Gacela of the Dark Death Study Guide

Gacela of the Dark Death by Federico García Lorca

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Introduction

At the time of his execution in 1936, Federico García Lorca was arranging for the publication of a collection of poetry entitled *Diván del Tamarit* (*The Diván at Tamarit*). These poems, published in 1940 by a New York journal, take their titles from two traditional Arabic forms, the *gacela* (ghazal) and the *casida* (qasida), which tend to deal respectively with love and death. "Gacela de la muerte oscura" ("Gacela of the Dark Death") is one of the most moving poems in the collection. Its meditation on the intersecting themes of love, life, death, sleep, and sorrow, as well as its subtle resonance with Lorca's own approaching death, make it of unique brilliance and importance in the poet's later work.

"Gacela of the Dark Death" is included in complete collections of Lorca's poetry such as Christopher Maurer's 1991 *Collected Poems*, and this edition is perhaps most appropriate because it contains the original text opposite an English translation. To fully appreciate Lorca, a poet whose expression of the visual and auditory rhythms of his language is notoriously difficult to translate, a reader will find the Spanish text vital. The language barrier will not prevent readers or students, however, from becoming immediately immersed in Lorca's completely unique universe.

Author Biography

In 1898, Lorca was born in an Andalusian village near Granada, Spain, to a landowning farmer and a village schoolmistress. He lived in this rural area for ten years, absorbing the folk culture and the widespread poverty of southern Spain, before his family moved to the provincial capital of Granada. His wealthy parents' liberal convictions were very important to his education there, and he began to meet progressive intellectuals as a teenager at the University of Granada. Already becoming known as a prodigious talent, Lorca published his first book, a travelogue entitled *Impresiones y paisajes* (*Impressions and Landscapes*) in 1918.

He then transferred to the University of Madrid, where he was influenced by developing European artistic movements and began a relationship with the artist Salvador Dalí, who later became a famous figure in the surrealist movement. Dalí was extremely influential over Lorca's work (and vice versa) and their friendship became ambiguously romantic. As a gay man whose openness about sexuality would have ostracized him from conservative Spanish society, Lorca kept his homosexuality private and masked homosexual themes in his writings, leaving many overt explorations of sexuality unpublished.

Lorca wrote a variety of plays and poetry that developed his reputation in Madrid, but his 1928 book of poems that combined folk rhythms with modern forms, *Primer Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*), brought him international fame. The poet nevertheless fell into a depression in 1929, which continued when he moved to Columbia University in New York and wrote a series of darker poems not published in their entirety until after his death. When he returned to Spain in 1930, Lorca made it his chief project to transform the Spanish theater, and his plays from this period, including *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*), were influential over the entire Spanish-speaking world.

Lorca continued to write verse in the 1930s as well, including an elegy on the death of his old friend, the bullfighter Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, and a group of poems based on traditional Arabic forms entitled *The Diván at Tamarit*, which contains "Gacela of the Dark Death." These later poems displayed a sophistication of style that solidified Lorca's reputation, but political developments prevented their publication until after his death. After the outbreak of civil war in 1936, the writer moved from Madrid to his family home in Granada, where many liberal figures resided. When General Francisco Franco's forces took the town, Lorca was arrested because he was perceived to have liberal sympathies, taken to a field outside the city, and shot on August 19, 1936.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first element of "Gacela of the Dark Death" to notice is its title; a *gacela* is a poem of Persian origin that has strict technical guidelines, including a very specific metrical pattern and tends to have an erotic theme. Lorca does not follow the technical form of a *gacela*, but by classifying a work entitled "Gacela of the Dark Death" as a love poem, he introduces a connection between love and death that will become an increasingly important theme. The title also requires the reader to begin to consider the difficulties of translation; because the Spanish title does not necessarily refer to one particular death, "Gacela de la muerte oscura" has also been translated without "the" ("Gacela of Dark Death"), which implies an ambiguity between universal and personal themes. It is also important to note that *oscura* can mean "obscure" as well as "dark," and this distinction becomes important when considering how Lorca envisions death.

The first line introduces a speaker desiring "el sueño de las manzanas" (the sleep of apples), which is both the image and the exact opposite of death. The symbol of an apple is chiefly related to the Garden of Eden in the Bible, and in one sense the poem is therefore desiring the lost paradise of Adam and Eve. But apples were also the instrument of the fall from Eden, and the sorrowful, darker aspect of the allusion becomes clear in Lorca's "Casida de los ramos" ("Casida of the Branches"): "At Tamarit there's an apple tree / with an apple of sobs."

Line 2

Line two makes clear that the speaker wishes, in his sleep, to be far away from what he calls the "uproar" of the resting place for dead bodies. This also seems to be a paradox (a self-contradiction), since cemeteries are normally associated with quietness instead of tumult or uproar. But in his book *Lorca's Late Poetry: A Critical Study*, Andrew Anderson helps to clarify this duality in Lorca's idea of death, translating Lorca as follows from the poet's *Alocución al pueblo de Fuente Vaqueros* (*Address to the Town of Fuente Vaqueros*): "there exist millions of men who speak, live, look, eat, but who are dead. More dead than stones and more dead than the true dead who sleep their sleep under the earth, because their soul is dead." Death and cemeteries, for Lorca, have none of the quiet peacefulness for which the speaker of the poem is longing.

