

# WHAT GOES ON BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT?

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

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### INTRODUCTION: WHO IS FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA?

Good question.

**Federico Garcia Lorca is a Spanish poet and dramatist who wrote his most enduring work in 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.

<b>"SITUATION"</b> (Features of the context)	(realized by...)	<b>"TEXT"</b> (Functional semantic components)
<b>FIELD OF DISCOURSE</b> ("WHAT'S GOING ON IN THIS TEXT?")	→	(EG. TRANSITIVITY, NAMING) <b>EXPERIENTIAL MEANINGS</b>
<b>TENOR OF DISCOURSE</b> ("WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?")	→	(EG. PERSON, MOOD) <b>INTERPERSONAL MEANINGS</b>
<b>MODE OF DISCOURSE</b> ("WHAT ARE WE INTERPRETING ANYWAY?")	→	(EG. RHYME, METER, THEME) <b>TEXTUAL MEANINGS</b>

According to Halliday's model, we understand the field of discourse (what is happening in the text) based on linguistic clues like the names used and the transitive properties of verbs. We understand the tenor of discourse (who is participating) through the mood, person or modality of the verb, among other things. And the mode of discourse (what the language's role is) is revealed through textual meanings: theme, cohesive relations to other texts, rhyme, meter and other information.

### THE LITERARY KEY TO LORCA'S ENIGMA

**Lorca's most famous texts often obscure one or more of the connections relating text to context such that the text is simultaneously evocative of and challenging to one's expectations.** By shrouding some of these connections in mystery while making others very clear, Lorca challenges assumptions about traditional values regarding nationality, sexuality and personhood.

To clarify this notion, **let's examine a poem from Lorca's *Sonetos del Amor Oscuro* ('Sonnets of Dark Love'), written in the final years of the poet's life and left unpublished until 1983.** The poems in this collection present themselves as traditional Spanish *sonetos* while simultaneously challenging the reader's expectations about traditional discourses on texts like these.

### 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.**

That which relates most obviously to the field of discourse is vocabulary. Here, between lover and beloved, **there is distance implied through the use of the verb 'send' as opposed to, say, 'give'.** The fourth stanza implies both spatial distance ("not seeing you") and temporal distance ("by night and day").

The grammatical structure of the poem reinforces this distance as well: the use of the di-transitive verb 'send' renders the beloved an indirect object, and the dove, fronted, is the subject of the utterance. **The dove's role as the literal subject of this love poem echoes the dove's metaphorical role as a token of the 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 blanca" ("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 DCD.**

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

<p><b>Soneto gongorino en que el poeta manda a su amor una paloma</b></p> <p><i>Este pichón del Turia que te mando, de dulces ojos y de blanca pluma, sobre laurel de Grecia vierte y suma, llama lenta de amor do estoy parando.</i></p> <p><i>Su cándida virtud, su cuello blando, en lirio doble de caliente espuma con un temblor de escarcha, perla y bruma la ausencia de tu boca está marcando.</i></p> <p><i>Pasa la mano sobre su blanca y verás qué nevada melodía esparce en copos sobre tu hermosura.</i></p> <p><i>Así mi corazón de noche y día preso en la cárcel del amor oscura llora sin verte su melancolía.</i></p>	<p><b>Sonnet in the Manner of Góngora in Which the Poet Sends His Beloved a Dove</b></p> <p>This young dove I send you from the Turia, with sweet eyes and white feathers, over Grecian laurel pours and subsumes the slow flame of love where I am staying.</p> <p>Its candid virtue, its soft neck in double lily of warm foam with a tremor of frost, pearl and brume is marking the absence of your mouth.</p> <p>Pass your hand over its whiteness and you will see what snowy melody it scatters in snowflakes over your beauty.</p> <p>Thus my heart by night and day held in the dark prison of love, cries its melancholy at not seeing you.</p>	<p><b>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.</b> 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</p>
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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.**

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