

BLOOD WEDDING (*BODAS DE SANGRE*, 1933)

By Federico García Lorca

POETICE TRAGEDY, POETIC DRAMA OR RURAL TRAGEDY: *Blood Wedding* is the first and most enigmatic of Lorca's trilogy of rural Andalusian tragedies and has been widely praised by the critics for the achievement of a tragic form. Its distinctive features include the fusion of lyric and dramatic impulses, the skillful integration of a musical pattern in the drama's structural design, the thematic relevance of songs, stage effects, and recurrent images (such as the horse, water, blood, knife, earth, the Moon, flowers)—in short, the assimilation of the Spanish folk and classical traditions in a poetic drama that is modern, sophisticated and authentic.

Plot and Structure: The play was inspired by a newspaper account of a real event that occurred in Almería in 1928. Artistically re-elaborated by Lorca, the story was a simple and an old one: the rivalry within a family, and the rivalry of two men for a woman who struggles between the attraction of a fiancé, who offers her wealth and peace of mind, and the more powerful attraction of her ex-lover, **Leonardo**. However, having been abandoned by Leonardo, the fiancée finally decides to get married (for her **pride**). The preparations of the wedding are clouded by premonitions. The wedding takes place in an atmosphere full of bad omens; there is the presence of Leonardo, now married to another woman, the flight of the lovers, and the death of the rivals after a pursuit and a frantic struggle in the forest. At the end we find the three women, **the Bride, the Mother, and Leonardo's Widow**, expressing their hatred, their sorrow and their loneliness when confronted by death, among the lamenting chorus of the neighbors.

Structurally, the play is divided into three acts, with three scenes in each act.

Tripartite settings include the farm homes of the groom and Leonardo in Act I, the Bride's cavern in Act II, and the damp, primeval forest in Act III (the only setting not based on local reality). Lorca postulated a broken engagement between the Bride and Leonardo. Yet these complications only arouse the primal passions of the Bride and Leonardo, leading to the explosion of repressed emotions manifested at the wedding. With respect to the episodes, thus the three acts of *Blood Wedding* can be called **Betrothal**, **Wedding**, and **Blood Wedding (Death)**—which is a “wedding” when dealing with the frustration of life). The title of the drama also plays on the ironic meaning of “blood weddings” (*Bodas de sangre*), on the one hand as a **violent aftermath** (i.e. the death of the bridegroom after the wedding) and, on the other, as a **true “blood” marriage** in the play, namely that between the bride and Leonardo.

Sources: The play combines realism, fantasy, lyricism and traditional folkloric materials in a radically innovative way. We can detect the breath of **classical influences**, such as the tradition of Spanish comedy, especially the tradition of Lope de Vega manifested in the wedding scene, its affinity with **Greek tragedy** in the ceremonial and spectacular content as well as in the lyric chorus, a touch of **ancient myth** linked directly to prehistoric rituals of sacrifice and proto-religious mysteries of birth, fertility (reproduction) and death, and modern touches found in the **Andalusian folk background**.

Imagery/Symbols: It is in *Blood Wedding* that the theme is embodied in the play not primarily by the logic of character, but by **the rhythm of its imagery**. *Blood Wedding* is indeed a tragic poem, a meditation on life and death in which characters (all are nameless except Leonardo) are victims of a collective and inevitable destiny. Leonardo and the Bridegroom meet violent death, but **the Mother** is the real

incarnation of the tragedy. She is the most vital person of the play, the chief interpreter of the human situation as well as the chief victim of the tragic circumstances. If it is the Bridegroom who affirms the “**purpose**” and Leonardo and the Bride who supply the “**passion**”, it is the Mother who furnishes the “**perception**” of the play. And she speaks for all women frustrated in their love and haunted by the fear of extinction.

In the development of the theme of **death** and other themes related to it—**honor, passion, pride**—the lyrical passages are of the utmost importance. There are lyrics of several kinds (the lullaby, the prothalamion, the love-duet, the choral ode, the dirge) and the range of emotion they express is as great as their several kinds suggest. They are not isolated or incidental poems; they are linked to each other and to the prose of the play in a comprehensive scheme of images that includes the whole world of nature and contemplates human life from the cradle to the grave as part of a life-death experience.

The imagery throughout is that of **the Earth** itself, of the fundamental categories of existence: the **knife** and associated images from the **mineral kingdom** (the silver dagger stuck in the horse’s eyes, the pins from the bridal wreath, the nails, the meal chain, the frost and snow, the Moon, the ashes); from the **vegetable kingdom** the flowers, weed, wheat, bread with which the fathers and sons are identified (Man is a “mirror of the earth”); and from **the animal kingdom** the man himself, inseparable from his **horse**; the woman associated with the **serpent**; the birds. The supreme image of the play is **blood**, with its analogue and opposite **water**. Both blood and water are ambivalent symbols, as are many of the images of the play that connote both life and death (the knife and the Moon, male and female symbols of fertility as well as of coldness and death; the serpent, a symbol of fertility and of treachery; the bird—the luminous dove associated with the Bridegroom, traditional Catholic symbol of the

Holy Spirit, the divine instrument of fecundation, and the “great bird with immense wings” that is Death).