Lines 3—4

Lines three and four add another dimension to this image of sleep; they express a longing to sleep like a certain child that, at some time in the past, wanted to cut out his heart on the high seas. The image of a child connotes purity, promise, and even the paradise suggested by the sleep of apples, but line four's violence reinforces the duality of peace and uproar. And there is further ambiguity in this line since the child only

"wanted" to cut out its heart, which implies that he did not actually do so and may, on the contrary, simply desire to pour all of his passion into the ocean, which for Lorca is a symbol for regeneration and the womb. Perhaps the most important element introduced in these lines, however, is its implicit erotic connection, since "that boy" might also refer to a lover. Anderson supports this idea by citing a letter in which Lorca calls his lover of this period "aquel niño" (that boy).

Lines 5—8

In the second stanza, the poem shifts to a meditation on death. The speaker does not want to hear about a variety of images of death, by which he means "death" in Lorca's sense: a soulless lack of passion. Line five's image of the dead losing no blood seems mysterious until grouped with line six, when it becomes clear that the kind of "dead" to which these lines refer are the dead described above, people who are alive but dead in soul and spirit. "Blood," in this case, ties to line four's image of a child cutting out his heart, and death is seen not as cutting out one's heart into the sea, but as keeping blood inside and decomposing from lack of water. Similarly, the water of line six is a somber echo of line four's regenerative water of the high seas.

The speaker seems already to know about the very specific sadness of this stanza, and his plea not to hear or find out about it is unsuccessful as the sadness becomes bleaker in lines seven and eight. The speaker says he does not want to hear about "grass-given" martyrdoms or the moon which does some kind of "work" just before dawn. Grass, for Lorca, is connected with death and decay, and this association is important when considering the "martirios que da la hierba," which is literally "martyrdoms that the grass gives," although *martirios* can also be translated as "torments." The "snake-mouthed moon" of line eight recalls (like the "sleep of apples") the Garden of Eden because of the snake of temptation in this story. The moon is a very complex and recurring archetype in Lorca's work, but here it seems, as in Lorca's play *Blood Wedding*, to be a force of death that accomplishes its mysteriously evil deeds in the last hours of darkness.

Lines 9—14

The speaker returns in the third stanza to what he does want, and lines ten and eleven express his desire to sleep some fixed amount of time, a moment or perhaps a century. In Spanish they are listed: "un rato / un rato, un minuto, un siglo," which gives a sense, paradoxically, both of passing time and of timelessness.

Line eleven marks the turning point in the poem, signaled by the word "pero" (but). The speaker wants everyone to know that he has not died, that he is sleeping but not dead, and he elaborates the chief characteristics of this state with three lines describing what he wants everyone to know about his sleep of apples. It is an important, and somewhat curious, demonstration of self-consciousness that the speaker needs for "todos" (everyone) to know about this sleep, and it is helpful to note that this is the first place in

the poem where Lorca is drawing attention to the process of expression and point of view.

The first of these characteristics of the speaker's desired sleep is "un establo de oro" (a stable of gold) in the speaker's lips. This may be a reference to Jesus's birthplace, called the Nativity, but like most images in the poem it is paradoxical and also implies the wildness of horses and the perfection of gold. Line thirteen's "pequeño amigo del viento Oeste" (little friend of the West Wind) reminds the reader of the young boy of the first stanza, especially since the West Wind is associated with spring and rebirth. And the darker side of the sleep of apples that is perhaps closest to the title's idea of "muerte oscura" (dark death) comes in line fourteen, since the image of the speaker as a shadow of his tears reflects the fleeting and shadowy qualities of living sleep.

Lines 15—18

Stanza four then changes to the speaker's request to be wrapped in a veil that will protect him from dawn's fistfuls of ants, and sprinkled with "agua dura" (hard water) to protect him from dawn's "scorpion's sting." This imagery is particularly mysterious, since it is difficult to see how a veil will protect the speaker from ants or how water will protect him from a scorpion. It is significant that dawn seems to be the force of evil here; this refers back to the "snake-mouthed moon" of line eight that "works before dawn." This also may be one of the stanza's subtle references to death; a veil connotes a burial shroud, while ants and scorpions evoke decomposition and burial. Also, shoes are a typical symbol for death in Lorca's poetry, although it is unclear what "hard water" signifies or why it is sprinkled on them.

Lines 19—22

The final stanza, which strongly echoes the first, begins with the refrain "Porque quiero dormir el sueño de las manzanas" (Because I want to sleep the sleep of apples). Its repetition, like the repetition of words for sleep, "dormir" and "sueño," characterizes the "lament" of the next line, which must cleanse him of the earth (or soulless death) and bring him to the place of peaceful sleep and "life."

