The Nature of Tragedy in Lorca’s Blood Wedding

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Assignment Guidelines: One 4000 Word Term Paper. Choose your own topic based on one of the works we have studied in the course. In the paper I explore tragedy in Lorca’s Blood Wedding with reference to Aristotle and Freud.
If, after reading Blood Wedding, a reader were asked to define the events of the play in a word, the word would undoubtedly be “tragic.” Indeed, even if the play were not introduced as a “tragedy in three acts and seven scenes” the title alone would naturally lead the reader to expect a tragic outcome. But what is a tragedy? The OED defines tragedy as “a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion,” that is, a tragic conclusion. It is interesting to note that “tragic” is defined as “resembling the action or conclusion of a tragedy; characterized by or involving ‘tragedy’ in real life; calamitous, disastrous, terrible, fatal.” Therefore, when an event in real life, such as a car crash or workplace accident, is called tragic, it is being compared to a type of drama; the word tragic is derivative of the dramatic model, not vice-versa.

To understand why Blood Wedding is a tragedy, we must look to the origins of the dramatic form of tragedy which are most effectively and influentially presented in Aristotle’s Poetics. From there, an examination of the elements of Blood Wedding which are congruous with Aristotle’s classical analysis, along with those elements which contradict or differ from his analysis, should yield a greater understanding of why Blood Wedding is successful as a tragedy and perhaps point to a new form of tragedy fashioned out of the old by Lorca.
To begin, Aristotle summarizes classical tragedy in this way:

Tragedy is [an] imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of artistic adornment...it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents. (Aristotle, Poetics 63)

It is obvious that Blood Wedding is a “complete action” with poetic language presented in dramatic form. I shall discuss whether Blood Wedding imitates a “noble” action “having the proper magnitude” later; the concept of catharsis, as well as hamartia, recognition and reversal, and the notion of a tragic hero will also be detailed later on.

Aristotle claims that “the most important [part of the tragedy] is the arrangement of the incidents; [and]...the most important means of which tragedy exerts an influence upon the soul are parts of the plot” (Poetics 64). It is prudent to begin with an analysis of the plot of Blood Wedding to determine whether the plot is as important to the tragic elements of the play as in a classical tragedy.

For Aristotle, the most important aspects of plot are recognition and reversal; he uses Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex to illustrate and define these terms. “Reversal,” writes Aristotle, is “the change of fortune in the action of the play to the
opposite state of affairs...thus, in the Oedipus the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and to remove his fears in regard to his mother; but...accomplishes the very opposite effect” (Poetics 66). And “Recognition...is a change from ignorance to knowledge, bringing about either a state of friendship or one of hostility” (Poetics 66-7). Aristotle claims that “such a recognition and reversal will evoke pity or fear” (Poetics 67) in the audience and will lead to suffering for the character[s].

There are incidents in Blood Wedding which relate to Aristotle’s definitions. The most obvious incident of reversal exists in the bare bones of the plot. The wedding itself was to be an event of great joy which would bring promise, life, union, and fulfilment—the singers call the Bride a “lucky girl” (Lorca, Blood Wedding 63)—but what actually happens is that “two men are left stiff with their lips turning yellow” (BW 99) and she is left virginal, “without a single man ever having seen himself in the whiteness of [her] breasts” (BW 96). This is certainly a shift to the opposite state of affairs. Likewise, a change from ignorance to knowledge of the state of affairs is experienced by the wedding guests when Death disguised as a Beggar Woman delivers the news about what has happened: “two dead men in the night’s splendour...and the bride returns/ with bloodstains on her skirt and hair...over the golden flower dirty sand” (BW 93-4). The wedding guests are made aware of the misfortune and,
rather than a state of friendship or hostility, the result is a marked sadness among the group regarding the turn of events.

Aristotle claims that, “the most effective recognition is one that occurs together with reversal” (*Poetics* 67). In this sense then, the double murder and virgin bride is a moment of both recognition and reversal at once which leads to “the incident of suffering result[ing] from destructive or painful action” (*Poetics* 67).

