

**Modern Spanish Literature as World Literature with a Special Focus on Lorca's  
*Romencero Gitano***

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**Abstract:**

The world at the turn of the twenty-first century has become a shrinking sphere. Innovative modes of transmission make communication from one continent to another almost instantaneous, encouraging the development of an increasingly global society, heightening the urgency of the need for mutual understanding. It is believed that people's literature are keys to their perspectives, their emotions, their heritage, and the formative events that have brought them to the present condition. World Literature regards both fiction and nonfiction as rich mediums for understanding the traditions of all countries all over the glob. In its view, full understanding of a literary work demands a careful attention to events and attitudes of the period in which any masterpiece has been written and which circumstances, whether social, political, or economic, that helped to crystalize this piece of art. In Spain and by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lorca's (1898-1936) *Romencero Gitano* (1928) (*Gypsy Ballads*) is considered one of the masterpieces of World Literature due to the effect it has implanted inside its readers. Thus, this study attempts to shed light on this piece of art as part of human literary heritage in general and Spanish folklore in particular during the governing of Facist regime at that time.

**Keywords:** World Literature, Lorca, *Romencero Gitano*, Gypsy Ballads, Spain.

## الأدب الإسباني الحديث كأدب عالمي : رومانسيرو جيتانو للوركا أنموذجاً

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### الملخص:

شهد العالم في بداية القرن الواحد والعشرين تغييراً جوهرياً تمثل بتحوّله إلى عالم أو كيان أصغر ، وقد ساعد على هذا التغيير وسائل التواصل الحديثة ، التي جعلت التواصل بين مختلف قارات العالم أمراً يسيراً ، وساعدت كذلك على تحويل هذا العالم الشاسع إلى مجتمع مصغّر يسوده تفهم ثقافة الآخر .

ومن المعروف أنّ أدب الشعوب هو مفتاح التعرف إلى ثقافتها ، وكلّ ما هو متعلّق بها ، لذا فإنّ ظهور ما يعرف بالأدب العالمي الذي يُعنى بدراسة نتاجات الشعوب الأدبية بأجمعها دونما تمييز ، مع توضيح نقاط التشابه والاختلاف بين أدب أمة ما وأخرى ، والتركيز على الظروف التي أحاطت بكلّ نتاج أدبي عالمي ، كونه معبراً صادقاً لما مرّت به هذه الأمة في حقبة معينة جعلته يبدو على هذا النحو .

إنّ واحداً من أهم هذه النتاجات العالمية هو ديوان الشاعر الإسباني (فيديريكو غارسيا لوركا ١٨٩٨-١٩٣٦) ، في مطلع القرن العشرين ، والمعنون بـ(رومانسيرو جيتانو - قصائد العجر الشعبية - ١٩٢٨) ، لما له من إضاءات اجتماعية وفكرية وسياسية على حالة بلده إسبانيا في ذلك الوقت ، في ظلّ حكم النظام الفاشي .

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** الادب العالمي، لوركا ، اسبانيا ، اغاني العجر الشعبية.

## Introduction

The history of Spain has been marked by all types of events, wars, conquests, marriages, deaths, assassinations, etc. by the last years of 19<sup>th</sup> and early years of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Spain became a subject to great dilemma's starting with the "[disaster of 98](#)"(The Spanish-American war, known also "War of Cuba", arose between Spain and the United States in 1898, during the regency of María Cristina, widow of the king [Alfonso XII](#). Spain suffered the loss of the overseas colonies and the end of the formerly powerful Spanish empire). Moreover, the Spanish Civil War broke in 1936 expanding to 1939, as and it ended with the ascent of Francisco Franco as President of Spain and the establishment of another dictatorship, which lasted until 1975. Franco's dictatorship was secured by the political and economic repression of the opposition. Thus, thousands of lives were lost during this period and one of those lives was that of Federico Garcia Lorca's (1898-1936) the talented poet and playwright of Spain during first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Labanyi, 2010: 46-7)

Literature has played an important part in Spanish life. Spanish literature generally refers to any work of literature, [poetry](#), [prose](#), and drama, written in the [Spanish language](#) within the territory that presently constitutes the state of [Spain](#). Its development coincides and frequently intersects with that of three literary traditions from regions within the same territory, particularly Catalan Literature, (Catalan- is a language spoken in three regions of Spain: Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands. It is also spoken in some parts of France and Italy). The second is Galician Literature (Galician refers to a national, cultural and ethno linguistic group whose historic homeland is Galicia, in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula). The third tradition is a more recent and formal one; the Basque literature (which is related to specific region in Spain that is San Millan and in which the standard language is used). In its earliest form, Spanish literature intersects as well with Latin, Jewish, and Arabic literary traditions of the Iberian Peninsula.