The last lines echo lines three and four except for two important qualifications. The speaker wants to "vivir" (live) with the child that is now "oscuro" (dark or obscure) and, as in the first lines, "wanted to cut his heart out on the sea." While expressing the paradoxical and mysterious darkness of his sleep, this image also adds an important lift to the poem. With his use of the key verb "vivir," Lorca underscores that in sleeping the "sleep of apples," the speaker is full of life.

Themes

Death and Love

The elemental forces of death and love are inseparable throughout *The Diván at Tamarit*, and in "Gacela of the Dark Death" this is a particularly well-developed theme. As mentioned above, the title itself is careful to draw attention to their intersection□a ghazal, or Persian love poem, about "dark death"□and Lorca considers the interplay of these ideas throughout the poem.

He begins by challenging the reader's understanding of death, drawing on many of death's traditional associations. In the refrain "dormir el sueño" (sleep the sleep), Lorca explores death's connection with the "sleep of apples" while also considering death and sleep as distinct forces. By the final refrain, the boundaries of *dormir* (sleep), *morir* (death), and *vivir* (life) are, in one sense, much clearer to the speaker and to the reader in terms of what they truly signify; death is a soulless state enclosed in the earth while sleep signifies a peaceful and free state of regeneration. But in another sense, the poet has reversed the traditional meanings of these themes to the point where it is very difficult to decipher where each of them begin and end. For example, cutting one's heart out on the sea is an image of life, and of sleep, to the speaker, but it literally refers to death.

Further complicating this idea is the connection of sleep, life, and death, with love. In the above example, the boy evokes the idea of a lover and cutting one's heart out into the high seas implies the idea of passion and regeneration by love. As Rupert C. Allen writes in his book *The Symbolic World of Federico García Lorca*, the ocean represents "the womb of all life" in Lorca's poetry while the child represents "the promise of man's continued renewal." So it is also difficult to distinguish the role that love plays in the battle between soulless death and soulful life, which already have a close duality themselves.

Indeed, it is particularly significant that, in the penultimate line, the speaker wants "to live with that dark child." This is the first time Lorca has introduced the verb "vivir" (to live), and it is no coincidence that the image is strongly connected both to the place of love in the poem and to the adjective "oscuro" (dark), used the first time in the poem's body, in order to connect it to the "muerte oscura" (dark death) of the title. Death and love have combined into an obscure force that can be either regenerative or destructive, and the final image of the poem emphasizes their inseparable duality.

Obscurity and Perception

Throughout "Gacela of the Dark Death," Lorca is concerned with perception, darkness, expression, and obscurity. The theme of sleep is particularly important to his exploration of perception, since the speaker longs for distant and obscure sleep characterized by

the "dark child." The speaker's self-consciousness about what he does not want to hear or find out continues to develop the idea that perception is obscure and dreamlike, as does his desire to be wrapped in a veil and his desire to sleep for "un rato, un minuto, un siglo" (a moment, a minute, a century), which is an attempt to obscure certain harsh realities of life that are never specifically explained. Lorca is considering what it means to long for obscurity and darkness, and why perception and self-expression are inevitably so obscure.

Style

Ghazal

Lorca's somewhat loose metrical and rhythmic pattern in the poem is an important stylistic device and may relate to the traditional ghazal. The poem is not a technical ghazal, but it does have some interesting elements in common with the Arabic form, such as the importance placed on the two line phrase, which is called a *sher* and is traditionally considered a complete poem in itself. Lorca often uses *quiero* (I want) to create the effect of individual *shers* in "Gacela of the Dark Death," particularly in stanzas one, two, and five, although the first two lines of stanza three make the only rhyming *sher* in the poem and the last three lines of stanza two make an irregular *sher*. These couplets give the poem a lyrical quality and may imply that the lines similar to a traditional *sher* follow the traditional function of a ghazal, which is generally to meditate about love.

Symbolism

"Gacela of the Dark Death" contains many images that have a profound symbolic resonance. Lorca employs archetypes from religions including Islam and Christianity, alludes to traditional elements of Spanish culture, and refers to a complex system of symbolism developed throughout his body of poetry. As mentioned above, in his book *The Symbolic World of Federico García Lorca*, Robert C. Allen highlights the ocean and the child as the chief symbols in Lorca's poetry, representing the "womb of life" and "renewal" and regeneration, respectively. Other symbols include the apple and the snake, which refer to the Garden of Eden, the "establo de oro" (stable of gold), which probably refers to Christ's Nativity, and the "viento Oeste" (West Wind), which symbolizes spring.

It is important to remember, however, that "Gacela of the Dark Death" is not a strict allegory (a symbolic moral lesson) and that Lorca's symbols in the poem are rather ambiguous. In fact, Lorca is careful in his sophisticated use of symbolism to choose only symbols that have a complex duality: the child also represents a possible lover, the "high seas" also have connotations of death and violence, the Garden of Eden is both paradise and a warning of the fall, and the stable of gold also connotes the wild violence of horses. This renders the symbolism well-suited to the *oscura* (dark and obscure) themes of the poem, and emphasizes the complexity of Lorca's meditations.

