

An Approach to the Literary Symbolism of the Sea in the Poetry of Federico García Lorca^{*}

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Literary symbolism is a powerful tool that is frequently used by Federico García Lorca, the most influential poet of the Generation of 27 of Spain. In Lorca's system of symbols, the sea appears to be the most significant. This study observes the variety of meanings of the sea, the evolution of this symbol, and its connection with other symbolic elements, as well as the structural function that the sea plays in Federico García Lorca's poems. The aim is to reveal the hidden messages beneath the metaphor of the sea, as well as the emotional world of one of the most prominent poets of 20th-century Spanish literature.

Keywords: symbolism, 20th-century Spanish literature, sea, Federico García Lorca

Introduction

Symbolism is one of the most important artistic movements of the late 19th century, which originated in France and Belgium, and spread throughout the 20th century in various fields, such as literature, painting, music, opera, as well as sculpture. But its greatest manifestation was in literature and represented a reaction against naturalism and realism. It is characterized by subjectivism, abstraction, mysticism as opposed to objectivism and the linear description of the fact of realism. Therefore, they rejected the realistic approach to everyday subjects (Vargas, 2020). In addition, the symbolists used a wide range of symbols or metaphors to express their moods and convey their ideas and emotions. Jean Moréas (1886), the precursor of symbolism, declared in his symbolist manifesto, "Le Symbolisme", that this movement is "the enemy of teaching, declamation, false sensibility, and objective description". To this end, the symbolists used rigorous rhetorical figures to represent ideas, express emotions, and abstract concepts in a suggestive and mysterious way (Cruz, 2023). Readers therefore need to decipher and interpret the hidden meanings of symbols to explore the authors' deep and intimate world. Regarding symbolist poetry, the greatest manifestation of literary symbolism, Moréas defined that it should comprise "descending undulations", mysterious ellipses, and other writing instruments favored by poets interested in "reely throwing the fierce darts of language" (Vargas, 2020). Therefore, they need to resort to a wide variety of refined metaphors, creating unexpected combinations between them, utilizing blank spaces and typographical devices. Furthermore, another notable characteristic of symbolist poetry is "rhyme of abstruse fluidity" (Moréas, 1886). That is, symbolist poets greatly emphasize the musicality of rhymes, while leaving

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verse construction in the background. To achieve this, they need to resort to a wide variety of refined metaphors, creating unexpected combinations between them, utilizing blank spaces and typographic devices. Furthermore, another notable characteristic symbolist poetry is its “rhyme of abstruse fluidity” (Moréas, 1886). That is, symbolist poets emphasize the musicality of their rhymes, while neglecting the construction of their verses. To achieve this, they employ the repetition of sounds to generate a musical effect. Regarding aesthetic mechanisms, synesthesia is frequently used, blending auditory, visual, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile sensations to convey the characters’ deep emotions more vividly.

Although symbolism originated in France and Belgium, it quickly spread to other nations, leaving a lasting influence, “reflecting itself in subsequent movements and inspiring artists for years to come” (Vargas, 2020). In the Hispanic world, it was subsumed into a movement more generally known as Modernisme and later had significant resonance in the Iberian Peninsula. Writers of the Generation of ‘98, such as Antonio and Manuel Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, are important representatives of this lithographic movement. Later, this literary resource also had a great impact on the works of the Group of ‘27. Among them, the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca undoubtedly stood out, one of the pinnacles of the Generation of ‘27 and of all 20th-century Spanish poetry (Arco, 2008, p. 268).

Symbolism was a resource widely used by Lorca to express his ideas and emotions. The moon, the wind, the horse, water, the sun, among many others, are symbols frequently present in the poet’s works. Of these, the sea stands out, one of the most recurrent and powerful symbols used by Lorca, which he imbued with a wide variety of meanings. In this study, this symbol in Lorca’s representative poems will be analyzed from three dimensions: its hidden meanings, its connection to other metaphorical figures, as well as its structural function in the poems, to reveal the emotion conveyed through this symbol and the poet’s inner world.

The Sea in the Poetry of Federico García Lorca

Among the symbols most used by Lorca, the sea occupies an important place and constitutes a constant theme in his work (Martínez, 2024, p. 222). This symbol represents a wide range of meanings and values, such as love, life and death, joy and pain, as well as the duality of the two extremes of our existence. That is, on the one hand, it represents joy and vitality; and on the other, it expresses pain and frustration. Furthermore, it should be noted that throughout Lorca’s life, from his birthplace in Andalusia, to his refuge in New York, the sea is always a prominent symbol in his writings, accompanying the poet’s movement. Suffice it to remember *Caracola*, which reflects the memories of his childhood in Andalusia (Oelker, 2023, p. 123), and *Norma y paraíso de los negros*, written during his time living in New York.

