Back in the Closet:

Federico García Lorca and the importance of sexuality in the study of literature

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In 1935, Federico García Lorca was at the height of his ever-increasing fame. He had penned numerous books of poetry, had published and directed novel plays, and was quite the socialite, knowing most everyone who was anyone in Spain; he had been roommates with Luis Buñuel for a time, he knew Salvador Dalí well, and he was a member of the Generation of 1927, whose members included some of the most famous and innovative Spanish poets of the time. Likewise, he was friends with Latin American poets like Pablo Neruda and had travelled to the New World, inspiring him to pen his most famous book of poetry, *Poet in New York*. His work would lead him to be recognized in the following decades as one of the greatest Spanish poets of the twentieth century, if not of all time.

And it was in this time that he sat down to construct these words:

> Tú nunca entenderás lo que te quiero
> porque duermes en mí y estás dormido.
> Yo te oculto llorando, perseguido
> por una voz de penetrante acero.[1]

[1] You will never understand how much I love you
because you sleep on me and you are asleep.
I hide you crying, persecuted
by a voice of biting iron.

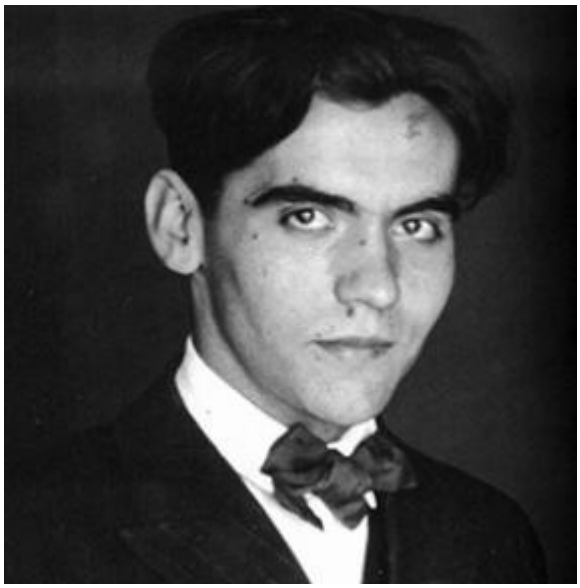
(translated by the author.)

Here is the first stanza of Lorca's "The Beloved Sleeps on the Breast of the Poet," from his collection of poems known as *Sonnets of Dark Love*. There is nothing utterly peculiar about these lines. They tell of two lovers, in perhaps the most traditional form of poetry concerned with love, a sonnet. A standard Spanish sonnet: four stanzas total, two of four verses, two of three. Eleven syllables per line. Even the imagery is rather tame for Lorca: famous for being the foremost surrealist in Spanish poetry, his words here hardly represent the dreamlike norm of his poetry. It is beautiful and elegant in its simplicity. But something stands out, lost in translation to the largely ungendered English. In the second verse, "dormid**o**", a gendered word. A gendered masculine word ascribed to the "you" of the poem, the beloved. He is a man. The speaker of the poem, the narrator of this poem and all the others of Lorca's collection *Sonnets of Dark Love,* is a man as well, he is "the poet", easily seen as Lorca himself. Lorca is addressing his beloved. This beloved is a man. Lorca has written a love poem addressed to a man.

A year later he would be dead.

I. The Life of a Poet

Federico García Lorca was born on the June 5, 1898 in Fuentes Vaqueros, a small town not far from Granada, Spain. Born to a wealthy landowner and a schoolteacher mother, Lorca, along with his family, including two younger siblings, brother Francisco and sister Isabel, relocated to the city of Granada proper in 1909, leading to the poet's future association with the ancient Andalusian city. He would forever identify as a *granadino*, and the city's peculiar, and particularly strong even in Andalusia, mix of Arabic culture and architecture with the Spanish would leave its mark on the poet.



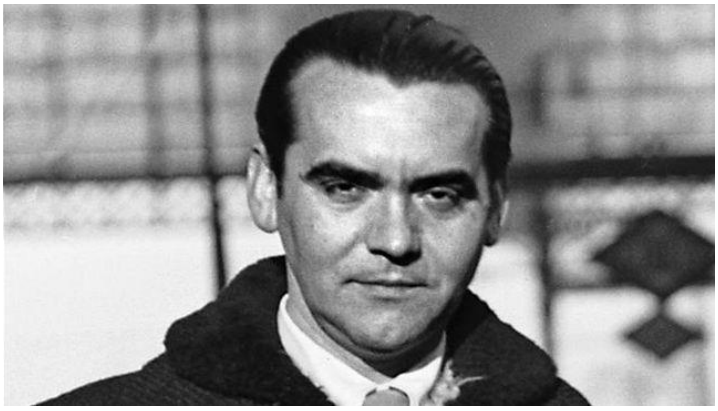
A young Lorca. (poets.org)

Although initially set to become a professional musician—he had an extraordinary talent for the piano—as a teenager, Lorca discovered an equally virtuosic talent for writing in all its forms. He wrote poetry, plays, and prose. He even dabbled in drawing. For a time, Lorca attended Granada University, which he followed with a move to Madrid that saw Lorca living in and studying at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* (The Student Residence). The re-established *Residencia* (the first was closed at the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936) has a website detailing the purpose of the original *Residencia*:

> The mission of the Residencia was to complement university education by fostering an exciting intellectual and living environment for its students. It strongly encouraged the constant dialogue between Science and the Arts, welcomed the avant-garde ideas from abroad, and became the focal point for spreading modernity in Spain.