Historical Context

Spain before the Outbreak of Civil War

Lorca was born in 1898, the same year that America defeated Spanish forces in the Spanish American War. This colonial defeat, which many considered humiliating for Spain, contributed to the increasingly turbulent Spanish political climate of the early twentieth century. Spain remained neutral in World War I, and until the 1930s engaged most of its military efforts trying to maintain control in colonial Morocco. In 1930, mainly because of growing economic problems, the Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera was forced to leave the country and the liberal Spanish Republic was born.

Lorca wrote "Gacela of the Dark Death" on a ship crossing the Atlantic in April of 1934, and he was arranging for its publication shortly before his death 1936. This time period had witnessed the buildup of widespread discontent with the Republican government. Radical political groups in the Spanish parliament were employing gangs to cause chaos in the streets, and the government was increasingly unable to maintain control. After the left-wing Popular Front made election gains in February of 1936, a group of Nationalist generals including Francisco Franco led an uprising against the government that began the Spanish Civil War.

During the turbulent final years of the leftist Spanish Republican government, it was becoming necessary to take sides in the conflict. Lorca did not support any specific left wing party and portrayed himself as above politics, but he was clearly identified with the leftist movement and, as Andrew Anderson points out in *Lorca's Late Poetry: A Critical Study*, he uniformly "side[d] with the oppressed" in interviews of the period. Although the political setting of 1930s Spain is undoubtedly an important context of his later poetry, critics tend to agree that Lorca's poetry never outwardly engages with political themes. Lorca would likely have denied the political resonance of "Gacela of the Dark Death" because of his insistence upon "pure," or timeless and apolitical, poetry.

The Generation of 1927

Spanish poets such as Pedro Salinas and Jorge Guillén, most influential and prolific between 1920 and 1936, have been categorized into a group called the "Generation of 1927" because of their common artistic agenda. Admirers of the baroque poet Luis de Góngora, their goal was to combine contemporary European literary trends with traditional Spanish poetry. Ultraists and French symbolists, who tended to stress "pure" conceptual art over realist art, were their main contemporary influences, and they considered the ornate style of the Spanish "Golden Age" (which refers to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) their chief poetical heritage.

Lorca refused to be categorized into any particular literary movement, and it is perhaps misleading to confine his work to any particular trend. But he has often been grouped

with the Generation of 1927, and he certainly sympathized with some of their goals. Lorca began chiefly as a "romantic" poet and concentrated on exploring his personal emotional world, but influences such as the surrealist painter Salvador Dalí drew him closer to some of the modern literary trends that his fellow Spanish poets were considering. Strains of influence of the Generation of 1927 are apparent in the symbolism of later works like "Gacela of the Dark Death," but Lorca was a self-styled innovator who by this time had fashioned a unique poetic world that functioned on its own terms.

Critical Overview

Lorca's execution cast a long shadow over the critical reaction to *The Diván at Tamarit*, and because of Francisco Franco's oppressive regime, it was decades before the poems could be openly discussed in Spain. As Andrew Anderson writes in his 1990 study *Lorca's Late Poetry: A Critical Study*, "much of the early Lorca criticism can be characterized, with some notable exceptions, as impressionistic, clichéd and superficial." Writing in his book *García Lorca*, Edwin Honig agrees that critics in England and the United States "sought either to make political capital of his tragic death, or introduce certain of his poems as examples of Spanish surrealism . . . [and] Lorca was neither a 'political' nor a 'surrealist' poet."

If critics were prone to mislead Lorca's readers in the years following his death, however, they did not tarnish his reputation. The international community largely reacted to Lorca's death with increased reverence for the poet and playwright, and it was a Columbia University magazine in New York that first published *The Diván at Tamarit*. At the time of his death, Lorca was at the height of his fame, vastly influential over the Spanish theater across the world, and widely considered the most prodigious poet of his generation.

The Diván at Tamarit has received less critical attention than, for example, *Gypsy Ballads* or the major plays. Anderson goes on to remark that "Much of the reputable general Lorca criticism in book form has unfortunately tended to ignore the late poetry or at least only treat it in passing," although key critics writing in Spanish journals have analyzed the collection's methods and forms. Two critics that provide a sustained analysis of "Gacela of the Dark Death" are Anderson and the Hispanic writer Daniel Devoto, and each provide a line-by-line examination (although Anderson delves more thoroughly into its symbolism and themes). Paul Binding, in his book *Lorca: The Gay Imagination*, discusses the poem in terms of his argument on the importance of sexuality in Lorca's authorial vision, writing that "Gacela of the Dark Death" is one of Lorca's most profound explorations of death and love. Few other critics have written about the poem, however, and perhaps this is because, as Binding writes, the *gacelas* and *casidas* "are even more difficult to access than Lorca's other poetry."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell highlights Lorca's self-consciousness about language and expression in "Gacela of the Dark Death."