Although the sea is a symbol present in the poet’s lifelong works, due to different experiences and situations in his life, the sea carries varied meanings. Therefore, five representative poems by the poet have been selected, in which the sea is presented as a prominent symbol, to explore the author’s different feelings and emotional situation at different stages of his life. In terms of space, we tried to cover a wide region of the sea; in terms of time, we tried to cover different stages of the poet’s life, with the aim of exploring the inner world and the evolution of this symbol throughout the space and life of this genius of 20th-century Spanish literature.

Analysis of the Meaning of the Sea in Lorca’s Poetry

The Sea Represents Nature and Vitality

The sea often symbolizes nature and freedom in Lorca’s poetry, especially in his early writings, which reflect

a fresh tone and love of nature. The short poem “Caracola” is a good example:

Me han traído una caracola.
Dentro le canta
un mar de mapa.
Mi corazón
se llena de agua,
con pececillos
de sombra y plata.
Me han traído una caracola.

This short poem is found in the “Children’s Songs” section of the book *Canciones, 1927* (Oelker, 2023, p. 123). Being a poem for children, the words are simple, and the rhythm is very lively. The conch shell contains the song of the sea, and the seawater welcomes the “silverfish”. The entire atmosphere is filled with light and brightness, displaying a fresh and vivid environment that expresses a joyful feeling. It is a poem dedicated to children, as Cervera (2019) stated, “the poem reflects Lorca’s deep affection for children and his love for natural spaces”. Here, the image of the sea symbolizes nature and the freedom of childhood, while the heart of the conch shell symbolizes humanity. An interrelationship is established between nature and humanity through the bearer of the sea.

Francisco Umbral (1986) defined Lorca as one of the cursed poets, who usually possess a rebellious personality and are representatives of symbolism, like the famous French author Charles Pierre Baudelaire and his work *The Flowers of Evil*. And one of the most notable features of the style of the cursed poets is to cultivate a dark text, generating an environment bathed in a dark and mysterious tone (Tabuenca, 2019). However, in Caracola, we see a different nuance, in which the poet creates a free environment, showing a very light tone with the dialogue with nature and playing with children (Martínez, 2024). Throughout the expansion of life, the sea becomes a heavier symbol, losing this freshness marked by the poet’s youth, remembering that this poetry was written in 1927 by the poet, in the youngest and least suffering facet of life.

However, throughout the expansion of life, as suffering was accumulating, the sea also became a symbol loaded with more weights, and complex that can represent “the fruitless search for love, the fear of death, the sadness of the poet before the enigma of time” (Gibson, 1985, p. 378), just looking at the following poems.

The Sea Represents the Immensity of Love

Love is an eternal and universal theme in the literature of different cultures, and the sea constitutes a symbol of love in Lorca’s poems, such as in “Llagas de amor”:

Esta luz, este fuego que devora.
Este paisaje gris que me rodea.
Este dolor por una sola idea.
Esta angustia de cielo, mundo y hora.

Este llanto de sangre que decora
lira sin pulso ya, lúbrica tea.
Este peso del mar que me golpea.
Este alacrán que por mi pecho mora.

Son guirnalda de amor, cama de herido,
donde sin sueño, sueño tu presencia
entre las ruinas de mi pecho hundido.

Y aunque busco la cumbre de prudencia,
me da tu corazón valle tendido
con cicuta y pasión de amarga ciencia.

This poem is part of the collection *Sonnets of Dark Love*, written during the poet's final years. Therefore, the sea carries more weight and symbolizes bitter love. The title of the poem already clearly indicates the suffering of love. The images in the first verses, such as a gray landscape, pain, anguish, and tears of blood, create a painful atmosphere. Then the sea appears, so heavy and ferocious that it can batter the lyrical speaker. We can imagine a scene of large waves battering all terrains, and a man suffering from love standing on the beach, desolate and traumatic. The image of the sea is like a burden that represents the immensity and bitterness of love. With this poem, Lorca immerses us in a world where love and pain are inextricably intertwined (Del Lápiz, 2024). From here, the sea has lost the light and fresh hue as in "Caracola".

