

**BALLAD OF THE
SPANISH CIVIL GUARD:
AN ANALYSIS**



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Description

In this lesson, students will interpret an English version of Federico García Lorca's *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard*, critique the work using a list of guided questions, and analyze how it serves as a social commentary for both the Spain of Lorca's time and of today.

Subjects

English / Language Arts

Grade Level

9-12

Duration

60 minutes

Tour Links

- Huerta de San Vicente, Parque Federico García Lorca, Granada
- Statue of Federico García Lorca, Avenida de la Constitución, Granada
- Parque Federico García Lorca and Fuente Grande, Alfacar, Granada
- Barranco de Víznar, Granada
- Statue of Federico García Lorca, Plaza de Santa Ana, Madrid
- Bust of Federico García Lorca, Santoña, Cantabria

Essential Questions

- Who is Federico García Lorca?
- What is a *gitano* (gypsy)?
- How is the gypsy representative of Andalusian Spain?
- What does García Lorca's *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* represent?
- How does *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* serve as a social commentary for both the Spain of Lorca's time and of today?

Academic Summary

“...el gitano es lo más elevado, lo más profundo, más aristocrático de mi país, lo más representativo de su modo y el que guarda el ascua, la sangre y el alfabeto de la verdad andaluza y universal...” -Federico García Lorca

Federico García Lorca never meant to be the amanuensis of the gypsy, but he certainly continues to be viewed that way, years after his assassination. Author of *Romancero Gitano* (“The Gypsy Ballads”), García Lorca considered the gypsy to be the best representation of the culture of Spain, specifically the Andalusian Spain in which he had been born and raised.

Natural, free and passionate, the *gitanos* (gypsies) could not be repressed by force or moral training. Because of this, they could often be found at odds with ordered society. García Lorca considered this to be the case with Andalusians in general. His response to this? The gypsy ballad, *Romance de la Guardia Civil española*.

One of García Lorca’s most controversial works, *Romance de la Guardia Civil española* dramatically tells the story of a police raid on a gypsy community, including the burning of the city and the murder of its inhabitants. The ballad, however, was never meant to be interpreted in a literal way. Full of symbols, allusions, and references to the human condition, it was García Lorca’s way of providing a social commentary of Spain in his time, which, in his opinion, was at odds with the forces of ordered society.

The problem lied with the ballad’s literal interpretation. On the surface, it appears to be a pointed and accusatory assault on the Spanish Civil Guard. This couldn’t come at a worse time, since the country would be engulfed in a civil war within a decades’ time. Sure enough, at the onset of the Spanish Civil War García Lorca was (or rather, is suspected to have been) shot and killed by Nationalist militia. Was it because of controversial works like *Romance de la Guardia Civil española*? We may never know.

In this lesson, students will interpret an English version of Federico García Lorca’s *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard*, critique the work using a list of guided questions, and analyze how it serves as a social commentary for both the Spain of Lorca’s time and of today.

Objectives

1. Students will interpret an English version of Federico García Lorca’s *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard*.
2. Students will use context clues and dictionaries to identify previously unknown words.
3. Students will critique *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* using a list of guided questions.
4. Students will analyze *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* and how it serves as a social commentary for both the Spain of Lorca’s time and of today.

Materials

- *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* Handout (1 page, double-sided)
- *Guided Questions: Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* Worksheet (2 pages, double-sided)
- English Dictionaries

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set (10 minutes)

- Opening Question: What are some defining characteristics of cultural Spain? If you had to summarize the essence of Spain in one word, what would it be? Think-pair-share (think about the question for 10 seconds, talk about it with a partner for 30 seconds, then share your thoughts with the class). [Answers may relate to: flamenco, bullfighting, festival processions, food (i.e. tapas, paella), passion, religion, tradition, etc.]
- To the poet Federico García Lorca, the essence of Andalusian (southern) Spain was the gypsy. He claimed that, "...el gitano es lo más elevado, lo más profundo, más aristocrático de mi país, lo más representativo de su modo y el que guarda el ascua, la sangre y el alfabeto de la verdad andaluza y universal..." (In English, "The gypsy is the highest, the deepest, the greatest aristocrat of my country; the most representative of her way and what keeps the ember, the blood and the alphabet of Andalusian and universal truth.") Why do you think he said this? What do we already know about the Spanish gypsy, or gitano? Discuss as a class, writing key words on the board. Create a definition together, and have the students write it in their notebooks.