While Aristotle’s model of plot can be observed in *Blood Wedding*, I believe that the “influence exerted on the soul” by the tragedy of *Blood Wedding* is not brought about by reversal and recognition, but rather in the way the plot is structured and the implications which stem from that structure. To explain, I cite R.A Zimbardo, who claims in his essay “The Mythic Pattern in *Blood Wedding*”: “The design of the play is tri-partite; its structure rests on the three points that define the arc of life: the promise of birth, the fulfillment of sexuality, and the limitation of death” (Zimbardo). If this is correct, and I believe it is, then the plot of *Blood Wedding* is structured to imitate life more literally than Aristotle could have ever imagined.

“The opening movement,” Zimbardo continues, “is dominated by the tribal theme...it looks toward the union of the Bride and Bridegroom within the communion of nature” (Zimbardo). It is
true that the opening act’s primary plot function is to point towards the wedding, which, within the society in the play, is a ritual promising perpetuation of the life of the tribe: “Do you know what it is to be married child?” the Mother asks the Bride, “A man, some children and a wall two yards thick” (BW 51). This perpetuation of the tribe is the primary method of overcoming the end-point of what Zimbardo has called the “arc of life” which is death of the individual. The tragedy of death can be thwarted in this way by assuring the existence of a continuing generation to follow the old. However, what is required by this is a loss of individual selfhood brought about through assimilation into the collective tribe which seeks to perpetuate itself en masse. We notice that the Bride has no feelings for the Bridegroom, who offers her that promise of perpetuation of the tribe through marriage and children and she desires to follow her individual feelings which most certainly will result in separation from the tribe. So, the Bride’s dilemma is introduced. Zimbardo continues:

The zenith of the arc, the center of the play’s structure, is the wedding feast itself. Here, two men contend for the Bride, a vessel that contains the potentiality both for life and death. The Bridegroom offers her the fulfillment of her tribal destiny, peace and fertility within nature. Leonardo offers separation from the tribe and the fulfillment of her individual destiny, an individuation that contains death. (Zimbardo)
Zimbardo summarizes the situation and the two possible outcomes which can result. It is interesting that, for Leonardo and the Bride, both outcomes must be tragic: if they follow their passion it means individuation and death, and if they do not then they are left without fulfillment and happiness, consumed into a collective existence.

Zimbardo completes his claim: "the last movement which completes the design of the play and the arc it traces is the ritual sacrifices, the triumph of death over life, of winter over summer, of barrenness over fertility" (Zimbardo). It becomes difficult to determine whether Zimbardo’s claims regarding the structure of the plot mirror the agricultural unfolding of life on earth or the structure of a human life. I suspect his claims relate more directly to agriculture as the purpose of his essay is to trace mythic patterns in Blood Wedding a la Frazer’s The Golden Bough. However, I notice one difference at least. In agricultural rhythms there is contained within the “triumph of winter over summer” an inherent promise of an eventual end to the winter with the rebirth of spring, whereas, for the individual human life, death is a final, inevitable triumph which leaves no hope for rebirth. And since the dilemma of Leonardo and the Bride is based around their
desire for individuation, the pattern of a human life is likely being mirrored as well.

In the conclusion of Blood Wedding’s plot, there is evidence that both of these outcomes are exemplified in the play, through the Mother and the Bride. Zimbardo’s mythic pattern is present in the Mother, who, unlike the Bride, remains an un-individuated part of the tribe; she finds consolation in the natural cycle of earth: “what does anything about anything matter to me? Blessed be the wheat stalks because my sons are under them; blessed be the rain because it wets the face of the dead” (BW 97). Life, namely the perpetuation of the tribe which the Mother is a part of, will go on; spring will come; the cycle will continue. For the Bride, who has individuated herself from the tribe by running off with Leonardo, there is no such consolation. Observe her comments: “clean as a new-born little girl...Light the fire. let’s stick our hands in; you, for your son, I for my body. You’ll draw yours out first” (BW 97). Because the Bride remains virginal, there has been no seed planted which may receive the rain and someday grow. The promise of rebirth has ended for her due to her successful separation from the tribe. She is left barren and dead inside; she will not feel the fire because she is already dead to the world: no life flows inside her. She will remain alone, exiled and untouchable by the tribe; she may continue on in “death-in-life” but there
is no promise, no hope, for her. As per the stage directions, “the Bride stays at the door” (BW 97). It is this finality, this total triumph of death over life in the plot which “exerts influence over the soul” of the audience and leads to suffering for the characters.