During his time at the residence Lorca would be roommates with the surrealist filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, and meet Salvador Dalí, with whom he would develop a complex and intense relationship. His association with these two also highlights Lorca's reputation as a surrealist. And from then, in the early 1920s, the progression of Lorca seems to be a near-continual rise. His poetry brought him national, and international, attention. He travelled abroad numerous times—a stay in New York inspired his book of poetry, *Poeta en Nueva York* (*Poet in New York*), now considered his greatest book of poetry.

It was during these travels abroad that Lorca was able to explore his sexuality, and perhaps become more accepting of it. Getting out of Spain and escaping "its stifling sexual morality" as Ian Gibson points out in his extensively researched biography of Lorca, "...had become vital goals for the poet..." (152). Gibson also points out that, in the recollections of many of Lorca's friends, "after his year away from Spain (in 1930), Lorca had become more openly homosexual" (301). Lorca's sexuality had always been a half-secret at best, something Gibson highlights; everyone seemed to know about it, but almost no one, including Lorca himself—except in the closest of confidences—would discuss it. Finally, at the age of 32, Lorca had become more comfortable with his sexuality; however, Lorca being more comfortable and open with himself in private, does not imply the contemporary idea of "coming out of the closet", an experience Lorca never had. He was still in the closet—enough so that his friends and family, even years after his death, had an unwillingness to discuss or even acknowledge his homosexuality" (Gibson xxi)—it just happened to be a bigger closet in which he felt more comfortable, he had embraced more of himself, but he could not be gay openly, still could not escape the inherent subterfuge of being gay in a dominantly heterosexual and, sometimes vehemently, homophobic society.



Lorca later in his life. (eldiario.es)

In the first half of the 1930s, Lorca wrote and experimented more with theater as the director of *La Barraca*, a university student theater company. During this time he published *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*), *Yerma*, and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of*

Bernarda Alba), three of his most well-known plays together called "The Rural Trilogy." And in 1935, he would write his *Sonnets of Dark Love*, a group of eleven sonnets, each of which are about a "poet" character and his intense love for the less-invested "Beloved". The poems are some of the most autobiographical Lorca ever penned: he rarely wrote love poems, usually the bread and butter of poets, and a subjective narrator, with an "I" attached, almost never appeared in his verse. His usual, more surrealist, poetry aspired to a mythical voice, like his *Gypsy Ballads*, or one of distanced observation, like the poems of *Poet in New York*. The *Sonnets of Dark Love* are some of the few "gay poems" he ever wrote, and perhaps, given their almost confessional nature, the most notable in relation to his sexuality.

II. The Death of a Poet

He was seen walking between rifles,
down a long street
out to chill fields
still lit by the early stars.
They killed Federico
when the dawn broke.
The executioner's crew
dared not look in his face.[2]

-Antonio Machado, 1936

Unfortunately, the new boldness Lorca displays in these poems never got to mature. The tension between Spain's two sides finally broke on July 17, 1936 after a failed *coup d'état* by rightwing military leaders on the recently elected liberal government in Madrid, and the country

[2] translated by A.S. Kline

quickly progressed into its Civil War. A month later, on August 19, Lorca would be dead, his body never to be seen again. For many years, it was assumed that he had been killed by a firing squad of Nationalists, the name given to the Falangist army by their leader, and Spain's soon-to-be dictator, Francisco Franco. The reasoning, likewise assumed, was that Lorca was a liberal and a homosexual. Just a year ago, however, in 2015, some official documents, written in 1965, came forward and confirm these assumptions about the event. In an article concerning these documents, Guardian journalist, Ashifa Kassam, writes:

> The resulting documents suggest García Lorca was persecuted for his beliefs, describing him as a "socialist and a freemason," about whom rumours swirled of "homosexual and abnormal practices".

It is jarring and saddening to the contemporary reader to see that Lorca was killed, at least in part, for his sexuality. Even sadder still is that the very thing that had been a difficulty, a contentious secret which he hid carefully, for most of his life was part of what led to his death. Although the bulk of his own thoughts on his sexuality have disappeared with his letters under the censorship in Franco's Spain, Lorca's sexuality is more than a footnote in his biography. His sexuality was part of his life, part of his death, and part of him. And it is for this reason that Lorca's sexuality is an important part of his work and the study thereof, even though it may not always be the most pertinent to the work at hand. In life, Lorca had to hide his sexuality. After death, Lorca has finally come out of the closet.