The decade of the 1920s in Europe marked the blossoming of artistic experimentation, as reflected in the number of *-isms* that appeared. Although many, such as symbolism and surrealism, began in France, they quickly spread through Spain's artistic and intellectual communities. The appeal of such movements lay in their promise of freedom from the strict limits of nineteenth-century realism. Modernism was rooted in the idea that "traditional" forms of art, literature, religious faith, social organization, and daily life had become outdated; therefore it was essential to sweep them aside. Generally, Spanish Modernism can be classified into

two significant currents: [Parnasianism](#) and [Symbolism](#). The influence of these two movements, which were developed in France since the middle of the 19th century, was very important to the appearance of Modernism in Spain as a reaction against Romanticism and Realism of previous centuries.

The style of the Spanish Modernist literature is a very characteristic one. The Modernists artists choose their words very carefully to produce colorful and musical effects. The use of phonic resources like onomatopoeias and alliterations is quite common, as well as [figures of speech](#) like metaphors, allegories, parallels and synesthesia. Adjectives and exotic, foreign or peculiar sounding words are also used often, and they recover some types of verses used in the past, like the alexandrine verses. Old stanzas are brought back and new ones are created. Most specifically, Poetry is a strong force within Spain with many examples proving the statement. The best example is "the Generation of 27", composed by a series of authors born mostly during the 1890's and who felt a great admiration for Juan Ramón Jiménez, a poet from the Generation of '14. The name comes from the tribute they organized in 1927 for [Góngora](#), marking the third century since his death. The main characteristic of this generation is the search of pure art and artistic experimentation. (Fergusson, 1965: 209-10) The Generation of '27 is responsible for some of the most brilliant works of contemporary literature, especially in the lyrical genre, which was preferred by most of the writers. Although all of these authors had quite different literary careers and did not share much in terms of style, the common characteristic to all of them is the will to integrate the avant-garde with tradition. Some of the authors of this generation are Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Luis Cernuda, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Gerardo Diego and Vicente Aleixandre. (Duran, 5)

### **Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)**

Life can't be understood without death. It took three bullets in the neck to kill Federico García Lorca, but at the same time they gave him life as a poet and a dramatist of worldwide acclaim. The man is considered the unsolved mystery of Spain and its greatest gifted figure. Maybe because the effect Lorca printed on his homeland is very much like the effect printed by Brecht on Germany. But in Lorca's condition, "Spain turned out more bitter, more impregnated with its own character, more closed, more tragic, more obsessive than any other nation" (Alonso, p. 50). This un-extraordinary effect of art, especially poetry, extended to the next years of Lorca's youth. Lorca showed great enthusiasm to learn the Spanish popular ballads, enriching himself with romantic and classical literature, combining it at the same time with a great interest in music. All these influences participated together to create Lorca's

lyrical mind. Henceforth and through the 1920s, Lorca was able to achieve a remarkable success as a poet, especially with the collection of poems entitled *Gypsy Ballads* (1924-27). Through this collection, Lorca started to inspire a whole nation through his presentation of the folk and gypsy traditions which led him to be “the poet of Andalusia and its gypsy subculture.” (“Federico Garcia Lorca”, [www.kirijasto.sci.fi](http://www.kirijasto.sci.fi)). Moreover, Lorca was also known to be a social activist. He along with many artists like Salvador Dali and Juan Ramon Jimenez, the famous Spanish artists, formed “Generation 27”, a sort of an art club aimed at reviving the heritage and culture of Spain. Lorca found in Spanish history folklore as the perfect medium through which he could speak freely of his ideas, criticizing the misconceptions of his society as well as its backwardness compared to other western countries. Lorca wrote little poetry in the last period of his life, declaring in 1936, “Theatre is poetry that rises from the book and becomes human enough to talk and shout, weep and despair.” (“F. G. Lorca”, cited in [www.spanishbooks.com](http://www.spanishbooks.com))