Based on these findings, it is quite clear that, while the plot is an important aspect of Blood Wedding, it is not the major force that delivers the “tragedy” in the play. For Aristotle, “the soul of tragedy is the plot, and second in importance is character” (Poetics 64). I believe that the “soul” is to be found underneath a mixture of plot and character. It is prudent, then, to assess the similarities and differences between Aristotle’s notion of character and character in Blood Wedding before the real nature of tragedy in Blood Wedding can be realized.

Aristotle’s understanding of character is based very strongly upon the presence of a tragic Hero whose hamartia (tragic flaw) leads to his downfall. In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is the tragic Hero and his tragic flaw is his anger which causes him to unknowingly murder his father’s caravan for shouldering him off the road: “in anger!...I killed them all—every mother’s son!” (Oed. 206) This action of course, sets in motion the tragic events of his life. Aristotle explains the nature of the tragic Hero:
[He should be] a person who is neither perfect in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through vice and depravity, but rather one who succumbs through some miscalculation. He must also be a person who enjoys great reputation and social standing. (Poetics 67-8)

In Blood Wedding, it is difficult to identify a single protagonist of any kind, let alone a character who could be considered a tragic Hero. Carol Dell’Amico observes:

with the exception of Leonardo, the characters are designated according to their societal position or role; hence, there is a Mother, a Father, a Bridegroom, and so forth. This particular practice of naming deindividualizes [Lorca’s] protagonists. They are made to seem less important as individuals than as social beings. (Dell’Amico)

Dell’Amico goes on to suggest, as I have, that this functions to preserve a communal society, a tribe. If we are to use Aristotle’s claims and attempt to identify a tragic Hero, then, with Dell’Amico’s observations, our attention must turn to Leonardo as a named character.

As has been stated, Leonardo’s individuality makes him a prime candidate for a tragic Hero; however, he is certainly not a character of good reputation and I feel that, if it is indeed a tragic flaw for him to run off with the bride, it can hardly be considered a miscalculation. Another interesting point which suggests that he is not a tragic Hero is that he lacks the pathos and ethos necessary for a connection with the audience.
Without this connection, there is no way for his fate to evoke pity and fear in the audience.

In *Oedipus Rex*, a catharsis—the purification of the emotions [pity and fear] by vicarious experience through drama” (OED)—is brought about by the audience’s connection to Oedipus which enables them to empathize with him, to feel bad for him for reasons Aristotle has explained. Based on my own reading experience of *Blood Wedding*, I can identify no character with whom I feel a connection strong enough to provoke catharsis; rather, as I will come to momentarily, I believe it is the play as a whole that evokes emotion. For now, the question remains: if we are unable to read Leonardo as a tragic Hero, then how are we to read him?

Zimbardo offers a valuable insight which he gathers from the lullaby in Act 1, Scene 2:

The ballad of the horse...contains the whole idea of Leonardo, the principle of individuation so crucial to the theme. The horse is wounded by winter, the death of his nature; his hooves and mane are frozen because he will not be reborn in the stream of life. Moreover, we are made to understand why he cannot drink: “deep in his eyes stuck a silvery dagger.” Leonardo, the horse, cannot look outward to the harmonious whole; he can only look inward to the self. The horse must die in his own blood because he will not be reborn in the stream of life. (Zimbardo)
I feel that this is an important observation because it echoes the push for individuation which we saw earlier in the bride, and it introduces the connection between man and animal using a timeless symbol for uncontrollable desire—called “passion” in the play—the horse. This brings me to the final stage of my argument where I will posit the idea that the forces of predilection, that is, the notion of an unavoidable destiny, are present in Blood Wedding as it is in classical tragedies like Oedipus Rex and that that unavoidable destiny, which comes from an internal rather than external force, is what brings about a catharsis and is responsible for the tragic nature of the play.

