**Observer**: Laurie Lomask

**Date**: 20 Nov 2013

**Class and level**: SPAN324 - Lorca: Poetry and Plays

**Professor:** (Ladder faculty member of Spanish Department)

**Class size**: 18 students (10 females, 8 males) **Time**: 75 minutes

 This is an upper-level literature class taught entirely in Spanish, based on the poetry and theater of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. The class included a student presentation, a lecture by the professor, and a close-reading based discussion of a poem. There were no secondary texts or images in this class, though in previous classes they had looked at Lorca’s personal drawings from his time in New York. During class the professor stood in front of the group, and students read along in their own editions of the text, taking notes and raising their hands to share ideas. Students participated on a voluntary basis. The class of 18 students (21 in complete attendance) is large for a literature class, and the set-up of the classroom was not conducive to open discussion. Nevertheless, the professor’s passion for and familiarity with the texts, as well as her extensive knowledge about Lorca and the culture of early 20th century Spain, made the class engaging. This class represented an advanced seminar that approached controversial topics in through a flexible, though somewhat traditional, lecture format.

 0-30 min: Class began with a student presentation of the poem, “Oda al santísimo sacramento del altar”. The student recited the poem from memory, standing in front of the class, and then commented on the religious imagery and theme of mystical and sexual desire in the poem. While the student delivered his presentation, the other classmates listened and some wrote notes sparingly. The professor, sitting in a chair among the rest of the class, listened and interjected from time to time, either emphasizing an important observation or correcting a detail regarding the poem’s publication. After the presentation the audience asked questions to the presenter, such as the relation of the poem to music or to other poems they had read. The presenter first answered the questions, but the professor then interjected and answered more extensively. At the end of the presentation she spent almost ten minutes adding her own observations and signaling several key verses in the poem. It was an interesting assignment to make the students memorize the poem, as I do believe memorizing and reciting poetry helps one to feel the rhythm and internalize the poem’s meaning. It is very good for students to practice delivering oral presentations, and the performance of a poem meshed well with the theatricality of Lorca’s work, a central element of the course.

30-40 min: Presentation of the poem “Oda a Walt Whitman” by the professor. She began in a lecture format, speaking from notes, explaining the difficulty critics have had in interpreting this poem and its sensitivity to the history of homosexuality in Catholic Spain. She made the case that there was a burgeoning international interest in queer culture in the early 20th century, and cited many texts related to the theme from countries all over Europe and the Americas. She wrote these titles and authors on the board. She then talked about the specific words that writers and scientists used to talk about homosexuality (such as Gregorio Marañón, “la intersexualidad”). This helped students grasp the broad significance of the language they read in the “Oda”.

40-75 min: Professor reads out loud the poem, though she could have asked for a volunteer from the class to read. She paused every stanza to ask questions (in Spanish) such as, “What is the emphasis here?”, “What was Lorca thinking of with these words?” When students had trouble answering, she directed their attention to specific words for them to gloss or interpret. I thought a few minutes of discussion in pairs would be a good technique to incite students to analyze the poem and prepare their comments before sharing with the class. This would increase student participation and take some emphasis away from the professor. The professor invited students to offer their own interpretations, and guided their attention to controversial ideas and offensive language in the poem, asking them what they thought the poet meant with these words. When students commented or asked questions, the professor was very encouraging, repeating what they said, elaborating or offering other ways to express the idea, and asking them to clarify or extend their ideas. She corrected glaring grammatical errors directly by providing the correct word or syntax. The discussion was lively and students were not shy to talk about such an obtuse poem. However, most of the interaction was between professor and one pupil at a time, and conversation did not open up between pupils, although the professor drew connections among different ideas that were expressed.

75 min: Ending on the observation of one student, the professor said that they would continue discussion of this poem in the next class.

Overall, I was impressed with the way the professor highlighted controversial and sensitive themes - such as sexuality, homosexuality, stereotypes, and blasphemy -- in the poems that the class discussed. She was able to present these topics academically by showing that Lorca participated in a wide intellectual climate, and she insisted on interpretation of the language, not simply reaction to it. I enjoyed the fact that the entire class was dedicated to only two poems, which allowed time to comment very specific passages and generate a nuanced reading. She welcomed everyone’s interpretation, finding value in each one and rejecting none. At the same time, she maintained the high emotional force of the poetry with her own enthusiasm for the text and by varying the dynamic of the class (changing her voice for emphasis, interspersing moments of rapid sharing of ideas with quieter minutes for further reflection, posing open as well as leading questions). It was clear that this professor has set high academic expectations for the group, and that she supported students as they took responsibility for their participation and learning.

Gide, “Corydon”; Forster, *Maurice*; D’Almar, *Pasión y muerte del cura… ;* Hernández Catá, *El angel de Sodoma;* L ‘Ersatz d’amour; *Willy.*