"Gacela of the Dark Death" is mainly concerned with the interplay between life, death, sleep, and love; the sleep of apples connotes a soulful life and peaceful sleep balanced with violent temptation, and the image of a child cutting his heart out on the sea combines ideas of regeneration, erotic love, and death. *The Diván at Tamarit* displays some of Lorca's subtlest thematic explorations, however, and "Gacela of the Dark Death" is a good example of the poet's ability to explore a variety of secondary feelings and themes that weave through the structure of the poem. For example, a strand of self-consciousness runs underneath each stanza, questioning the function of poetry and the power (or futility) of language.

The most overt evidence of this poetic self-consciousness is in the final stanza, which is the key to unraveling the meaning of the rest of the poem. By echoing the first stanza, Lorca guides the reader back to the beginning of the poem, this time with the ability to decipher the characteristics of the cleansing process the speaker seeks as well as what exactly constitutes freedom from death and the "sleep of apples." Line twenty's desire to "learn a lament that will cleanse me of earth" is one of the most important of these clues and specifically evokes Lorca's self-consciousness. The reference to a lament, which implies a poetic effort, offers a potential solution to the speaker's conflict: writing poetry.

In his book *Lorca's Late Poetry: A Critical Study*, Andrew Anderson agrees that this line suggests the writing process is a way to evade earthly death: "Figuratively, he will learn to write poetry, which will in another sense ensure his 'survival,' and he will achieve an emotional release (being able to cry) which will overcome sterile earthbound passions." Although it is normally a somewhat futile reaction to a death that has already occurred, lamentation here becomes a way to avoid figurative death and ensure soulful life. It is appropriate that the poet uses "llanto" in line twenty, since this word can mean "weeping" as well as "lament"; the speaker's tears and his poetic process thereby combine to wash away earthly death.

Anderson does not elaborate, however, on one of the most important consequences of this particular solution to the speaker's dilemma; Lorca is inevitably self-conscious about his own role as a poet. Given the difficult task of poetry and the somewhat flimsy defense it offers against death, Lorca is unsure whether his own poem can provide a solution to the empty and soulless earth. As becomes clear with closer examination, he is self-conscious about his purpose as a poet, the reason he writes in the first place, the power of poetry, and the purpose of manipulating language.

Lorca is most nervous about poetic powers at the turning point of the poem, which comes with line eleven's "pero que todos sepan" (but let it be known). The speaker has previously been worrying about what he personally hears and knows, but this

declaration is the first point at which he is concerned with what everyone else knows about him. The lines that follow are an attempt to outline the qualities of his public image, which□as Lorca makes clear in the clue of the "llanto" (lament) in the final stanza□is simply his poetry.

It is important, therefore, that this turning point also marks a major shift in the power of poetry to help the speaker. Poetry is quite pertinent to the speaker's desire to "sleep just a moment, / a moment, a minute, a century" in lines nine and ten; this kind of longevity is something a poem does provide because it will "live" much longer than the poet. But the potential of poetry completely shifts after line eleven turns outward and alludes to the efforts of self-expression that "todos sepan" (all know). The "stable of gold in my lips" is an evocative image but is difficult to picture even as an abstract possibility (as is the idea of the speaker befriending the West Wind). And since it tries to force such a majestic and impossible idea into the speaker's lips, it alludes to Lorca's preconceptions about the difficulties of language. As Christopher Maurer writes in his introduction to Lorca's *Collected Poems*, Lorca is in many ways a romantic poet convinced "that no language will ever capture poetic emotion," just as no lips will ever hold a stable of gold.

Lorca's self-consciousness is even more apparent in line fourteen: "that I am the enormous shadow of my tears." This image, which may refer to Lorca's elegiac powers (his skill as a poet lamenting the dead), is perhaps the most paradoxical in the poem; tears would make small and translucent shadows even if they were pouring from the speaker's eyes. It is a fascinating image to connect to Lorca's treatment of the function of poetry; if the speaker's tears are connected to the "llanto" (lament), the speaker is therefore nothing but the weak shadow of his poetry, which he desires to be "enormous" but which is difficult to visualize as very large or substantial at all. This seems to underscore the futility of language and poetry to express identity or "life."

It is no coincidence that Lorca is anxious about the power of poetry at the point in the poem where he turns outward to the public; the futility of poetry is never so questionable as when its value is determined by whether the reader can appreciate it. To Lorca, because of the romantic tendencies Maurer highlights and perhaps also because of the difficult dualities of his themes, his poetry can never be fully communicative. Perhaps this is why the "veil" (which emphasizes death by referring to a burial shroud) and the "hard water" of the fourth stanza seem so completely inadequate against the "fistfuls of ants" and the "scorpion's sting," if the reader is to imagine that the poetic metaphor continues after line fourteen. Poetry is almost as tenuous as life and almost as weak in defending against the forces of earth, death, and obscurity.

Interestingly, this concept of the obscurity involved in communication is directly connected to the main way in which self-consciousness is visualized in the poem. From the title onwards, the sense that poetry is *oscura* (dark or obscure) is a major preoccupation of Lorca's, both in its figurative sense of the gap between the poetic meaning and the reader and in its visual sense of darkness and light. Appropriately, the visual sense of the term is developed most thoroughly during the self-conscious declaration at the end stanza three. "The enormous shadow of my tears" implies both senses of *oscura*, and it comes during the poem's transition between darkness and

light. Since stanza two ends with "before dawn" and stanza four begins "Wrap me at dawn," Lorca seems to intend the reader to visualize the moments before dawn, which he repeatedly states were the darkest and most evil of the day, in the second stanza.

