

GARCIA LORCA, THE TRAGEDIAN:  
AN ARISTOTELIAN ANALYSIS OF  
*BODAS DE SANGRE*

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Federico García Lorca was not a tragedian in the Aristotelian manner, and to presuppose that he was is an anachronism. Nevertheless, if one applies Aristotle's rules to *Bodas de sangre*, it will be found that many necessary elements of tragedy exist, even though it remains an exclusively Spanish tragedy.

First, we must determine the species of tragedy, that is, whether the tragedy is simple or complex, active or passive, ethical or fatal, or spectacular. *Bodas de sangre* is not a simple tragedy but a complex one, since it contains both Peripety (the sudden change when the action veers round to its opposite) and Discovery (the change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet either for good or bad fortune). We may eliminate the possibility that the tragedy is active; although the tragic figure, the Madre, has suffered since the murders of her husband and first son were committed by the Félix family, she has sought no vengeance upon them. It is true that she urges her second son, the Novio, to revenge his honor, but she refrains from taking an active part in this wholly Spanish tradition. Therefore, the Madre has suffered passively for fear that her only blood relation, her last son, might meet the same fate as his brother, and thereby deprive her of grandchildren. For *Bodas de sangre* to be an

ethical tragedy, the ending would require "poetic justice." This is not the case, however, for the play ends unhappily in murder. Therefore, *Bodas de sangre* is a fatal tragedy. Lorca does not depend on the scene or background as a dominating element, so the tragedy is not spectacular. The species of tragedy has now been determined: it is complex, passive, and fatal.

Second, the plot must be discussed in the light of the nature of the change, the contribution of each incident to the change, and whether the plot is a simple one, a complex one, or an episodic one. The Madre, neither all good nor all bad (but rather a mixture of these qualities,) passes from a state of happiness to a state of unhappiness. The plot is actually a pattern of love, honor, and vengeance. A marriage is arranged between the Madre's son and the daughter of a widower. The Novia has long been in love with Leonardo, the son of the murderer of her betrothed's brother and father, and was engaged to him for a time. They experience a losing battle against their passions, which culminates in the elopement of the Novia and Leonardo on the evening of the wedding. To avenge his honor, the Novio embarks on a search for the couple which results in his and Leonardo's deaths. The plot is not episodic because there is a high degree of probability. It is not simple, but complex, since the change is accomplished by Peripety and Discovery almost instantaneously.

Third, what are the regional qualities of *Bodas de sangre*, the affective response, the degree of pity and fear? To answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate the causes of the tragedy, the nature of the Peripety and Discovery, the pathos, and the contribution of the spectacle. Aristotle lists the following causes for tragedy: fate, nature, accident, evil men, moral weakness, and *hamartia*. In *Bodas de sangre*, fate and moral

weakness are the causes for the tragedy. Arturo Barea says of this work:

The Mother is the quintessence of this tragedy. A strong woman who had enjoyed life with her husband, she has become dominated by the fear of the extinction of her blood—fear of death not for herself but for her seed—and by the anxiety to see her physical existence continued, perpetuated by her son's children. This constant fear fills her with a sense of doom. Vengeance of her «Blood» follows from her possessive, death-haunted love; to let the enemy's seed survive one's own would mean final death.<sup>1</sup>

The Peripety concerns the following points: the Novia is found missing on the night of the wedding; there is a suspicion that she may be with Leonardo, for he, too, is nowhere to be found, and his horse has disappeared. The action turns from happiness to unhappiness. The Discovery takes place instantaneously with the Peripety.