Tragically, Lorca anticipated his own death and the savage way he was executed in 1936, after the break of the Spanish civil war. Accused of being supporters of the popular front, Lorca along with his brother in law were shot by Franco’s fascist militia on August, 19. Lorca was thrown into unmarked grave near his homeland, Granada, ending by this the life of a man, but never ending him as a legend. It is true that Lorca’s life was cut short, but his creative mind is still breathing whenever a poem to be read or a play to be performed, to be the live witness on the unstable life and death of a man and his love to the earth of his unstable nation. (Jones & Jones, p. 3)

The *Romancero Gitano* (The Gypsy Ballads) is the most famous book of poems by [Federico Garcia Lorca](http://www.federicogarcialorca.com), published in 1928. It is considered as a masterpiece in World Literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish works. The Ballad means a form of narrative poetry that presents a single dramatic episodes, which is often tragic or violent. The Ballade typically tells the story of unhappy live affair, domestic tragedies, especially family feuds or murders; popular outlaws and rebels. (Morner & Rausch, 18) These are poems committed to an assertion of Andalusian culture and values, in part as a kind of defiance of the then prevailing tastes, essentially Castilian in their aesthetic, which largely dominated the Spanish literary world. Their imagery is often vividly inventive and unexpected, yet grounded in common experience. The poems celebrate and lament the concrete and the mysterious in a sort elaboration of a language that manages both to be startlingly fresh and obviously in debt to a rich tradition, that of the traditional Spanish ballad and its offshoots. Lorca has succeeded in bringing

Spanish heritage to the world through these poems the matter which made of his Ballads masterpieces of world literature according to the classification of Norwegian Book Club and Norwegian Nobel Institution in 2002.

Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* are made up of 18 ballads revolving around the topic of the gypsy life style, culture and customs. The ballads reflect the pains of the gypsies who live in the margins of society and are constantly persecuted by the authorities, and the fight against them and their repressive laws. Lorca is the poet of the myth, as Don Quixote calls it 'the reason of the no reason'. He describes the conflict between the Gypsy's eagerness to live without social restrictions, and the pressure society brings to bear on him. His freedom implies a return to a basic way of life. This "primitivism" springs from the very core of the earth; an encounter between popular and poetical sentiments. This common feeling is watered by blood: when blood flows it is the essence of life; once it is shed, it is the essence of death. This myth carries surrealist overtones, which came to Lorca through Dalí and Buñuel, at the time, his closest friends. The theme of death also assumes a prominent place in Lorca's lyricism. The poet manipulates his marionettes through a game of passion and death. Of the eighteen poems, thirteen end in pain, disillusion or death. (Lopez-Morillas, 132)

The poems in the *Romancero Gitano* are mainly ballads; all of them are joined by the style and the topics they treat. Thus, those poems can be grouped according to different themes: lyricism and women; women and their dilemmas; the three mythical Archangels; epic and men (divided into extreme situations and the destruction of the Andalusian mythical world); and legends and traditions. (Labanyi, 7-8)

### 1. Lyricism and Women

The first three poems ('Romance de la luna, luna' (Ballads of the Moon! Moon); 'Preciosa y el aire' (the Beautiful and the Air); 'Reyerta' (Brawl) focus on the confrontations between the gypsy world and several different mythical forces: in the first poem with death, represented by the moon; the second between desire and the masculine instinct, represented by the wind; in the third poem the confrontation is against the fights and violence of the gypsies.

