

# The Privilege of the Dead: Images of Death in Lorca's "Poet in New York"

Amelia Ying Qin

University of Houston, Modern and Classical Languages, USA

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## Abstract

This paper presents a close analysis of the images in Federico Lorca's poems entitled "Poet in New York" where he depicts two kinds of deaths that are opposite to each other in multiple aspects of meaning and significance. In so doing, the paper argues that the death depicted in such images as the drowned child signifies the loss of innocence, while the death of the city, depicted in the many cruel and bloody images in these poems, signifies a terrifying living death. The former is a concept that Lorca lamented and ritualized, a concept he allowed himself to be obsessed with. The latter is a concept he detested and condemned. The paper further shows that both concepts are reflections of his personal plights and tribulations in life and his own experiences in New York.

**Keywords:** Federico Lorca, Death, New York, the City, the Innocent

## 1. Introduction

Federico Lorca was obsessed with the concept of death in his poems as well as throughout his life. In the series of poems entitled "Poet in New York" written during the year 1929-1930 when he was a student at Columbia University, images of death can be found everywhere: the "death of a boy on a Japanese schooner," "Open beaks of dying birds" (Maurer, 669), "the chore of dead dahlias" (Maurer, 675), "dried butterflies," "the mummified hand of a child" (Maurer, 677), "snuffed-out eyes," "a tree murdered by the caterpillar" (Maurer, 687), "dead snails" (Maurer, 699), "a dead lady in the branch of the tree" (Maurer, 741), etc. What Lorca sees in these morbid images can be related to his infatuation with a very personal concept of death – a dark side of his poetic passion. Usher notes, "One of Federico's party tricks was to slump to the floor feigning death. He did it so convincingly, however, it spooked people" (Usher). Death has its special attraction and mysterious meaning to Lorca. When he was in his late teens, besides costuming his siblings and family maids, dusting their faces with rice powder and staging them in plays, he also "dressed up as a bullfighter, covered his legs with fake blood, and allow his friends to carry him through the streets on their shoulders as though he was mortally wounded. By simulating death he sought to dispel its mystery" (Stainton, 25).

Time magazine quotes Lorca's explanation of the "heavy freight death carries for his people: 'in all countries death is an end. It comes, and the curtains are closed. Not in Spain. In Spain, they are raised...A dead person in Spain is more alive dead than anywhere else in the world'" (Usher). Similarly, in his "Poet in New York" the dead is more alive than the rest of the world. In these poems, Lorca sees death as an escape from the fickleness, nonchalance and cruelty of the world, and the ritual of death almost a ceremony to be admired. Often in his poems, the pure and innocent and those that are in harmony with nature die, leaving the poet in grief and despair in a world of death. Also in his poems, the dead would come back, powerful and righteous, to announce their victory over the world. Lorca devoted so many images to the dead that it seems that the dead in his poems is much more alive and powerful than those that are alive in the world, which actually is a world of death in terms of innocence and purity. Lorca's "Poet in New York" clearly reflects this theme of a living world that is actually dead and the dead that is actually more alive. In the Lorca's depiction of the New York City, the poet gives special privileges to the dead – a symbol of lost innocence and purity – over the living death of the modern city in late 1920s and early 1930s.

## 2. Images of Death

The obsession with death started early in his life. Lorca's closest boyhood friend, a fifty-five-year-old Compadre Pastor died when Lorca was seven years old. Lorca had glimpsed his body in its casket, and observed the details of how the dead man had been laid in. "The episode proved to Lorca that death was neither a liberation, nor a transition to some new phase of existence, but the complete physical annihilation of life. ... The dead man, a former shepherd, epitomized everything Lorca had lost at puberty: virtue, harmony with nature, the unconditional love of his parents and friends" (Stainton, 43). As Lorca puts it in the poem "Your Childhood in Menton" – "your childhood: now a fable of fountains" (Maurer, 649). Maybe because of this, death is associated with all the precious things that he had lost. As if compelled to relive the moment of loss just to keep the memory fresh, to keep the mind from numbing over years of living death in the material world, Lorca developed an obsession with death and experienced it from time to time in both his poems and his life.

