

'YERMA' BY FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA: Social, Cultural and Historical Context & Themes

1.	Written 1934: the play concerns Yerma's desperation to conceive a child, despite her husband's apparent indifference. The play revolves around society's expectation of women to bear children and explores the feelings of failure and injustice that women experience when that perceived function or right is denied. The other characters serve to highlight Yerma's plight. Her husband, Juan, lacks understanding of her desperation. Victor represents the alternative life Yerma could have had, while the Pagan Woman and Delores offer devious means for getting pregnant. The Washerwomen and Juan's two sisters highlight the theme of societal judgement. Further characters such as the young women and masked dancers at the festival aid the action of the plot and exploration of themes. As a tragic hero, Yerma's refusal to dishonour her family leads to her demise.
2.	Traditional notions of family honour and loyalty- idea of upholding and defending the family honour, even to the death. The play deals with themes of societal pressure, family honour and the acceptance of fate.
3.	Strict Catholic context. Yerma cannot pursue an extra-marital relationship with Victor, with whom she appears to share an unspoken bond from her youth. Her lack of fulfilment highlights her isolation within the rural, patriarchal and oppressively religious society of Spain in the early twentieth century.
4.	Yerma is the second of Lorca's three rural tragedies which stem from his own Andalusian background, born as he was in an isolated village 12 miles from Granada, where he lived to the age of 11. The plays reflect his passion for the countryside of his childhood.
5.	The 1930s were a turbulent time for Spain, building up to Civil War in 1936. Lorca's liberal values and bohemian, left-wing lifestyle would have been frowned upon by the emerging right-wing. Lorca travelled widely and struggled to confront his emerging homosexuality. Lorca was influenced by friendships with other avant-garde figures such as Dalí (surrealist painter), Buñuel (surrealist film-maker), de Falla (composer), Picasso (cubist artist). Lorca himself was very artistic- he wrote poetry, he could draw and he made puppets as well as playing piano and guitar. Lorca's life was cut short in a violent manner when he was arrested by right-wing partisans and executed by firing squad.
6.	The Spanish Civil War was fought between the left-wing Republicans and the right-wing Nationalists. The uprising against the established Republican Government started in 1936, supported by the conservative landowners, industrialists and the Catholic Church. After three years of much blood-shed, the right-wing fascist Dictator General Franco proclaimed victory in 1939.
7.	The musical influence can be traced to Lorca's Andalusian childhood. He was fascinated by the flamenco dance as well as cante jondo, the songs and lullabies of his native area. Cante jondo means 'deep song'- said to deal with love, pain and death. The simplicity of the form and the strength of the emotions appealed to Lorca, who used the idea of a 'tragic poem' as a vehicle for Yerma.
8.	All three of Lorca's rural tragedies are principally concerned with the lives of women- dramatizing their challenges, dilemmas and the restrictions within their lives. (Blood Wedding, The House of Bernarda Alba, and Yerma).
9.	The characters in Yerma reflect the rural setting: shepherds, washerwomen, farmers, young wives (who mostly have children to raise). Lorca drew inspiration from the real-life stories of his neighbours and contemporaries.

Form

1.	Lorca calls Yerma a 'tragic poem in three acts and six scenes'. Inspiration: Lorca was a seasoned playwright and had his own touring theatre company, La Barraca. Theatre in Spain at the time was generally seen by the middle classes but Lorca sought to bring performances to more remote locations. La Barraca performed plays from the Spanish Golden Age period, several dealing with code of honour as a theme. Lorca was inspired by the works of Pedro Calderon and Lope de Vega as he was developing his own style. Lorca went on to write plays in different styles (including based on the puppet tradition) but here we will focus on the style seen in the rural trilogy.
----	--

Genre & Style

1.	Yerma represents the theatrical style of poetic drama. The style challenged the prevailing style of realism of the early twentieth century. While the play represents a domestic tragedy in human terms, Lorca adds strong elements that are non-naturalistic, such as Yerma's dream at the opening of the play, the washerwomen chorus and the ritualistic dance in Act 3.
2.	The play blends believable characters with more symbolic figures and relies as much on its visual elements as upon its dialogue for its effects. Music is also key to the style, creating the atmosphere,, setting and distinctive moods of each scene. Lorca was able to blend the speech patterns he grew up around with a more heightened form of expression, resulting in a style of theatre that was both realistic and poetic. Yerma is written in richly figurative verse and heightened prose and blends scenes of semi-realistic domesticity with scenes with choric surrealism and festival. Stark, stylised settings, dramatic lighting effects and bold movement including dance reveal an intention at the opposite end of the spectrum to Naturalism despite the countryside setting. Lorca combines elements of Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism and the puppet tradition in order to create an anti-naturalistic style.