### 2- Women and their Dilemmas

The 'Romance Sonámbulo' (Ballad of the Sleepwalker) tells the story of a gypsy smuggler who returns home and finds his wife dead by the despair of waiting for



him; in 'Monja gitana' (Nun Gypsy) the main character is a nun debating between her faith in God and her freedom instincts; 'Casada infiel' (Faithless Wife) is about a married woman who gives up her fidelity, guided by her instincts. In 'Romance de la pena negra' (Ballad of Deep Sorrow), Lorca expresses the tragic feeling of the gypsy life through the deep sadness of Soledad Montoya. Lorca's work challenged the accepted role of women in society and explored taboo issues of homoeroticism and class. (Lopez-Morillas, 134)

### 3- The Three Mythical Archangels

Each of the mythical gypsy Archangels represents an emblematic city in Andalusia: San Miguel represents Granada, San Rafael represents Córdoba, and San Gabriel represents Seville. Their placement answers to a geographic order. The poems are complex and hermetic, with a large number of metaphors.

### 4- Epic and Men

These poems can be divided in two parts:

The first part is composed of 4 poems in which the gypsy character has to face extreme situations. 'Prendimiento de Antoñito el Camborio' (Arrest of Antoñito el Camborio) and 'Muerte de Antoñito el Camborio' (Death of Antoñito el Camborio) talk about the gypsy dignity: a gypsy is humiliated and murdered, victim to the jealousy he provokes among his family due to his great qualities. 'Muerto de amor' (Death of Love) tells the story of the death of a young gypsy who dies of sadness from a broken heart. 'Romance del emplazado' (Ballad of One Doomed) narrates a gypsy's obsession about a predicted omen of death, which ends up being true. The second part is the 'Romance de la Guardia Civil' (Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guards), which shows the destruction of the mythical Andalusian world, always under the menace of mysterious forces that try to destroy it. In this case, this destructive force is symbolized by the [Guardia Civil](#) who enters the village breaking and killing anything and anyone they find. (Duran, 8-9)

### 5- Legends and Traditions

The last three poems deal with three legends with different traditions that Garcia Lorca changes slightly to adapt them to the gypsy world, to reinforce the mythical and universal projection of the gypsies. In 'El Martirio de Santa Olalla' ('The Martyrdom of St. Olalla') Lorca turns back to the Early Christian period to tell the story of a young man persecuted by the Romans, the same thing that happened to the

gypsies with the Guardia Civil. 'Burla a Don Pedro a caballo' ('Outwit Don Pedro on horseback') takes us to the literary world; it's a poem about oblivion and solitude, represented in the lack of love suffered by a knight. 'Thamar y Amnon' (Tamar and Amnon) is based on the Book of Samuel, a biblical story that narrates the love story of an incest relationship between [Thamar and her brother Amnon](#). (Murgia)

As far as the characters are concerned, the *Gypsy Ballads* has many different characters, but they are not the typical characters (by this we mean people) but 'abstract' characters or topics. Technically, they are Allegorical Character: the personification of abstract ideas such as violence, death, love, etc.). Notably, those gypsies are accustomed to clash with those of the conventional world, and this provokes tensions and the shedding of blood. The consequence to this is death, an essential theme of the ballads.

Thus, the gypsy figure in Lorca's works is not folkloric, but a symbol of the Andalusian culture. It represents the social marginalization and the exotic, the natural impulses of men. The Gypsy also represents the archetype of a free man, who fights against repression and social violence. The gypsies represent the great, deep human feelings, and they are subjects to tragic fate. On the other hand, men and women gypsies are presented in very traditional settings: the men are mature, sensible, quiet, protective and very influenced by the customs of their race; there are barely any physical descriptions. The women women are symbols for sensuality and eroticism. They are described in details, physically and psychologically, as marked by their sadness and weakness when facing difficulties, men are their protectors. Sometimes, those women represent abstract ideas. Lorca does not talk about the black sorrow directly but through his character Soledad Montoya. He says:

Soledad of my sorrow, hard-mouthed and untameable,  
in the end you'll reach the sea, and waves will swallow you.

'Don't remind me of the sea, for if you do the black pain  
will unfurl in the land of olives beneath the rumour of leaf-rain.'

Soledad, what hurt you suffer! What great pathetic grief!  
Lemon tears bitter with waiting roll into your mouth.

.....  
Oh the pain of the gypsies! Pain so clean and alone.  
Pain of hidden river-beds and unapproachable dawns.



(Lorca, Romance de la Pena Negra)

**'Romance de la luna, luna' (Ballad of the Moon! Moon)**

The moon came to the forge

With her bustle of spikenards

The child looks, looks.

The child is looking.

