we look at the male characters in *The Purification*, this is not the case, even though they are not as "fleshed-out" as those in the Lorca drama.

Another weakness in *Yerma*, according to Cobb, is the playwright's use of simple, country people in the play. Lorca considers the bourgeois class, his own social level in reality, too effete and hypercritical. And here he strains our credulity by having unlettered people argue with subtlety and speak in elaborate symbols.<sup>22</sup> Even with the above named faults, *Yerma* is an outstanding play; appealing especially to Spanish audiences because it deals with two enduring

---

20. Cobb, p. 136.

21. Cobb, p. 137.

22. Cobb, p. 137.

themes: the strength of the maternal instinct and the theme of honor; however, Elena, the heroine in *The Purification*, repeatedly violated both.

An entire paper could be devoted to the symbolism in *Yerma*, beginning with the opening dream sequence, but the writer now focuses on the final scene, since it brings together the various symbolic elements of the play; (among them the Old Woman as a Sorceress, and the pilgrimage and pagan fertility rites).

*Perhaps Lorca intended the scene as a dream projection by Yerma [as in the opening prologue with the Shepherd and Child] with the Old Woman in contact with the forces that govern the fertility rites. . . rites that represent the natural instincts; the pilgrimage representing civilized morality. And when Yerma chooses to retain the bond of honor to her husband, she is choosing Christian and Spanish morality. She can murder by instinct, but she cannot violate the bond of honor, even to fulfill the maternal instinct.*<sup>2 3</sup>

*Yerma*, like all Lorca's dramas, reflects the modern and now "commonplace" theme in world drama: the emasculation of the male character and the rising dominance of the female. However, for Lorca, as for most of Williams's women characters, the female dominates, but is herself usually defeated!<sup>2 4</sup>

In defense of *The Purification*, not that it needs it, too many people tend to overlook it excusing themselves by referring to it as "that little Mexican play that Williams wrote", or "Because it's poetry, Mexican poetry!". And they find the incestuous theme bordering on bad taste. As for Williams' use of poetic symbolism in *The Purification*, not only does he "stop to smell the flowers", but he almost gets lost in the woods while doing so! As far back as 1938, Tennessee Williams noted that every real artist has a basic premise, one that pervades his whole life and being, providing the impulse for everything he creates.

---

23. Cobb, p. 137.

24. Cobb, p. 142.

The poetic symbolism in *The Purification* is as numerous as it is obscure; nevertheless, it is never meaningless. Some of the most outstanding examples are: Death as represented by a steer skull on the wall of the set; long life and happiness symbolized by the wide arched doorway opening on an aquamarine sky and golden plain; the guitar player who accompanies the dialogue throughout the play and the drumming, chanting and dancing Indian women both representing those innate rhythms of human life; the kiss of snow water for emotional restraint; the poisoned mountain spring for the Son's demented state of mind; and the barn seen as "church-like in arch of timber, a huge wrecked vessel, in deep seas of light!". And the list could go on and on. Perhaps the most provocative symbolism is Elena herself, envisioned by her brother as a fountain and by her husband as a dried-up, lifeless desert. Luisa, easily perceived as the most convincing and realistic character in the play, is an early prototype of many of Williams' women: earthy and commanding, a symbol of Mother Earth and desire. The most poetic of his symbols is the reference to Peeto the Pony, viewed by this writer as the young, masculine love of the Son. (The "Peeto lines", interestingly enough, are found completely intact in Williams' *Camino Real* over ten years later).

One of this writer's favorite *Yerma* stories, as related by J. B. Trend in Durán's classic *Lorca*, is "the tragedy of Lorca himself". Argentinita, his dancer-actress friend, is quoted on the night of the play's premier performance:

*This play is about Federico's own personal drama. What he would like best in this world is to become pregnant and give birth, to a girl or boy, especially a boy. That's what he misses in life. Yerma is Federico's tragedy'.<sup>25</sup>*

Before concluding, this writer will make one more observation regarding Lorca's theater-poetry. Francis Fergusson, an American critic and writer, says that Lorca actually *restaged* Spanish art, or the analogies between forms of art and the forms of human life. "I have never been to Spain", he continues, "But I have seen Sancho Panza and his burro in northern New Mexico, and the faces of the old people there reflecting the subtle faces in Spanish painting".<sup>26</sup>

25. Durán, as cited and translated by Durán, note 19, p. 47.

26. Durán, p. 174.

Fergusson also says that Lorca was fortunate in being able to work with "fertility within his native culture, whereas our own Southern American writers hesitate painfully between the South, where their roots are, and the national scene in which they are obliged to live".<sup>27</sup> And he concludes by saying that Lorca wrote poetry of the theater as our poets would like to do!<sup>28</sup> To Fergusson's observations, this writer would like to add "except for Tennessee Williams!". Through the characterization and dialogue of his plays, which germinated in early plays like *The Purification*, he, as did Lorca in Spain, restaged art; especially the art of the American theater. And as for the setting of *The Purification* being in New Mexico, it is "mind boggling" that Williams used "new world Spaniards" living in "New Spain" as the setting for his only verse drama; and caught Spanish symbolism in an authentic and dramatic treatment of Spanish honor!

As for Lorca, in the fall of 1960, one of his plays was produced in Madrid, for the first time since the Spanish Civil War began in 1936; and that play was *Yerma*. The production was so successful that it was repeated the following year. Lorca, "the gypsy poet from Andalusia" in 38 short years was able to fire the passions of this fellow Iberians into moment of dark delight, which kept alive by the "duende", exists as the expression of the human spirit in all its complexities.

---

27. Durán, p. 175.

28. Durán, p. 175.