Key Characters

1.	Yerma's name means 'barren' meaning that she represents more than just herself- representing all the childless wives. Yerma's tragic trajectory takes her from hopeful young wife, anticipating a family of her own, to a deranged obsessive who murders her husband, who she believes is wilfully withholding her son from her. Yerma is a tragic protagonist whose refusal to dishonour her family leads her to commit a terrible and irrevocable act of murder. Yerma is the most developed of all the characters in the play and is on stage for the whole play except Act 2, scene 1 where she is the subject of gossip by the washerwomen.
2.	Juan is Yerma's husband- a straightforward farming man who appears to care more for his land than his wife. He is unemotional and works hard to increase the profit he can make from the farm. He is a conventional character who believes a woman's place is in the home and that a wife should be subservient to her husband. Indifferent to Yerma's childlessness and her suffering, he is not intentionally cruel to her but his lack of understanding causes Yerma first to hate him and finally to murder him in an act of madness when he finally declares that he has no desire to have children.
3.	Victor is the shepherd that Yerma has known since she was a girl. Yerma is clearly attracted to Victor, and although the attraction may be mutual, Victor is also a conventional man who will not commit any impropriety with a married woman. He wishes Yerma well but leaves the area, selling his sheep to Juan and moving away from a situation he may feel is dangerous.
4.	The other characters in the play are functional:

	Maria is Yerma's friend who becomes pregnant after only being married for five months. Yerma's instinctive advice about how to care for herself and her baby endears her to the audience in Act 1. In Act 2 Maria acts as a barometer for Yerma's mental health as she tries to slip past the door unseen, not wanting to upset her with the sight of the baby, who always makes Yerma cry.
5.	Dolores is the mother of the Second Girl described in the Spanish text as a conjuror. Yerma visits her in the night for potions and prayers that will help her conceive. Dolores claims to have had many successes.
6.	The Pagan Woman acts as a striking contrast to Yerma. She is the mother of 14 children and openly admits her enjoyment of the physical side of marriage. The Pagan Woman tries to persuade Yerma to leave Juan and come and live with her grown-up son and have children with him. Yerma cannot consider this because of her notion of family honour.
7.	The Sisters-in-Law are Juan's two sisters who are spinsters and childless, but presumably are glad to be dependents in a comfortably off household. Their almost silent presence and constant spying on Yerma make them unnerving characters.
8.	The six washerwomen at the stream represent the village society and each voices a slightly different attitude towards Yerma. They act as a chorus, mostly disapproving of Yerma's barren state.
9.	Most of the other characters are girls or women who represent different attitudes towards motherhood, the sanctity of marriage and relations between the sexes.
10:	In the final scene there are various extras, both male and female. They are not presented as individual characters but as a group of people related to the theme of fertility and reproduction. Dancers and singers, they are part of the fertility rite and accompany the strongly erotic dance of the masked male and female dancers.