Fate plays a major part in Oedipus Rex, as, even before he was born, Oedipus was fated by the gods to murder his father and marry his mother. The play, Bernard Knox argues, “is a tremendous reassertion of the traditional religious view that man is ignorant, that knowledge belongs only to the gods” (Oed. intro. 152-3). Knox observes that

the plot of the play consists not of the actions which Oedipus was ‘fated’ to perform, or rather, which were predicted; the plot of the play consists of his discovery that he has already fulfilled the prediction. And this discovery is entirely due to his action. (Oed. intro. 149)

For Knox, this proves that man is free, at least, to discover the truth.
I would like to propose that the presence of fate in Blood Wedding is even more restricting and limiting than the fate decreed by the gods in Oedipus Rex. What we see in Blood Wedding is a world where two of the characters—Leonardo and the Bride—are unable to repress their erotic desire. Thus, they are “fated” by their own natural drives to be exiled from society and destroyed by either that society or those very drives; their individuation is actually caused by the nature of Freudian Eros and is less a triumph of rebellion against a society overtly rigid in its traditions and demands for conformity than it is a tragic example of the fate facing all humankind (from the Freudian perspective): to repress your desire and remain unhappy and unfulfilled, or to give in to that instinct of desire and be unable to exist in society.

Freud theorized that mankind is driven to act primarily by an inherent desire which arises from the need for hunger and sex. He argues that this drive for sex—called Eros after the figure in Greek mythology—is insatiable and is the motivating factor behind all human existence: all actions, feelings, emotions, etc. arise in some way or another out of Eros. If this theory is applied to Blood Wedding, the results are striking. The play is starkly written in poetic language which enables the audience to feel the pure, simple emotions which not only act upon the characters, but force the characters to act. By
applying Freud’s theory, all of those emotions become symptomatic of the sex drive, Eros, resulting from frustration of that insatiable drive. If we are to understand the play through Freudian thought, then the presence of Eros and “his equally immortal adversary Thanatos” (CaiD 82) should be able to account for Leonardo and the Bride’s self-destructive actions. Additionally, the implications of a Freudian reading should explain the disparity between the individual and society in the play and explain why Leonardo and the Bride have failed to conform. I believe that an understanding of this will shine a light on the cathartic possibilities of Blood Wedding.

Eros, as I have said, is the human sex drive which is latently present in all human action; Thanatos, or the death drive, is inseparable from Eros. For Freud, “[Thanatos] rules the world jointly with [Eros]” (CaiD 58). Thanatos stems from a memory trace which every human being possesses. This memory hearkens back to the feeling of oneness with the external world experienced in the womb. It functions thusly: Eros causes a person to search for another person as an object of desire (sexual object) and, since the reality is that the object can go away (by death, infidelity, etc.) the person’s desire is to merge totally and completely with the object attaining that same oneness inherent in the memory trace in order to prevent this loss of the object. Of course, the merger results in death.
Eros and Thanatos are ever-present forces in humanity and Freud concludes that they form the basis of society:

[Eros’s] purpose is to gather together individuals, then families and finally tribes, peoples and nations in one great unity—humanity...however...civilization is opposed by man’s natural aggressive drive, the hostility of each against all and all against each. This aggressive drive is the descendent and principle representative of [Thanatos]. (CaiD 58)

What this opposition of forces means within society I will explain in a moment; for now I want to observe this struggle between Eros and Thanatos as it is present in the relationship between Leonardo and the Bride. Eros and Thanatos are clearly present in the Bride’s comments to Leonardo after they have run off:

The same hands, these that are yours,
But which when they see you would like
To break the blue branches
And sunder the pearl of your veins.
I love you! I love you! But leave me!
For if I were able to kill you
I’d wrap you ’round in a shroud. (BW 87)

Clearly, the Bride identifies herself as Leonardo’s sexual object—her hands are his—and she expresses her love (desire) for him at the same time as she explains how she would kill him if she could. The double-presence of love and aggression fits well into Freud’s theory.
This struggle between opposing forces of sex and death present in Leonardo and the Bride’s relationship also exists within the society of the play. By implication, it must because “the development of civilization...must show us the struggle between Eros and [Thanatos]...as it is played out in the human race. This struggle is the essential content of all life” (CaiD 58). Therefore, society is constructed out of a reaction to these forces—here originates the conflict between society and the individual which I have stressed as a major contributor to the actions taken by Leonardo and the Bride as they individuate themselves from society.

