**DISCOURSE - A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE POETRY OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA**

**INTRODUCTION: WHO IS FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA?**

Good question.

Federico García Lorca is a Spanish poet and dramatist who wrote his most enduring works between the 1920s and 1930s. In his time he quickly rose to become a prominent public figure, and his style—which blends Romanticism, Symbolism and Surrealism—has become emblematic of Spanish literature. Today he remains an enigmatic and enduring figure to those who work to better understand his art and his life.

While a public figure, Lorca lived a very conflicted private life. He despised the glorification of war and aggression he felt was embedded in his nation’s culture since the era of the crusades; he identified strongly with his nation’s oppressed populations, especially the gypsy culture from his native Andalusia; and he struggled to come to terms with his sexuality in a climate that considered homosexuality unspeakable. As he became more and more frank about these conflicts in his work, he became a target for nationalist forces. Lorca was assassinated in 1936 and quietly buried in a location that to this day remains a mystery.

The catalyst for this research was the idea that Lorca’s work posed a challenge to notions of Spanish culture and identity, to an extent that he affected these notions during his own time and beyond.

Of course we know that art often has this power; this research seeks to investigate why such a thing is possible, and how it works.

**A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

The sociolinguist M.A.K. Halliday developed a model for analyzing texts by exploring the connections between the text and the social-semiotic context in which its meaning is interpreted. The word “text” here is broadly defined to include anything that can be “read,” including all language as well as anything else with symbolic meaning) that seeks to find a link between situation or context, and features of the text itself.

**“SITUATION”**

(realized by 

**“TEXT”**

(Features of the context)

**FUNCTIONAL SEMANTIC COMPONENTS**

EXPERIENTIAL MEANINGS

INTERPERSONAL MEANINGS

TEXTUAL MEANINGS

**FIELD OF DISCOURSE:** WHAT'S GOING ON IN THIS TEXT?

We could describe the field of discourse in this text thusly: an explication of the meaning behind a gift given to an absent lover.

**TENOR OF DISCOURSE:** WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?

Who are the participants in this discourse? In the convention of the love poem, there is a lover (the subject ‘I’) and the beloved (the ‘you’). The original Spanish text makes it clear that the relationship between the two is a familiar one through the use of the informal 2nd person pronoun ‘te’ and the imperative “Pasa la mano sobre su blancura” (“Pass your hand over its whiteness”).

The interpersonal function of Lorca’s poetry is without a doubt the most opaque of the three connections from Halliday’s model. In many cases this can be read as an attempt to write poetry focused on same-sex attraction without being explicit in order to avoid censorship or further repercussions from a socially conservative government and culture. This is made especially difficult by the morphosyntactic nature of Latin languages, which mark nouns and adjectives for gender.

It’s noteworthy that the Sonnets of Dark Love, among the last poems Lorca wrote before his death, include the first and only instance of unambiguous marking of a masculine subject in a love poem in Lorca’s known works.

**MODE OF DISCOURSE:** WHAT ARE WE INTERPRETING ANYWAY?

What role does language itself play in the interactive process of meaning-making? In poetry, properties like meter and rhyme determine the mode of discourse.

In the original Spanish, this poem fits the requirements of a traditional Spanish soneto: two stanzas with four lines, followed by two stanzas with three lines; eleven syllables per line; and the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDC CDC.

Working in such culturally recognizable forms has the effect of signifying and identifying with the values and themes of the previous literary movements of which they were a part. In evoking the soneto as well as Góngora, Lorca can tap into the ornate baroque elements for which Góngora was known, and evoke Góngora’s universal, often existential themes as well.

**CONCLUSION**

Exploring how these connections between a text and its discursive interpretation are made and sustained can be a valuable clue in tracing ambiguity and nuance in texts. In Lorca’s texts, one of these connections—most often between the interpersonal meaning of the text and the discursive interpretation of who is involved, the tenor of discourse—is obscured while others are made clear in order to provide a sense that things are not quite as they seem. Some of Lorca’s most prominent themes, such as the relationship between humankind and nature, the oppressive nature of capitalist/culturally conservative nationalism and homosexual love are very often conveyed by manipulating these connections in a way that understand some of the text explicitly (for example, that the text is a love poem) but not understand other aspects (such as to whom that poem is addressed). In this way, the text itself is the source of the enigma.

Lorca’s life and work have both been studied extensively; yet there is great opportunity for better understanding in exploring these texts further with a sociolinguistic lens.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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