In the trembling air

The moon moves her arms

Showing breasts hard as tin

Erotic and pure,

Fly, moon, moon, moon

For if the gypsies come

They'll make rings

And white necklaces

Out of your heart.

Child. Let me dance!

When the gypsies come

They'll find you anvil

With your little eyes closed

Fly moon, moon, moon.

Because I hear their horses.

Child. Leave me alone

And don't touch my starchy whiteness

The horseman draws near

Beating the drum of the plain,

Within the forge child

Has its eyes closed.  
Through the olive groves  
Come gypsies bronzed and dreamy,  
Their heads held high  
And their eyes half closed.  
How the owl hoots!  
How it hoots in the tree tops!  
Through the sky the moon goes  
With a child by the hand.  
Within the forge  
Gypsies weep, crying loudly.  
The air veils her, veils her  
The air is veiling her.

Lorca's "Ballad of the Moon! Moon" establishes the general outline for the Ballads. The moon appears in the smithy (gypsies were often blacksmiths) dressed as a woman, wearing a bustle of white lilies (suggested by the moon's whiteness), and she begins a lascivious dance in front of a little boy left in the shop by his parents. García Lorca renders the spell cast on the boy through rhyme and repetition: "The boy stares and stares at her./ The boy keeps staring hard." Captivated, the boy warns the moon that she must flee before the gypsies return or they will chop her up for necklaces and silver rings, typical gypsy jewelry. The words that he uses to caution the moon are incantatory, "Run away, moon, run away, moon."

The moon, however, refuses to be frightened and answers the boy with her own prediction: When the gypsies come, they will find you on the anvil with your tiny eyes shut. Enthralled, the boy draws near. A rider is heard galloping across the plain, and in the smithy the boy's eyes are shut. The moon gives way to the sound of dry hooves pounding on the ground, which suggests death. The gypsies return through the olive groves, their bronze faces also under the spell of the moon. A barn owl hoots, and through the sky goes the moon, taking a boy by the hand. The boy's body lies inside the smithy, but his spirit has gone with the moon. The gypsies, upon

discovering their loss, commence to wail and shout. Outside, the air, this time a sympathetic element of nature, watches over them.

There are many stories in Greek and Roman mythology of the moon descending to the earth to capture a young man and take him away. The most famous case is the handsome Greek shepherd Endymion, whom the moon goddess found irresistible. Thus, Lorca did create a modern mythology for his gypsies, weaving strands of ancient tales and local Andalusian culture. ( Murgia )

### **Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* as World Literature:**

Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* are actively studied and discussed in many parts of the world as the masterpiece of Modern Spanish literature for the following reasons:

1- This type of National literatures has always enabled writers from different countries to reach out to global audiences, and helping readers around the world to gain a better sense of the world around them.

2- Lorca's *Ballads* introduce new literary worlds that invite the reader to investigate the many and various strategies by which literary texts create worlds: some offer social worlds dense with realistic detail, character relationships, and activity; others create deliberately spare and separate realms, alternatives to any familiar world.

3- The *Ballads* show Lorca's mastery of modern Spanish literature techniques, specifically in his elaboration of Personification and Allegory. He presents the sea as a dancer and, therefore, a possessor of what Lorca so often finds in flamenco artists. Also, the moon, one of the protagonists of the whole of *Gypsy Ballads*, is only half-perceived in a synecdoche of sorts: it is her banks, her edges that begin to be peopled by sounds as she is separated from the reeds that she apparently possesses. The moon is also personified as a woman that lures the hearts of the innocents and thus, it symbolizes temptation, a totally different image from all traditional perspectives.

4- The language used in Lorca's *Ballads* is highly figurative language used artistically to depict the Andalusian heritage and culture and the violence practiced against them. It is precisely the social and political voluptuous complexity that prefigured the Gypsies' tragic destiny in the hands of embodied sternness and cruelty. Thus, these *Ballads* have a tremendous value in registering the impact of historical change in human civilization in Spain.

5- It is in the historical antagonism between the Spanish Gypsies and Spain's Civil Guard that Lorca finds a poetic motive for anguish, death, heroism, and ultimately, myth creation and re-creation which are elaborated as the Ballads' major themes.

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