The agents involved in the action are the Madre, a passive force who sees her chance for grandchildren vanishing with the disappearance of the Novia; Leonardo, the son of the murderer of the Novio's father and older brother, who elopes with the Novia; the Novia, who is drawn to Leonardo as one is to "un río oscuro;" and the Novio, who must avenge the blot on his honor. All of these agents are *philia*; otherwise, there would be no pity or fear but only suffering. Even Leonardo was related through marriage to the Novia, having married her cousin. Furthermore, these agents are fully aware of their relationship and do not act in a state of ignorance. We find that they are, generally, above average morally. The Madre is afflicted with a flaw of character, the desire for vengeance, but this defect does not place her below the average on the scale of morality. Certainly, the Novio is shown to be very high on the moral scale. He

<sup>1</sup> Arturo Barea, *Lorca: the Poet and His People*, trans. Ilsa Barea (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), p. 35.

has no desire to continue the feud between the Félix family and his own, and in seeking revenge on Leonardo, he is following the *pundonor* of Spain under which he has no other choice of action. Leonardo has committed an act which would be difficult to condone in any society. But we know that he has been fighting his passion for some years, has a wife, a son, and another child is expected soon. If he is to be excused at all, it is because fate wills that he yield to his passions and cannot allow him to surrender his real love, the Novia, to another. The Novia, too, must be viewed in this light. She says:

... y el otro me mandaba cientos de pájaros que me impedían el andar y que dejaban escarcha sobre mis heridas de pobre mujer marchita, de muchacha acariciada por el fuego. Yo no quería, ¡óyelo bien!; yo no quería, ¡óyelo bien!, yo no quería. ¡Tu hijo era mi fin y yo no lo he engañado, pero el brazo del otro me arrastró como un golpe de mar, como la cabezada de un mulo, y me hubiera arrastrado siempre, siempre, siempre, aunque hubiera sido vieja y todos los hijos de tu hijo me hubiesen agarrado de los cabellos! <sup>2</sup>

Although she consented to run away with Leonardo on her wedding night, she did not lose her virginity.

The outcome of the action finds the Novio dead alongside the lifeless Leonardo; the Novia is destined to live always with the stigma of her act tainting her soul; the Madre is alone and will not see her seed perpetuated. Her enemy's seed has outlived her seed, which, in her concept, is the ultimate death.

The element of the "unknown" in the figure of the Mendiga (Death) and her assistant, La Luna, increases the regional quality, evoking a high degree of pity and fear.

The fourth element for discussion of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is the degree of catharsis of pity, fear,

<sup>2</sup> Federico García Lorca, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1960), p. 1179.

and moral outrage. In *Bodas de sangre*, there is no complete purgation of pity and fear. To an extent, we have a partial catharsis, for the fear of the impending doom is relieved after the Peripety and Discovery have taken place. Still, the ending is not a happy one. There is, however, a certain degree of acquiescence, for the Madre accepts her fate, the survival of the enemy's seed. The Novia, on the other hand, demonstrates some degree of transcendence by rediscovering higher values, the power of "truth" and the danger of playing with evil.

Lastly, *Bodas de sangre* is a unified work employing a causal change: the beginning is not by cause, but comes about naturally, and the rest of the action follows the law of probability and necessity. The length of the play falls under the category of "short;" the sequence of events can be retained easily and vividly. The characters number less than twenty, but only four principal ones are involved in the action composed of a few but highly powerful incidents.

On the literal level, the tragedy does not concern a class of people that would render the play a serious one. But, if we take *Bodas de sangre* on the symbolic level of interpretation, the degree of seriousness rises to a level suitable for tragedy. As Gustavo Correa has pointed out, the Madre is the symbolic representation of the land, land which has been cultivated and has produced fruit<sup>3</sup>. The Novia, too, symbolizes the land, but land which is waiting to be cultivated, and, yet, has not been fertilized. Man is seen as a tree, a plant, a natural product of the land and with the power of penetrating deep into the earth. He is also symbolized as the river which runs deepy within the earth. This symbolism relates Woman (land) to Man (tree) to Blood (river). This threefold

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Correa, *La poesía mítica de Federico García Lorca* (Eugene: University of Oregon Publications, 1957), pp. 60-71.

relationship is further extended, through the Moon, to the entire cosmos. Through these symbols, Lorca has managed to define man's relationship to himself and his relationship to the universe. The last line of the play is a synthesis of this symbolic idea: "la oscura raíz del grito," the sex ritual, the possession of life and the salvation from death. It is the anguish which we all feel; it is the anguish which Federico García Lorca captured for us in his tragedy *Bodas de sangre*, a modern work which closely adheres to the rules of Aristotelian tragedy.

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