

The Task

You are to write an essay about García Lorca's *Yerma* that connects the complexity of the symbolism to thematic meaning.

Concept One: Complexity

One of the measures of good writing about literature is the willingness to engage complexity in the text. Like the word *analysis*, there are numerous ways to define *complexity*, but for our purposes we will define the concept not as "hard to understand," but as "intricate" and "containing contradictions." In other words, when you are writing about the complexity of an idea, embrace the contradictions, paradoxical ideas, and reservations the author has about what s/he is describing; resist the urge to oversimplify to make the writing task easier. There are a number of ways to express complexity, but the big idea should be: *While X is true, (seemingly contradictory idea) Y is also true (to some extent).*

You might notice this two part structure also works as a potential essay format with the conclusion showing how: 1) the two ideas are not meant to be resolved (because people and ideas contain inherent contradictions), 2) the two ideas can be resolved by thinking about them in a certain way (that is, both are true under certain conditions or in certain circumstances), or 3) the two ideas were never really contradictory in the first place (that the conflict between the two is more illusionary than real).

Expressed in outline form, this is the Idea/Qualification Structure:

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Idea/Appearance
- III. Idea/Appearance is qualified/contradicted/reversed
- IV. The gap between the two ideas shows something important in the text (from thesis)

You can also insert a short transition paragraph in between II and III that illustrates how the ideas in II seemingly break down upon scrutiny (setting up questions that will be answered in III). My example essay does this.

I spent several class periods talking about *Yerma* in terms of the complexity of its symbolism. Some of you didn't pay much attention, I suppose because you thought you would never be responsible for it. That is thinking like a child-- especially since you should have figured out by now that I don't burn class days just to show off how smart I am.

To remind those who were paying attention, some of the complexities I discussed are the way that dryness is connected to fertility in a relatively straightforward way, but water as a symbol does not behave quite how we'd expect. Similarly, different symbols can have multiple meanings dependent on point-of-view.

Concept Two: Symbolism

A symbol is a concept with significance beyond its obvious and immediate meaning (used to represent something else). This significance can be established using either the logic of metaphor or metonym. Sometimes it can be both, dependent on the context. See the class presentation for more information.

In writing about the symbolism in *Yerma*, you have a few good choices. The big symbols are: 1) the water/lack of water continuum; 2) the heat/fire/cold/ice cluster of ideas; and 3) the house/fields/streets cluster of ideas. Choose one of these to write about.

Do not confuse these with the connotations or associations of the symbols themselves. “Ripening grain” is a symbol that suggests fertility (plants gestate in the ground for several months before harvest; a child grows in the womb for several months before birth), but “fertility” is not itself a symbol.

Depending on whether the symbols are being used as metaphors or metonyms, you will either be explaining how the comparison works or explaining how the associations create an identification between ideas. If you are not doing this, you are not really explaining.

Concept Three: Thematic Meaning

A theme is simply an argument that the text is making. What is the play saying is sterile? What is play saying about gender roles? What is the play saying about desire? What is the play saying about honor? There are other themes developed in the play, but these are the big ones.

You also need to think about how to read the end of the play. If your essay isn’t providing a roadmap about how to read the ambiguous ending, you’re probably not really developing an argument (and instead are just listing ideas). You don’t have to explicitly write about the ending, but doing so is one way to force you to actually commit to an idea.

However, whatever you argue, your last paragraph (the conclusion) should include an extended discussion about theme. See the thematic statements assignment from Semester One if you’re confused about how to do this.

Due Date

The essay is due Tuesday March 26 because I don’t want it due on the week we get back, and I don’t want it due on the same day as a reading quiz. Were it me, though, I would start thinking about it now (choosing a theme, deciding on the way I will implement the Idea/Qualification structure, and finding my evidence). If you turn in the assignment early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by writing two essays (each about a different symbol).

Sample

I have included a sample essay in Supplemental Resources section of the García Lorca readings. You can look at it or not, but if your essay looks nothing like mine (especially in terms of its development), you are screwing up (and probably earning a poor grade).