For Freud, civilization is a means of assuring the survival of humankind against a hostile external world by “forming a unified whole out of individual human beings” (CaiD 77). “Communal life,” he continues, “becomes possible only when a majority comes together and presents a united front against every individual” (CaiD 32). Freud pits society against the individual for one reason alone and it is the very reason that Leonardo and the Bride are destroyed and exiled respectively for their attempt at individuation: because “members of the community restrict themselves in their scope for satisfaction; whereas the individual kn[ows] no such restrictions” (CaiD 32). This means that the members of the community are able to sublimate their natural aggression and sex drive in order to co-
exist, an ability that is contradictory to their nature as individuals, in which there is no need for such restriction since the individual mentality is to look out for number one, that is, satisfy his own desires as best he can.

In *Blood Wedding*, the act of societal sublimation of the instincts is evident in the non-individuals of the play. Observe the Mother’s comments in Act 2 scene 2: “Don’t I seem mad to you? Well, it’s the madness of not having shrieked out all my breast needs to. Always in my breast there’s a shriek standing tiptoe that I have to beat down and hold in under my shawls” (*BW* 69). The Mother feels constant aggression in her hatred for the Felix clan, but she is able to suppress her feelings and not act on them because to do so would be against the requirements of society. Likewise, the Father suppresses his aggression and sexual desires by focusing on the need to perpetuate the community in order to defend against the hostile, external world. He wants grandchildren from the marriage between the Bride and the Bridegroom because “there’s a battle to be waged against weeds, the thistles, the big rocks that come from one doesn’t know where” (*BW* 69). Both of these characters are able to suppress their natural instincts and help contribute to the society by not acting on their desires.

Leonardo and the Bride however, are unable to suppress the forces of desire that exist within them. Both characters realize
the potential satisfaction they can experience by yielding over to their desire; they find that the constant sublimation of individual desire results in unbearable dissatisfaction and unhappiness: “to burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves...when things get that deep inside you there isn’t anybody who can change them,” (BW 60) says Leonardo. He has reached a point where he is no longer capable of controlling his desire. The Bride echoes this loss of control in her response: “it’s as though I’d drunk a bottle of anise and fallen asleep wrapped in a quilt of roses. It pulls me along and I know I’m drowning—but I go on down” (BW 60). Both Leonardo and the Bride, having lost their ability to sublimate, are helpless against the power of Eros: they are doomed. The desperate plea of the Servant, who, as the stage directions indicate “seiz[es] Leonardo by the lapels” and shouts, “You’ve got to go right now!” (BW 60) is to no avail. These characters fates were sealed the moment they lost control.

As we know, Leonardo and the Bride meet a sad end after their society-defying elopement. Subsequently, the Bridegroom too individuates himself from the group by acting on his aggression towards Leonardo for the theft of his sexual object, and death also awaits him at the play’s conclusion. I believe that the tragic element of Blood Wedding exists within the nature of human desire, namely, the idea that desire is
inescapable and functions as destiny for all human beings. In Blood Wedding, Lorca presents a situation where the characters can either live as a part of the communal society, which tragically implies that their individual desires must remain forever unsatisfied; or, they can attempt to satisfy these unquenchable flames of desire and find either death or exile from society as a result.

The play evokes pity and fear in me when I realize that the characters are destined to meet a tragic fate no matter what they do. The poignant words of Leonardo to his Bride capture this feeling: “I threw sand in my eyes. But I was riding a horse and the horse went straight to your door” (BW 87). He had no control over his actions in the course of the play. He died as a victim to the nature of things, the natural forces within an ultimately tragic world which must exist for all of us as they do within Blood Wedding.

Oh, it isn’t my fault—
The fault is the earth’s—
And this fragrance that you exhale
From your breasts and your braids.

(BW 87)

That’s the way it goes.