As the **blood-water** opposition forms the nucleus of the symbolism of life-death, it becomes the focal image of the related themes of honor, pride and passion. Good **blood** in the sense of one’s family heritage means not only men who produce many sons, it also means men of honor. Thus the Mother refers to the Bridegroom’s family as men of “good stock; good blood”, the Bride’s father says of Leonardo “He’s not of good blood”. However, from the Mother’s point of view the heritage of the Bride is also suspect as the Bride’s mother “didn’t love her husband” although “her face glowed like a saint”, therefore, what could be hoped the Bride who resembled her mother “in every way”? The “dishonorable” passion of the lovers is also expressed in references to blood and water. Leonardo is “**hot-blooded**”; he is described by the Bride as “**a dark river**”, and the Bride herself had been too indecent to throw herself into the water: “decent woman throw themselves into the water; not that one”. Here water is both purifying and destructive. The reference to Leonardo as “a dark river” links the themes of passion, honor and life-death. The connection is fairly clear when the Bride refers to the fatal force of the dark river in contrast to the “little bit of water [the Bridegroom] from which [she] hoped for children...”.

The themes of honor and passion are similar linked with that of life-death in many passages in which recurrent images of water and blood are the unifying principle, as, for example, in the passage cited when the Mother says, “There are two groups here. My family and yours... The hour of **blood** has come” and in the scene by the arroyo where the blood is spilled and “two treat torrents are still at last”. The woodcutters anticipate the **spilled blood** and link it with the tainted passion of the lovers (see Scene 1, Act III, pp. 78-79).

The imagery of **Earth** reconciles opposites and strengthens the ambivalent force

of *blood* in respect to honor, passion and the life-death continuum. Viewed from the perspective of their imagery, the **lyrics** function as matrix of thematic development. We can say that it is the pattern of image, symbol, and motif that constitutes the “musical structure” of the play, and it is the lyrics that give it movement and variety.

The lyric movement begins in Scene Two with the **Lullaby** of “the big horse who didn’t like water”. This scene, which has been regarded as an interlude, not only occupies a key position in the sequence of incidents in Act I, it also prefigures the central event and the dominant images of the entire play. The Lullaby, rendered by Leonardo’s Wife and the Mother-in-law, introduces the blood-water opposition, recalls the (phallic) knife (now a “silver dagger”) which entered the play in Scene One, and anticipates the entry of Leonardo’s horse, whose hoof-beats are heard as Act I comes to a close. The song is a preparation for the “blood wedding” of Act III. The horse in the Lullaby is to be identified with Leonardo’s horse and his wounds with the fate of Leonardo is indicated by the action accompanying the song. The tone of the Lullaby is foretelling the fatal wounds and the grief to come. And the “black water”, the “snow wound”, the “silver dagger” and the singing stream itself are echoed in subsequent references to Leonardo’s destiny.

In Act II the songs (one in each scene) are **prothalamia** sung by the Bride’s servant and the wedding guests. They are part of the two phases of the nuptials introduced into the action: the ceremony of preparing the Bride for the church and the festivities preceding the entry of the Bride and Groom in to the bridal chamber. Both lyrics employ the familiar imagery of flower, branch, and stream and both make visible another thread of imagery that is to become prominent as the themes of pride and passion move toward their ultimate resolution in the theme of death. The imagery of fire is enhanced here, associated with theme of honor as well as the themes of passion and death.

The lyric impulse of the play culminates in Act III, where the themes of **honor** and **passion** are absorbed in the theme of **death** that paradoxically is life. The play's double perspective on death is suggested in the dual manifestation of Death. In one image Death is an *Old Woman* demanding "a crust of bread". In another image Death is the *white-faced Moon* longing for life and seeking in the death of the men "a heart", "the crest of the fire", and "red blood" for his cheeks. The final scene is a recapitulation of this imagery of Earth and a lyric epilogue which contemplates man's destiny.

Themes: One interpretation of *Blood Wedding* views it as a drama of the soil, with the Groom representing **water** and the Bride **the arid lands**. Another interpretation, emphasizing socio-economic factors, postulates an indictment of **arranged marriages** based on property rather than on mutual attraction (true love). Still another views the work as a re-enactment of mythic patterns described by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, the marriage and death cycle repeated endlessly.