Aside from its associations with the futility of language, and therefore with obscurity, poetry is also shown to be *oscura* by its connection with the "sleep of apples" and the "niño oscuro" (dark child). This kind of darkness and obscurity, however, has quite a different connotation from the evil moments before dawn. Just as the "dark child / who wanted to cut his heart out on the sea" might normally be associated with death but instead is connected with life in the thematic structure of the poem, obscure poetry may paradoxically refer to a lament that will successfully "cleanse [the speaker] of earth."

In this sense, poetry is a hopeful solution to earthly death that, despite its obscurity or, indeed, perhaps because of its obscurity, is able to transcend the limits of earthly life and offer the speaker a life with "that dark child." This turn in the last stanza is perhaps the most hopeful point in the poem in terms of the value and power of poetry. But it is once again undermined by the fact that in line twenty the speaker merely "wants" to "learn a lament that will cleanse me of earth," which implies that he has not yet actually learned how to do so and that this poem has not actually succeeded in its effort to cleanse him.

Given the insistent dualities in the poem, however, and the fact that, for Lorca, poetry must be *oscura* in order to achieve any measure of success, this paradox should not surprise the reader. A clear thematic resolution would, in a sense, end the "life" of the poem and deny the speaker (and Lorca) eternal life, since the poem would be fixed and therefore inorganic. Instead, the reader is left unsure whether language can accomplish any kind of permanent self-expression and life, confident only that Lorca is a powerful, if self-conscious, contributor to this struggle.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Gacela of the Dark Death," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Potter is a university writing instructor and fiction writer living in San Francisco. In this essay, Potter shows how Lorca's adaptation of the Arabic ghazal *in this* gacela *displays the poet's deeply idiosyncratic poetic diction.*

"Gacela of the Dark Death," the eighth *gacela* of eleven of such poems in his collection *The Divan at Tamarit*, is one among those Federico García Lorca wrote in the 1930s in the tradition of the Arabic Granadian poets who had once resided in his native region of Andalusia, Spain. The *gacela*, which is Spanish for *ghazal*, is Lorca's adaptation of a short, rhymed, fixed verse form in Arabic poetry, according to his brother Francisco García Lorca in *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca*. In the *gacela*, the speaker-poet, "I," addresses a person, often a beloved. In the poem discussed in this essay, the person or thing addressed is "dark death." Interestingly, poems on this somber subject matter were originally collected in what Lorca called *Poems for the Dead*. As Ian Gibson writes in *Federico Garcia Lorca: A Life*, death was an ever-present concern for the poet. Clearly, by just examining the titles of the poems, the poet's vocabulary, or diction, is so specialized that understanding the poems quickly is not readily accomplished.

Beginning with an overview of *The Divan at Tamarit* and Lorca's poetics, his own philosophy of poetry, can aid interpretation of the poem. As Candelas Newton explains in *Understanding Federico García Lorca*

The word *divan* refers to, among other things, a collection of poems in Persian or Arabic, usually by one author. *Tamarit* was the name of a *huerta*, or small farm, owned by one of Lorca's uncles . . . [meaning] 'abundant in dates' in Arabic. . . . Lorca adopted the Arabic names not so much because of the direct influence of Arabic metric patterns as the evocation of a world with which he felt deeply identified. . . . [These poems] are thus opposed to the restrictions imposed by the official religion and social mores of contemporary Western culture. This book is a meditation about the I-you subjectivity in the Tamarit garden, a poetic projection of the speaker's subjectivity. This space has Granada, the poet's native city and the source of much of his inspiration, as background. The dichotomies of Granada, a city divided between its Arabic past and its Christian present, between its Gypsy anguish and its external restraint, echo that of the author himself, fragmented between desire and social restrictions, love and its undoing in time. *The Divan at Tamarit* captures the aesthetics of that agony made word on the page.

Understanding key concepts in Lorca's poetics unveil not only an idiosyncratic use of poetic diction but also some of the poet's unique creative interests. This collection represents Lorca at a stage in his development as a poet where he, as Carl Cobb notes in *Federico García Lorca*, "changed direction, . . . with a use of symbol and image based upon the personal myth from his earlier poetry." It is with a new aesthetic, due to his exposure to the avant-garde movement in the 1920s and the Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora, that he began discovering, as Newton explains

unexpected relations in the world that are then expressed in startling metaphors. . . . The poet moves from advocating the transformation of reality by the imagination to affirming the realm of inspiration, where poetry is detached from logical connections with the world. Inspiration leads to the *hecho poetico* (poetic fact or event), an image freed from analogical constraints and thus endowed with its own poetic logic.