III. Reading Queer Literature

> *In the bright morning,*
>
> *I wanted to be me.*
>
> *A heart.*

And in the fallen afternoon,

I wanted to be my voice.

A nightingale.[3]

-Federico García Lorca, 1924

Reading a queer poet creates a unique dilemma. You either read them as a queer poet or you read them as a poet, and both present their own problems. This might seem an oversimplification, but let me explain. When a poet is read as a queer poet, when you admit their queerness and make sure to have it in mind, the tendency is to create a singular focus on their sexuality. Whatever you are reading, you have to include the poet's queerness and, in fact, search it out in whatever stray word implies a Freudian slip. And while sometimes this type of reading may be important, as when a gay poet makes it a point to discuss his sexuality—as in Lorca's *Sonnets of Dark Love*—doing so is a disservice to many other works. An example in Lorca would be reading *The House of Bernarda Alba* and deciding that Adele's desire to escape the stifling atmosphere of her mother's house and the restrictions placed on female sexuality as a metaphor for Lorca's desire to escape the stifling atmosphere of a homophobic country and its restrictions of his own sexuality. That reading may indeed be valid and enlightening, but it ignores the same work's commentary on the role of females in Spain's patriarchal society, and how, even in a house of only women, the influence of men remains ever-present, dominant, and oppressive.

The opposite has its own problems, mainly found in what it means to read a poet as "just a poet". Just a poet seems to mean a straight poet. Let me explain. I once was in a class of

[3] Translated by the author.

Spanish poetry, and while reading Lorca, the professor asked us to "ignore his sexuality for a moment." Now, I understood the professor's intent—he wanted to make sure we did not get stuck on a looping conversation about Lorca's sexuality—but I also felt the request to be pointless. Why? To me, at the point already devoted fan of Lorca, Lorca's homosexuality was an essential part of who he was as a poet—so trying to ignore his sexuality seemed impossible. The inverse of the request even highlights its illogical nature. Imagine someone asking you to ignore a straight poet's sexuality for a moment. It does not make sense, because a straight poet's sexuality does not affect our preconceptions of them. In fact, it adheres to our preconceptions—we never had to be told the straight poet was straight.

Katrina Kimport writes, in a chapter discussing heteronormativity from her book *Queering Marriage: Challenging Family Formation in the United States*, "heteronormativity, as a practice that (re)institutes heterosexuality as the norm, is unrecognized. Heteronormativity can be recognized when its invisible machinations are disrupted" (130). Heteronormativity in this case assumes the poet is straight unless told otherwise: when you read a queer poet, someone, has to inform you they are queer, whether the poet does so within their own work or it is someone else. The problem with the poets who do not say this for themselves, like Lorca rarely does, is that it is up to the person of authority, the professor or author of a book on the poet, whether or not the queerness ought to be ignored. And when they ignore it, the assumption, an invisible machination of heteronormativity, is that the poet is straight. For me, this happened in a class about New England poetry. The professor decided Walt Whitman's sexuality did not merit discussion, so I did not become aware of his queerness until I read Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman" a year later. Because of someone else's decision to ignore the poet's sexuality in favor

of a more “objective” reading, their queerness disappeared, and instead the norm filled the void: the ignored sexuality of the queer poet is replaced by the standard and assumed heterosexuality.

The problem at hand is the problem that lies at the heart of a heteronormative society: how do you normalize those things that exist outside the heterosexual norm? How do we read Lorca without ignoring his sexuality in favor of an “objective” reading of his work? How do we read Lorca as a gay poet without only focusing on his homosexuality and potentially simplifying and reducing our understanding of his broader, non-autobiographical themes? One day, perhaps, we may not have to mention or explain a non-heterosexual poet’s sexuality, but for now there is no easy or obvious answer. Lorca’s sexuality, even in his works most unrelated to it, is as essential to him as a person as it is to any other poet. Perhaps the best we can do is try to keep his sexuality in mind, as a footnote—yet again an act that is unimportant and unnecessary for a straight poet—while reading. We must be aware of it, even when it is not the main focus of the topic or work at hand, because ignoring his gayness denies the prejudice that contributed to his death. Ignoring his gayness erases part of him. Ignoring his gayness places him back in the closet he was stuck in for his whole life, chafing under the norms of the native country he loved—the same country in which he was murdered.

I end with my translation of Lorca’s own words, the remaining stanzas of “The Beloved Sleeps on the Breast of the Poet”, in which Lorca feels the eyes of those that lie in wait for him, feels the claustrophobia of a homophobic society. In which he almost grasps the death that soon comes to him:

A norm that disturbs both flesh and star
now pierces my pained breast

and the unhappy words have bitten

the wings of your severe spirit.

A group of people leaps in the gardens

lying in wait for your corpse and my agony

on horses of light with green manes.

But continue sleeping, life of mine.

Hear my broken blood in the violins.

See that they stalk us still!

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