Suggested definition: Originally from the Indian subcontinent, the gypsies entered Europe in the 13th century. They were thought to be from Egypt, and so were called Egyptians (this is where the word "gypsy" comes from). There are now Gypsy populations across the world. One of the most notable is in Andalusian (southern) Spain. Gitanos (gypsies) are often perceived as "real Spain", expressed by the term "España Cañí", which means both "Gypsy Spain" and "Traditional/Folkloric Spain." Gypsy culture has influenced Spanish culture, and vice-versa. Gypsy culture is diverse from group to group, but is usually defined by loyalty to family, the ability to speak Romani, the sense of freedom as a natural condition of a person, and a cohesion as a group. They have an unwritten culture, spoken from generation to generation, making it very vivid and representative of the whole people. They have also been the victim of much persecution, most notably by the Nazis during World War II (responsible for the deaths of up to 1 million Roma).

- Between 1924 and 1927, Federico García Lorca wrote and compiled what would be known as "Romancero gitano" ("The Gypsy Ballads"). Before its publication, Lorca recited the poems in private and public forums. This spoke straight to the heart of the country, being the most direct way to inform others and tell a story. Without intending to, Lorca became the "official" amanuensis (one employed to write from dictation or copy a manuscript) of the gypsy. Today we will be analyzing one of the most controversial poems from the set, "Romance de la guardia civil española" ("Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard").

II. Body of Lesson (40 minutes)

- "Romance de la guardia civil española" is a poem showcasing a brutal conflict between a gypsy community and the Spanish Civil Guard, a police force dedicated to restoring order. The poem is dedicated to Juan Guerrero. This refers to Juan Guerrero Ruiz, the poet and editor of *Verso y Prosa* ("Verse and Prose"). Before the release of "Romancero gitano", Guerrero Ruiz published

“Romance de la luna de los gitanos.” This dedication, perhaps, was Lorca’s way of showing gratitude for it.

- Pass out the full text of *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard*. Read aloud as a class.
Note: Remind students that this is a *romance* (ballad), originally recited to people. It is meant to be read aloud, so do so with emotion!
- Now that everyone has read the poem in its entirety, it is time to do a full analysis of the work. Break the class up into 6 groups. Each group will be assigned a different set of stanzas to analyze:
Group 1: Their horses are black – of abstract pistols
Group 2: Oh, city of the gypsies! – that nightly comes nightly (the second one)
Group 3: Saint Joseph and the Virgin – toward Jerez de la Frontera
Group 4: Oh, city of the gypsies! (the third one) – but a window full of spurs
Group 5: Swept clean of fear, the city – in a vast profile of stone
Group 6: Oh, city of the gypsies! (the fifth one) – a game of sand and the moon
Note: Advise each group to highlight their assigned stanza, in order to prevent confusion.
- Pass out the *Guided Questions: Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard* to each student. Advise each group to mark which questions they should answer:
Group 1: Questions 1-7
Group 2: Questions 8-14
Group 3: Questions 15-21
Group 4: Questions 22-28
Group 5: Questions 29-35
Group 6: Questions 36-42
Note: It would be helpful to show both the assigned stanzas and questions on the board or on a projector.
- Hand out an English dictionary to each set of students. Each group should look up any words they do not already know and write them on a separate sheet of paper. In their groups, students will read their assigned stanzas aloud again, then work together to answer their assigned 7 questions.
Note: An analysis is subjective. Remind students that there is no right or wrong answer, but they should be able to back up all of their answers in a logical way.
- After each group has finished answering their assigned questions, review as a class. Correct any misconceptions. Advise students to fill in the answers from other groups.
- Now that the students better understand the poem, read it aloud again as a class. Have each group pick a representative to read their stanzas, then read them in order. Bonus points for being extra theatrical!