Staging, Music & Imagery

1.	Several locations need to be communicated – Juan and Yerma's home (interior), fields, the stream, Delores' house and the area around the shrine in the mountains. Following Lorca's suggestions would entail changing the set for each location with slickness and speed. You can chose to have quick set changes using revolve, trucks or flown scenery, however a composite set with the use of lighting and sound has been the more popular route in modern productions. The water effect, for example, can be created through lighting and sound. Don't forget to consider your staging configuration and entrances and exits.
2.	Music, song and sound can communicate the mood setting and style of each scene. Examples: 1:1 - offstage lullaby sung as Yerma wakes from a dream, Yerma also sings to her unborn child as she sews. 1:2 Victor sings of his lonely life as a shepherd. 2:1 Washerwomen sing about relationships, sex and childbirth as they wash the clothes. The song they sing after gossiping about Yerma is earthy and sensual, and full of allusions to potent menfolk impregnating their wives. 3:2 music, song and dance of the festival. Yerma's own lines and those of the other women begin like a chant but the atmosphere changes from ritual to festival when the masked dancers appear, with singing and dancing accompanied by clapping and laughter. Choices need to be made in regards to what kind of music is used, whether songs are accompanied or simply chanted or sung without live instrumental accompaniment and if they are accompanied, whether musicians are seen. Choices need to fit with Lorca's intentions as well as your own overall concept for the play.
3.	Water as recurring image of fertility in Lorca's plays (musical quality of water, abundance of water, water as positive sign). The play has many references to water due to the stream which runs through the village which is not only used for drinking and washing but also for irrigating the land. A designer for Yerma may want to have water on stage but this has practical implications.
5.	Each scene contains a tapestry of references to: water, flesh, the body, breasts, the belly, animals, birds, trees and flowers and seeds. The reproduction of animals and plants is quoted Yerma as evidence of her natural right to mother offspring too. Organized contrasts emerge when you trace the imagery: light and darkness, water and dryness, flowering and withering. The imagery serves to express and confirm the play's fundamental tragic tension. Hovering over the play is Yerma's name meaning 'barren' which was a term more commonly used to describe land that was not fertile and yielding. Ironically, Juan and Yerma's land is amongst the more productive farms in the village, serving to underline her humiliation and sense of guilt that she cannot be seen as fertile.
6.	The elements, Robert Lima, argues, draw Yerma. Through the elements (earth, air, fire and water) Lima argues that Lorca introduces "natural factors that are in obvious opposition to the unnatural state of affairs in Yerma's relationship with each of the men in her life... The four elements begin to appear in the very first scene of Yerma, either singly or in combinations, and continue to be a major frame of reference in the rest of the play. Through the elements, Lorca is able to create a symbolic pattern that is both ironic, in that it is Yerma who most frequently and intuitively refers to the pagan elements yet cannot assimilate them, and portentous (in that they build towards the full manifestation of the Dionysiac in the final scene of the play)". This is the play which put Lorca at most risk before his murder, given its open challenge to Catholicism and its strict codes of sexual morality in Spanish society.
7.	See page 143-144 in the AQA text book for information about the first staging of Yerma in Madrid, in 1934. Also how more recent productions have staged the play.
8.	Key challenges: evoking the rural setting for the audience, episodic exchanges of Yerma and Juan in domestic setting, direction of chorus and Yerma's exchanges with Victor and female friends, the use of set pieces to depict the festival/shrine. It is essential that the audience appreciate the husband's plight as well as the wife's (eg. his concern over her night time wanderings) and that the audience should experience catharsis at the end of the tragedy.

Key Quotations

1.	Juan: 'You know how I like things to be. Sheep in the pen and women at home. You go out too much. I've told you often enough'.
2.	Yerma: 'The rain only has to fall on the stones to soften them and encourage the mustard seeds to grow'
3.	Pagan Woman: 'Tell me if your man/Has seed that's good and true/To make the water sing/And soak your nightdress through'.
4.	Yerma: 'A woman who lives in the fields and has no children is as useless as a clump of thorns'.
5.	Yerma: 'Can't you see I'm alone? The moon searching for itself in an empty sky!'
6.	Yerma: 'Oh Lord, let this rose bloom/Do not leave it in darkness'.
7.	Yerma: 'And I'm hurt, hurt and made to feel so meaningless when I see the wheat ripen, the streams full of water, the ewes giving birth to hundreds of lambs, the bitches pups. I feel as if the entire land is rising up to show me its tender, sleeping young...and all I've got are hammer-blows here instead of my child's mouth'.
8.	Pagan Woman: 'I've had two husbands and fourteen children...All I did was lie on my back and sing. Children just come, like water'.

Further reading/watching

Ask Dr. B. for a copy of the AQA text book chapter. Make use of the study notes in your Methuen student edition which are also excellent. We also have a copy of 'Federico Garcia Lorca: A Life' by Ian Gibson. You may also find some good blogs online such as this one which reflects on the rural trilogy and the female characters in their relationship to night and day: <https://lucywritersplatform.com/2020/09/03/women-of-the-night-chapter-1-lorcas-rural-trilogy/> There is also a scholarly article to be found at <https://journals.ku.edu/jdtc/article/view/1742/1706> which is entitled 'Toward the Dionysiac: Pagan Elements and Rites in Yerma'. (By Robert Lima, Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Spring 1990)