For Lorca, this particular poetic logic flows from *duende*, "the spirit of unpredictable passionate outpouring that speaks from beyond us . . . the energy generated by authentic risk. *Duende* asks that we place ourselves at risk in the poem□that the poem be also our own duel," Peter Boyle remarks in "Some Notes on the Poetry of Federico García Lorca." Newton continued this sentiment by stating that *duende* is "a power . . . from the unconscious . . . where passionately personal experience attempts to burst all bounds and life struggles against death."

These concepts, the tradition of the Arabic *ghazal* penned in the Granadian tamarit garden, pouring from the poet's *duende* toward realizing fresh images, are essential toward unlocking the obscure power behind "Gacela of the Dark Death." The poem gives voice to Lorca's experience of the proximity of death, a recurrent fascination of his in his plays and poetry, also of note as Spain was in the turbulent days of a new republic, only five years before the Spanish Civil War (1936—1939), as Gibson writes in his biography of Lorca.

The poem opens with an arresting metaphor that establishes the rhythm of its lines. The death that the speaker desires is not found in earthly cemeteries, for what he expresses in his tamarit garden is an unearthly anguish. The "sleep" that is desired is a sleep that is not temporal or terrestrial; it is of Lorca's idiosyncratic world, it is a "sleep of apples." In "Casida of the Branches," one of the nine *casidas* in the *Divan*, such apples are on "an apple tree" in the tamarit garden "with an apple of sobs" where "the branches are happy, / the branches are like ourselves. / They do not think of the rain and they've fallen asleep, suddenly as if they were trees." In Lorca's world, apple trees are closely identified with the speaker-poet, and the "sleep of apples" that he desires becomes one of the highly subjective feelings he projects in the collection.

In the second stanza of "Gacela of the Dark Death," like Peter who denied Christ three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, the speaker denies earthly death in the tamarit garden further, three times: "I don't want to hear that the dead lose no blood, / that the decomposed mouth is still begging for water. / I don't want to find out about grass-given martyrdoms," he claims, ultimately negating dying for Christ. And, in the final line in this stanza, by using the image of the "snake-mouthed moon that works before dawn," the poet plays with an image that occurs in other *gacelas*, extremes at odds struggling with each other. Newton, in *Understanding Federico García Lorca*, interprets this cycle of day turning to night, the struggle between the sun and moon, as "desire . . . constantly confronted by its annulment in death." Ghazal 9 and *casidas* 8 and 9 show the continuum of morning ending in night, night in morning, as Newton says, "a cycle of anguish without relief or resolution. . . . Night is wounded by the inevitable coming of its opposite, noon." These extremes struggle, shaping "the image of a serpent that in many other poems is identified with the moon." In "Gacela of the Dark Death," the moon has

the mouth of a serpent because she herself first inspired a night of love with her game of seduction but later only betrayed it. In ghazal 1, love is betrayed in an embrace in which the lovers are trapped in a knot/communion that consumes rather than nurtures. Opposites duel in the serpentine moon as Lorca's unconscious power of *duende* expresses both the transformative and consuming powers of love.

In the third stanza of "Gacela of the Dark Death," the speaker returns to what he does desire, he "want[s]" a timeless "sleep," and he stops time through repetition in the first two lines: for "a moment, / a moment, a minute, a century." He desires a kind of immortality, for he does not want to be the "little friend" of the "West Wind," harbinger of death; he would rather "let it be known that I have not died." The speaker does not want to be "the enormous shadow of my tears," for "weeping," as in "Casida of the Lament," is too expansive; it is "an immense dog, . . . an immense angel, . . . an immense violin, . . . nothing is heard but the weeping" in Granada. Like the weeping done during mourning, Lorca confronts the trappings of death. He personifies death as a woman with a lethal sting, so that the speaker-poet's refrain in his final stanza stands in sharp relief. Indeed, he wants the "sleep of apples" that transcends mortal death; he longs to "learn a lament that will cleanse me of earth." With a sorrow peculiar to his Granadian garden, in his final lines, the speaker-poet cries out clearly in a new lament for what is inevitably lost to desire, as he writes in "Gacela of Unforeseen Love," "always, always, always: garden of my agony." Because the power of *duende* has transformed his images in the poem thus far, the final lines achieve greater clarity. The speaker does not want to die but to "live," to "live with that dark child / who wanted to cut his heart out on the sea."

Why does the speaker-poet want to "live" with "that dark child," the figure of a boy desiring suicide at sea? "Gacela of the Dark Death," as a love poem, expresses both the poet's own homosexuality and the Greek love of boys, often an Arabic love theme, as Carl Cobb asserts in *Federico Garcia Lorca*. The speaker-poet identifies with the figure of the boy, wanting at the beginning of the poem to live with him, and, at the end, to die with him. In "Gacela of the Dead Child," there is "a child" who "dies each afternoon" in Granada, where "the day is a wounded boy;" and in "Gacela of the Flight" the speaker-poet says, "I have lost myself in the sea many times / . . . as I lose myself in the heart of many children." Both an expression of his homosexuality and his lost childhood, as Gibson notes in his biography of Lorca, this line transforms the themes of his identity, controversial in Spanish society at the time, and of death through the image of the sea, a symbol of the unconscious, which Newton explains is at work in many of the *gacelas*.