The Sea Reflects Pain and Suffering

More emphatically, the sea in Lorca's poetry reflects pain and suffering, as in "The Ballad of Sea Water":

El mar
sonríe a lo lejos.
Dientes de espuma,
labios de cielo.
-¿Qué vendes, oh joven turbia
con los senos al aire?

-Vendo, señor, el agua
de los mares.

-¿Qué llevas, oh negro joven,
mezclado con tu sangre?

-Llevo, señor, el agua
de los mares.

-¿Esas lágrimas salobres
de dónde vienen, madre?

-Lloro, señor, el agua
de los mares.

-Corazón y esta amargura
seria, ¿de dónde nace?

-¿Amarga mucho el agua
de los mares!

El mar
sonríe a lo lejos.
Dientes de espuma,
labios de cielo.

This time, the sea is a central element of the poem, presented as a symbol of pain and suffering. In the opening lines, the sea is personified as a living being smiling in the distance, giving it a mythical quality. The waves are then described as foamy teeth, depicting a ferocious scene that could crash onto the beach and creating

a dark atmosphere. The three characters—the young woman, the young black man, and the mother—all come from the lower classes of society and endure the pain of life. One must sell water, suggesting the sale of beauty, and even life; another must mix blood with the bitter sea water; the last weeps with salty tears.

However, seawater becomes a pure symbol of suffering, associated with blood and tears. This interconnection between all these sad images turns the sea into a symbol of the pain of human existence.

El mar Representa La Dualidad de La Tristeza y La Belleza

While in “Caracola”, vitality is represented by the sea, in the earlier poem, the sea symbolizes pain; and on other occasions, the sea can reflect the duality of the two extremes of humanity’s sensations, that is, the duality of joy and sadness, of life and death. As Martínez (2024, p. 228) states, “the sea of good and evil, the ambivalent sense of life and death in his work is evident”. In this sense, the poem “Mar” is a good example:

El mar es
el Lucifer del azul.
El cielo caído
por querer ser la luz.

¡Pobre mar condenado
a eterno movimiento,
habiendo antes estado
quieto en el firmamento!

Pero de tu amargura
te redimió el amor.
Pariste a Venus pura,
y quedóse tu hondura
virgen y sin dolor.

Tus tristezas son bellas,
mar de espasmos gloriosos.
Mas hoy en vez de estrellas
tienes pulpos verdosos.

Aguanta tu sufrir,
formidable Satán.
Cristo anduvo por ti,
mas también lo hizo Pan.

La estrella Venus es
la armonía del mundo.
¡Calle el Ecclesiastés!
Venus es lo profundo
del alma...

...Y el hombre miserable
es un ángel caído.
La tierra es el probable
Paraíso Perdido.

The sea in this poem represents both beauty and sadness, life and death. Like the wordplay in the verses of “Tus tristezas son bellas”, the contrast between sadness and beauty simultaneously expresses the joy and suffering

of humanity, the life and death of human beings. It should be noted that this duality reflected in Lorca's works is also a reflection of the duality of his own personality, as Gasch (1950, p. 9) indicates, which has "a violent, wild, and at the same time joyful and fresh individuality, like the first breath of a dawning wind".

In short, the sea, in this poem, embodies almost all the meanings Lorca endowed in his poems: love, sadness and beauty, life and death, revealing a search for the universal values of human existence. In this sense, the symbolism of the sea becomes increasingly complex throughout the poet's growth; it also indicates the maturity of his thought in line with his accumulated life experiences.

Reflections

Lorca's poetic work is full of symbols, among them the sea, which has a notable influence on his poems, laden with diverse symbolic meanings. It can represent nature and freedom, the immensity of love, pain and suffering, as well as the duality of life and death, which can lead to "the general understanding of human life" (Quiles, 2019).

At the same time, the meaning of the sea becomes more complex throughout the growth and expansion of the poet's life, from the freshness and freedom reflected in his early writings to the ambiguous sense of human existence, present in his works created in New York. It is in this process of accumulating personal experiences that the sea acquires more complex meanings. It ultimately becomes a conclusive metaphor for life and death, the passage of time, the environment, and infinity. And this shows, on the other hand, that the creative context evolved with the poet's personal experience.

The use of the sea as a symbol laden with diverse representations enriches the poet's expression of feelings and thus demonstrates the structural function of the sea, which serves to convey the poet's profound emotions and reflections on life and human existence. And the analysis of these representations of the sea allows us to better understand Lorca's works and decipher the keys to Lorca's imagery (Martínez, 2024, p. 233).

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