

A Psychological Outline of "Yerma's Dream"

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**Antonio Fusco and Rosella Tomassoni,**  
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**Abstract:** In their article, "A Psychological Outline of 'Yerma's Dream'," Fusco and Tomassoni examine the world of Lorca in his play. Fusco and Tomassoni present an examination of the psychological characteristics of this world, and focus their attention upon a dream of one its female protagonists. Yerma is observed to be a heroine of "sterility" -- or rather, the heroine of an impossibility to love. The heroics of this impossibility is interpreted according to the social constraints made upon women within a male dominated society. These constraints are said to surface symptomatically within her own dream world -- as a heroine who is allowed to experience love only in the form of an illegitimate desire to procreate.

## Antonio FUSCO and Rosella TOMASSONI

### A Psychological Outline of "Yerma's Dream"

Federico García Lorca's world is a rural world based on certain dogmatic conventions belonging to a particular "narrow" society. The psychological characteristics of such a society may be characterized by the problem of being positioned and arranged within a social structure relating to interpersonal identity and worth. While subjects can be identified as "outcasts," they cannot assume the dignity of "rebel." The rebel -- and correspondingly, rebellion -- has an acknowledged place within society because of its ability to inspire fear. An person outcast, however, cannot exist within the scheme of things: Because they cannot be positioned or arranged within the psychological makeup of a narrow social world, outcasts have been (and remain) psychologically "cast out" without a discernible role or value. The whole social order is based on an essential and distributed value called *honra*. A variant of the traditional concept of honor, within Lorca's world, it acquires and maintains a sacrosanct status. It is beyond society in that the social order appears to derive from -- and is sanctioned by -- forces outside it. Indeed, *honra* is particularly sacred when remaining or vanishing into this beyond: it is indefinable because it is without rational foundation or justification (from the large corpus of Lorca scholarship, see, for example, Eisenberg; Salto; Smith; Warner).

Man -- in the context of a patriarchal society as paterfamilias -- is conceived as representing a vengeful biblical God on earth. He dominates with unquestioned and unquestionable authority. Woman's duty, as Adam's "rib," is only to procreate children -- possibly male ones (for example, already Aristotle, in a different historical and cultural environment the one in discussion here, maintained that women were mere receptacles of sperm). Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba* is an example of this sacrosanct social order administered across several layers of society and culture where the order's distribution and administration is internalized and administered by women themselves. Personally speaking -- in so far as one can distinguish the personal from the interpersonal here -- Bernarda declares a state of mourning within the household that remains "behind." Its "remains" enacts expressions of a drama of (mis)communication following the death of a man in a context where the departed husband is not regarded exactly as "dearly" departed. In this society, similar to Peter the Great's eighteenth-century Russia where a woman's adultery was considered a crime to be punished by death or in some contemporary societies where the punishment for adultery is no less serious, women are void of self-expression. In such male-dominated worlds characterized by hypocrisy it is the women who become the vessels of society's representations. They become the agents of dis/integration and the bearers of social values -- the standard by which male society measures its own (false) standards, and exemplifies itself. Here, to love outside marriage is a crime punishable by torture and death where, however, only women are punished and killed by men for failing to live up to male standards: In *Bernarda Alba's House* this is exemplified eloquently and starkly in the images of the penetration of burning instruments into a woman's vagina.

But love is often stronger than the social order of gender inequality. When it is not free to express itself, it can take refuge in dreaming while awake it can bring the mind to psychosis or transform a woman into a criminal (when Yerma's kills Juan). Lorca is a subtle observer and chronicler of the human soul: Discerning various psychological motivations and noting their corresponding physical manifestations, he is able to show us different typologies of "repressed" love -- violently contrasted or in an opposite way, necessarily asexual. He demonstrates how repressed mental energy can throw a human's mentality into disorder and act (as happens between the sisters in *Bernarda Alba's House*) an alternation to affection and emotional stability. The most violent hate can be replaced by fraternal love causing tragedies that are nothing more than the expression of an aberrant conception that substitutes the *honra* to love. In "Yerma's Dream" when the curtain opens, Yerma is asleep with a working basket at her feet and a shepherd enters on the tip of his toes and stares at Yerma. He is holding a child by his hand who is dressed in white. The clock strikes. As soon as the shepherd leaves, the lights change into that of a spring morning. Yerma is awake now (365). Particular psychic dimensions in which the reader must read a dream but in an abnormal figuration in which the concept of a dream appears on the scene. Lorca chooses here the

background as an expressive element of his creation and the strange setting of a dream becomes a metaphor of a solid dream of action in Yerma's mind. The processes of drama demand the way in which two essential elements are represented: Yerma's love for Victor and the corresponding desire to conceive a child with him (see *The Theatre School* <<http://theatreschool.depaul.edu/perform/0001/s3guide00.htm>>[inactive]).