Indeed, Lorca's vocabulary is specialized in *The Divan at Tamarit*. The "sleep of apples," "the snake-mouthed moon," the "enormous shadow of my tears," and the "dark child" are among the striking images that make up a complete lexicon, or specialized dictionary, for Lorca's world on his uncle's farm, transposed from its Arabic roots to his own time. As a work of literature, "Gacela of the Dark Death" functions to send an anguished cry against mortality and the restraints of time.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "Gacela of the Dark Death," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Lorca denied ever writing about politics, yet "Gacela of the Dark Death" was written during an extremely turbulent time in Spanish history that lead to Lorca's own death. Research the political climate of the Spanish Republic. Do you think the poem has any political themes? Why was Lorca executed? What did various political figures think of his writings? Why was *The Diván at Tamarit* censored by Francisco Franco's government?

How do you think Lorca's homosexuality influenced his poetry? Read about why Lorca felt he needed to be secretive about his sexuality and consider how the public might have reacted to poems that dealt with his sexuality directly. How do readers and critics treat his homosexuality today? Do you notice any homosexual themes in "Gacela of the Dark Death"? Use lines from the poem to support your answer.

Lorca was an influential visual artist as well as a poet and playwright. Study some of his artwork, including "Sexual Water" and "Image of Death," which were both drawn in 1934. Are there common themes between his drawings and "Gacela of the Dark Death"? How does an exploration of Lorca's artwork enhance your understanding of the poem?

Read *The Diván at Tamarit* in its entirety. How does "Gacela of the Dark Death" weave into the greater argument of the book and what are the main themes of the collection as a whole? Or, compare the poem to some of Lorca's other late poetry, such as *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (*Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*). What are the common themes in these poems and how do they differ from one another?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: A republic governs Spain for the first time since the collapse of the Roman Empire. The liberal Spanish Republic fails to maintain order among provincial and political groups, however, and it falls to a military coup in 1936.

Today: Spain is a parliamentary monarchy with democratically elected leaders, but the government in Madrid continues to be in conflict with separatists from the Basque country in the north.

1930s: Francisco Franco's forces execute thousands of intellectuals, liberals, and "undesirables" without trial.

Today: The death penalty and imprisonment without due process are illegal in the European Union, of which Spain is a member state.

1930s: Spain is enjoying a period of cultural achievement and literary prosperity, producing a new generation of poets, writers, and artists extremely important to the world literary scene.

Today: Spanish literature has blossomed since the death of Francisco Franco, but writings from Central and South America are perhaps more influential over worldwide Hispanic literature.

1930s: Lorca's home region of Andalusia is among the poorest in the country, with widespread unemployment and desperation.

Today: Although Andalusia remains one of the poorer regions in Western Europe, subsidies from the European Union and from other parts of Spain, as well as a rapidly expanding tourist industry, have largely stabilized the economy.

What Do I Read Next?

Lorca's *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*) (1928) is his most famous collection of poetry, in part because it so successfully blends traditional forms with innovative trends.

Pablo Neruda is a world famous Chilean poet and friend of Lorca's. His book *Residencia en la tierra* (*Residence on Earth*) was published in three parts, and the third, *Tercera residencia* (*Third Residence*) (1947), connects with *The Diván at Tamarit* both because of its mature and elegant meditation on death and its subject matter of the Spanish Civil War.

Bodas de sangre (*Blood Wedding*) is one of Lorca's most successful plays. First performed in 1933, it displays the effects of love and violence on a small Andalusian community and balances Lorca's dramatic verse with a compelling plot line.

Salvador Dalí's autobiographical *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942) is a delightful account of the artist's early years, including his relationship with Lorca.

W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" from *The Tower* (1928) is a poem from an entirely different culture but with many thematic similarities to "Gacela of the Dark Death." Like Lorca, Yeats creates a unique world of imagery related to youth and the Arabic tradition in order to meditate on death and the soul.

Further Study

Gibson, Ian, *Federico García Lorca: A Life*, Pantheon Books, 1989.

Gibson's biography of Lorca is extremely thorough and authoritative, and it is of great help in considering how the poet's personal life affected his writings.

Lorca, Federico García, *Line of Light and Shadow: The Drawings of Federico García Lorca*, edited by Mario Hernandez, Duke University Press, 1991.

Lorca was an influential artist as well as a writer, and his drawings offer some helpful perspective on his poetry. This book is a vivid overview of his artwork.

Morris, C. Brian, *Son of Andalusia: The Lyrical Landscapes of Federico García Lorca*, Vanderbilt University Press, 1997.

This book discusses the main settings for Lorca's poetry and the influence of his native region on his verse.

Stainton, Leslie, *Lorca: A Dream of Life*, Bloomsbury, 1998.

Stainton's accessible literary biography of Lorca tends to concentrate on his career in the theater but also provides an insightful discussion of *The Diván at Tamarit* on pages 360—64.

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Newton, Candelas, *Understanding Federico García Lorca*, University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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