III. Closure (10 minutes)

- Class Discussion: Why do you think this poem was so controversial? Do you believe it was meant to be read literally, or symbolically?
- This poem was never meant to be read literally, but instead with allusions, symbols, and the human condition in mind. It was not written to offend or incriminate anyone. Instead, it shows a fight between a symbol of liberty (the gitanos) and the order of society (the Spanish Civil Guard). Although it is a mythical poem, many believe that Lorca was assassinated because of it. Do you think this is true?
- Homework: Write three-paragraph essay reacting to “Ballad of the Spanish Civil

Guard.” What is the central conflict of the poem? What does it represent? How does it serve as a social commentary for both the Spain of Lorca’s time and of today?

Extension

On tour: Huerta de San Vicente, Granada

The Huerta de San Vicente was the summer home of the García Lorca family from 1926 to 1936. Federico García Lorca wrote some of his most famous works in this house, and spent the last days of his life here before being arrested and assassinated at the start of the Spanish Civil War. Activities are frequently scheduled at the house, organized by the Huerta de San Vicente and the Federico García Lorca Foundation, including exhibits and poetry readings. Explore the house with a partner. What is it about this place that might have inspired García Lorca? How do you think the city of Granada as a whole influenced his “Gypsy Ballads”? In a journal, take notes on how the house and/or Granada make you feel. Pick a quiet area in the park surrounding the house, and write a short poem or story based on this inspiration. Then, have a poetry reading of your own as a group!

Web Links

- www.huertadesanvicente.com/
Official website of Huerta de San Vicente, the summer home of the García Lorca family from 1926 to 1936. Features include quotes from Federico García Lorca, timelines of his life, and a virtual tour of the house. Both Spanish and English versions of the website are available.
- www.patronatogarcialorca.org/
Official website of El Patronato Cultural Federico García Lorca (The Cultural Patronage FGL), the agency that manages Fuente Vaqueros, the birthplace of Federico García Lorca. Site outlines the life of the poet, as well as identifies geographical areas of significance to him. Both Spanish and English versions of the website are available.
- www.museolorcavalderubio.com/
Official website of the Casa Museo Federico García Lorca de Valderrubio, the house of the García Lorca family from 1905 to 1909. Features a description and photos of the house. Both Spanish and English versions of the website are available.
- www.garcia-lorca.org/
Official website of La Fundación Federico García Lorca (The Federico García Lorca Foundation), in Spanish. Features include current mentions of the poet in the news, a timeline of his life, and *Una vida en breve*, a biography of the poet by Christopher Maurer.
- ramonfernandez.revistaperito.com/Introgc.pdf
“Introducción al ‘Romance de la Guardia Civil española’ de Federico García Lorca” (PDF), by Ramón Fernández Palmeral. Spanish text introduces and gives a line-by-line analysis of Lorca’s *Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard*.
- www.bpj.org/PDF/V02N1.pdf#zoom=100
“Gypsy Ballads by Federico García Lorca” (PDF). Trans. Langston Hughes. Ill. John McNee, Jr. Intro. Robert H. Glauber. From the *Beloit Poetry Journal* 2.1, Fall 1951. English versions of Lorca’s “Gypsy Ballads.”

Key Terms

- **ballad** a simple narrative poem of folk origin, composed in short stanzas and adapted for singing
- **castanets** a pair of concave pieces of wood held in the palm of the hand and clicked together, usually to accompany dancing
- **Civil Guard** a military force (in this case in Spain) employed with police duties among civilian populations
- **gitano** (gypsy) Originally from the Indian subcontinent, the gypsies entered Europe in the 13th century. They were thought to be from Egypt, and so were called Egyptians (this is where the word “gypsy” comes from). There are now Gypsy populations across the world. One of the most notable is in Andalusian (southern) Spain. Gitanos (gypsies) are often perceived as “real Spain”, expressed by the term “España Cañí”, which means both “Gypsy Spain” and “Traditional/Folkloric Spain.” Gypsy culture has influenced Spanish culture, and vice-versa. Gypsy culture is diverse from group to group, but is usually defined by loyalty to family, the ability to speak Romani, the sense of freedom as a natural condition of a person, and a cohesion as a group. They have an unwritten culture, spoken from generation to generation, making it very vivid and representative of the whole people. They have also been the victim of much persecution, most notably by the Nazis during World War II (responsible for the deaths of up to 1 million Roma).
- **Jerez de la Frontera** (also called Jerez) a city in southwestern Spain, known for its sherry (wine)