In 1918, in a brief story he filmed with three other friends, he posed dead in an Arab dress while his friends carrying out the funeral ritual (Stainton, center pictures). When he was in the Madrid Residencia around 1925, Lorca would often talk about his own death, sometimes more than once a day. Sometimes he would arrange his own death and funeral, “calling out to a group of friends, ‘Hey everyone, this is how I’ll look when I die!’ he would then throw himself across the bed, feign rigor mortis, and direct his companies in a boisterous enactment of his funeral procession...” (Stainton, 131). “Death thus became a familiar presence in his life, an event to be viewed with calm, to be milked for inspiration” (Stainton, 132). In the poem “Death,” where everything struggles in a circle, only to end up with the unavoidable death, the speaker envisions himself “on the roof’s edge, what a burning angel I look for and am” (Maurer, 697).

Lorca mentioned to a friend that he was on the verge of suicide prior to his trip to New York (Vance, 33). His obsession of death often resulted in his abrupt changes of mood. When in conversation or with company at a public place, he would suddenly fall silent. “In due course he confessed, ... that he had been thinking of death” (Stainton, 159). His trip to New York didn’t seem to alleviate the situation. New York is a city of despair and loneliness to Lorca. He lived a dummy life in New York: He acquired almost no English, however, he pretended to enjoy his studies. He lived an isolated life in his dorm room, having no English-speaking friends, however, he wrote home and reported victories in his social life in America (Stainton, 217). Lorca felt uprooted and homesick, a feeling expressed in his poem “After a walk” – “cut down by the sky” (Maurer, 641) – an isolated feeling of one who couldn’t speak English and couldn’t mix with the New Yorkers around him.

New York to Lorca, as he puts it in “The Public,” is a place of “Mortal Agony,” of “man’s loneliness in a dream filled with elevators and trains” (Lorca, 40). The more poetic definition of New York by Lorca is a place where trees amputated, children with “the blank face of an egg” and butterflies “drowned in the inkwell” (Maurer, 641), while “the drunks lunch on death” (Maurer, 693) – a place of indifference, oblivion and death. Lorca saw death everywhere in this city. In “New York (Office and Denunciation),” the poet states “Everyday in New York, they slaughter, / four million ducks, / five million hogs, / ...” (Maurer, 717). He once even came across a suicide victim who had thrown himself from the upper floors of a Manhattan hotel during the New York Stock Market collapse in 1929 (Stainton, 235). “New York, mire, / New York, wires and death” (Maurer, 731). Instead of the “grandeur” of New York at his first sight of the city that impressed him so much that he wrote to his parents, “All Granada would fit into three of these buildings” (Maurer, 215), Lorca chose to paint dark and bloody scenes of the modern city in his “Poet in New York.” Born under such circumstances, the collection of poems has been debated over as a “dark and angry sequence – one of the first ‘anti-American’ piece of literature” (Pollard, 28).

However, Lorca’s interpretation of New York is highly personal – he felt drowned in New York. It is a world that poses threat to the poet – “there is a world of death whose perpetual sailors / will appear in the arches and freeze you from behind the trees” (Maurer, 671) – a hopeless world of despair as Lorca depicts in “Dawn” – “Dawn arrives and no one receives it in his mouth / because tomorrow and hope are impossible there” (Maurer, 683). He was terrified and isolated, and ever more obsessed with death. In Bushnellsville, NY, he claimed a taxi driver had tried to rob and murder him in a dark corner of the forest. He was terrified by the sight of the sleeping baby of his friend, thinking it was dead (Stainton, 228). Later, he claimed a little girl was drowned in a well during his visit to a friend’s farm, but in fact none such thing had happened (Stainton, 229). All these imagination or stories related to death could be simply a subconscious outcry of Lorca’s personal despair and loneliness, and his feeling of being suffocated, drowned in the modern city that he couldn’t or wouldn’t adapt to. Feeling spiritually drowned already by the outside world, Lorca was terrified of death in real life. His friend recalled that only in church was Lorca unafraid of death. When taking a walk, he insisted on holding his friends’ hands as if by doing so he could remain anchored to life. He was afraid of swimming in the sea, “terrified of drowning” (Stainton, 164).