In the scene when a shepherd enters and stares at Yerma, he is holding a child by his hand who is dressed in white. This scene suggests several meanings such as Victor must enter on the tip of his toes in order to limit the impact of sexuality on Yerma's super Ego and because -- in contradiction to Juan -- Victor is seen and perceived by Yerma with tenderness. Tenderness, on the other hand, expresses the necessary (read: legitimated) desire to have a child -- that is, in the context of and according to the social and moral constraints placed upon women of the time and place. A desire that can only be given legitimate expression within the context of a dream. The desire's truth value -- that is, its ability to be realized in the real world -- can only occur as a displaced aspiration and longing. The clock that strikes comes into the oneiric scene with a meaning from which we can only assume: A recall on time that passes, a necessity to return to reality and, at limits, an anticipation of the tragic ending of the event -- time is an allusion to an inevitable chain of events.

After the shepherd leaves, the scene changes into that of a spring setting. This change represents an oneiric tone with which Lorca wants to underline the transition from the mind to an oneiric dimension to a dimension of waking up. The "strange" setting of the dream allows "fantastic digressions" and the realization of forbidden desires (obviously, this interpretation is in the context of Freud's classical psychology; see also Fromm). The morning light breaks the enchantment and brings us to a pitiless vision of reality despite the spring setting that stands as a metaphor of youth and of life. When Yerma awakes, an uncertain voice sings tunes about pastoral domesticity. Words and images of symbolic desire about maternity, even in humble and simple conditions, but with a loved man continue throughout the play. From these words we can deduce that the woman continues, even after opening her eyes to reality, to "dream" in a particular mental dimension that is not exactly a dream but neither is it awareness and consciousness. With a fine psychological intuition, Lorca does not specify if it is Yerma herself that sings, even if the "voice" clearly expresses Yerma's desires. This also suggests an escape from direct responsibility and, therefore, from the censorship of the Super Ego. Afterwards Yerma turns towards Juan while her maternal valences persist and are expressed further in the dream. Here, a psychological interpretation allows for the suggestion that the residual of oneiric contents is directed at the offer of milk to Juan and in Yerma's maternal behaviour towards him.

The residual content of a dream can enter into the psychic dynamics of a waking state and determine conscious thinking processes. Indeed, without this dream the story would take a different course. Yerma's dream and the song of a rose anticipate the co-ordination that will be the material of the entire drama. The psychologist can observe that Lorca possesses expression capable of condensing into a few images complicated meanings which then are developed later in the drama. The text and its representation on the stage suggest several possibilities of meaning with regard to oneiric processes and language. Consequently, the language and its theatrical representation is able to afford to send a message with few figurative parts. Thus, in the context of psychology we are able to suggest that the importance of "dreaming" in the complicated and articulated activity of the mind reaffirms the claim that elements of the psychic represent a true expression of the human creature. In the play, the problem arises when the dream reveals to Yerma her desire to have a child with Victor. And here we enter into a complicated psychic mechanism: The subject connects us to a new awareness and a conscious level which are in line with positionings, demands, and administrations of powerful social norms.

Yerma is probably conscious, even if in an incomplete way, of her love for Victor, but her Ego cannot allow even the desire to have a child from the shepherd. In this way, just after the dream, the young woman expresses again the desire for maternity, but with a mechanism of moving projection toward Juan, almost confusing Juan with Victor. This way, she is able to shield herself from feelings of guilt. The rest of the drama shows us how her self-protection in action is not sufficient

to remove the mind from the psychic trauma that brings, ultimately, Yerma to homicide and suicide.

More than fatalism, Lorca recognizes Eros as a potential psychic energy that, with sufficient investment, becomes self-aggressive and can destroy the mosaic of the Ego by disturbing the mental balances to the point where psychosis becomes psychic death (see Galimberti). Gandhi said that the only real and existing demons are those that fight in the human heart. Among these "demons" Eros represents a strength that defines and holds the macro- and micro-cosms of life in its powerful hold; it is Eros that can create and destroy the "world," often with human beings as mere spectators. Yerma is the heroine of sterility; or rather, this heroine represents the impossibility to have the man she loves. She becomes a murderess to escape (in appearance) from the psychosis of the Eros as played out under the social constraints of the culture she lives in: Mariana Pineda dies in a state of an erethistic excitement close to psychosis (on psychosis see, e.g., Brenner) and Adele in *Bernarda Alba's House* dies because of the guilt of having loved. The "bride" and Donna Rosita in Lorca's *A Bloody Wedding* and in *The Language of Flowers*, respectively, will live "not living." Which of these women, all troubled and determined in love will have better luck is a matter of our imagination; on the scene when the curtain falls, only Love remains.

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