Instead of the little girl Lorca claimed to be drowned on his friend’s farm, “Little Girl Drowned in the Well” is probably just his resurfaced memory of a girl drowned years ago in Granada. In the poem, the well has “small mossy hands” that trap the chaste child in the “unmoving water that never reaches the sea” (Maurer, 695). Similar images appear in Lorca’s “Sleepwalking Ballad” where the “green” figure of a drowned girl floats on the surface of a cistern (Maurer, 555). Lives lost in water have a special meaning to Lorca, especially lives of innocent children. Lorca was obsessed with these images and often identified himself with the dead child, drowned and trapped (Stainton, 231).

In his poems, children are the symbol of the childhood innocence and the purity of human life. The wounded, threatened or dead child in his poems represents the loss of innocence, the cruel reality of everything pure ruined by the mundane world. In “Abandoned Church,” the speaker of the poem “pounded on the coffin” and lamented for a son “lost in the arches, one Friday, Day of the Dead.” The grief of the loss is so overwhelming that the speaker has to cry out loud – “My son! My son! My son!” (Maurer, 659). In “Little Stanton,” a fearful and disturbing image of a boy threatened and beaten by “cancer” that ‘springing to life, full of clouds and thermometers’ (Maurer, 689) is depicted. In “Blind Panorama of New York,” the poet talks about “wounded boys” and the “genuine pain” that “doesn’t live in the spirit, / nor in air, nor in our lives, ...” “The genuine pain that keeps everything awake / is a tiny, infinite burn / on the innocent eyes of other systems” (Maurer, 679). Here, the poet claims the most painful thing is to expose the innocent eyes to the living dead of a material world – the loss of innocence. And the dead, buried innocence is crying – In “Sleepless City,” “a boy who was buried this morning cried so much/ they had to call the dogs to quite him” (Maurer, 675). Lorca cries too. He identifies himself with the wounded, threatened, or drowned child in his poems – the lost innocence: in “Double Poems of Lake Eden,” the speaker says, “I want to cry ... the way children cry in the last row of seats – / because I’m not a man, not a poet, not a leaf, / only a wounded pulse that probes the things of the other side”

(Maurer, 685). Lorca is the child neglected by the world in the last row of seats, he is the innocent and pure wounded and buried by the world.

Besides the large amount of space Lorca devoted to death in his poems, he gave more privileges to the dead: the dead, including animals, children, and the harmony with nature, in his poems are more pure, more alive and more powerful than those that are actually alive in the world, such as the wall Street, the nonchalant multitude, etc. Thus in his poems, what is alive turns out to be living a life of death, and what is lost and dead will return more alive than ever. In Lorca's "Dance of Death," the mask symbolizes all that suffer and are suffocated in society – nature and the purity of human life. The dance of the mask will announce their rights over the world: "The mask will dance among columns of blood and numbers, / among hurricanes of gold and the groans of unemployed, / who will howl, in the dead of night, for your dark time" (Maurer, 665). On the other hand, the multitude of the society is living a life of death: "Crowds stagger sleeplessly through the boroughs / as if they had just escaped a shipwreck of blood" (Maurer, 683). Those who are alive in the dead of the city are walking corpses while the dead dancing and coming back to claim their righteousness.

### 3. Conclusion

In his unique way of portraying death and associating meanings to it, Lorca distinguishes two kinds of deaths in his "Poet in New York." One is the death depicted in images of the drowned child, the lost innocence; the other is the death of the city, the cruel, bloody image of a living death. The former is a concept that Lorca lamented and ritualized, a concept he allowed himself to be obsessed with. The latter is a concept Lorca detested and condemned. Both concepts are reflections of his personal plights and tribulations in life and his own experiences in New York.

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