

Ballads as Vessels for Collective Cultural Memory: A Critical Comparison of Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" and Federico García Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo"

Los romances como receptáculos literarios de la memoria cultural colectiva: una comparación crítica de "The Highwayman", de Alfred Noyes, y "Romance sonámbulo", de Federico García Lorca

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Abstract: Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" (1906) and Federico García Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo" (1928), two early twentieth-century ballad poems, serve as literary vessels for the collective memory of historical periods and share aesthetic and narrative similarities. Common images and colors (red, green) also illustrate both texts. The shared imagery calls attention to the ballads' roles in preserving and transmitting collective memories. This study references the way that ballads stabilize in cultural memory, in line with David Rubin's assessments of memory and literature in *Memory in Oral Traditions* (1995), as well as the studies of other scholars (e.g., Benjamin, Boyd, Connerton).

Keywords: Ballad; memory; twentieth-century poetry; Spain; England.

Summary: Introduction. Path and Sequential Imagery. Specific versus Abstract Objects. Colors as Symbols. Conclusions.

Resumen: "The Highwayman" de Alfred Noyes (1906) y el "Romance sonámbulo" de Federico García Lorca (1928), dos romances de principios del siglo XX, actúan como receptáculos literarios de la memoria colectiva de otras épocas históricas y comparten semejanzas estéticas y

narrativas. Ciertas imágenes comunes y colores (el rojo y el verde) ilustran ambos textos. Las imágenes compartidas ponen de relieve el papel de los romances en la conservación y transmisión de esa memoria colectiva. Siguiendo los estudios de David Rubin sobre el recuerdo y la literatura en *Memory in Oral Traditions* (1995), además de los estudios de otros investigadores (por ej. Benjamin, Boyd, Connerton), este artículo muestra la manera en la que los romances se fijan en la memoria cultural.

Palabras clave: Romance; memoria; poesía del siglo XX; España; Inglaterra.

Sumario: Introducción. El camino y las imágenes secuenciales. Los objetos específicos frente a los objetos abstractos. Los colores como símbolos. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Two famous ballad poems from early twentieth-century England and Spain, both narrating similar traumatic series of events, today encompass the collective memory of specific historical periods. Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" (1906) and Federico García Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo" ["Sleepwalking Ballad"] (1928) have never been critically compared, although several aesthetic and narrative similarities are striking. These two works have prevailed over obscurity from the early twentieth century through the present and retain a firm presence in the popular culture and imaginary of their respective countries and languages. Psychologist David Rubin's studies of human memory in relation to certain poetic texts guide this discussion of how the mind, and specifically the mind's eye, remembers such poems. Other scholars who have written about memory in relation to history and literature, such as Walter Benjamin, Carolyn Boyd, and Paul Connerton, complement the analyses. Strong visual elements in the ballads themselves, in conjunction with repeated public exposure to the texts through education, reprints, and multimedia allusions, have created the basis for a strong collective cultural memory that maintains their importance in contemporary literary and popular circles.

Alfred Noyes (Wolverhampton, England, 1880–1958) was a famous poet-playwright in his era, and he published narrative as well. Noyes was well-liked by the public, though he has not received a great deal of critical attention. An article by Robert Sencourt published just after Noyes's death in 1958 states: "[A]t thirty he was, or looked like, the most popular poet alive in either Britain or America. *The Highwayman* and *Lilacs and Kew* were immense favourites with the people, the former for

the drama which made it effective to recite” (“Alfred Noyes” [1958] 119).¹ In an earlier article, Sencourt writes:

[T]he appeal of Mr. Noyes is through vigour of expression, and poetry’s musical flow. It is to catch at one time the spirit of adventure, at another to delight in tuneful song. The result was that he enjoyed in England a steady popularity . . . while in America a great following has always delighted in the way he combines robust directness of shrewd and sinewy mind with unsophisticated lyric charm, and a delight both in music and colour. (“Alfred Noyes” [1951] 221)

Another review published in 1913 agrees that Noyes is at his best when producing “the wonderful lyrics, the gorgeous descriptions, the splendid narratives, and the patriotic songs of which he is capable,” noting that he should avoid more didactic pursuits (Colby 291, 298, 304). Apart from expressing patriotism in some texts, his poetry does not seem to be politically involved; aesthetics is his strength. Noyes taught English literature in the United States at Princeton for several years in addition to writing (“Poet Noyes”). Some other well-known works by Noyes, among hundreds, are the epic poem *Drake* (1906), the play *Sherwood* (1911; see Alarcão; Potter), and his autobiography, *Two Worlds for Memory* (1953). Later in life, as a result of his second marriage, he converted to Catholicism and added many religion-centered texts to his publication list.

Federico García Lorca (Granada, Spain, 1898–1936) is one of the best-known poet-playwrights of early twentieth-century Spain, especially within the pre-Spanish Civil War context. During his lifetime, Lorca published nine poetry collections and a dozen plays, in addition to other prose publications. Some of his more famous works are the poetry collections *Romancero gitano* (1928) and *Poeta en Nueva York* (1940),² and the plays *Bodas de sangre* (1933) and *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936). Lorca enjoyed fame and popularity; however, his life and literary career were cut short in 1936 when he was killed at the start of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Immediately after the war, his works were censored by Francisco Franco’s government and pro-Falange critics rarely mentioned him, until poet-critics Dámaso Alonso (in 1944) and

¹ “The Highwayman” was first published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1906, and republished in a book, *Forty Singing Seamen and Other Poems*, in 1907.

² Published post-mortem.

Guillermo Díaz-Plaja (in 1948) published important criticism exclusively on Lorca's literature (Wahnón 425–31). According to Sultana Wahón, because of these two pieces of criticism, it is probable that “la recepción de García Lorca adquiriera a partir de 1950 visos de normalización” (431).³ Lorca is known for his participation in the *avant-garde* movement, the incorporation of surrealist characteristics into his writing and drawings, sociocultural commentary, and his deep appreciation for and inclusion of elements of Andalusian culture and folklore in his literary production. He belongs to the Spanish poets' group *la Generación del 27*.

Both “The Highwayman” (1906) and “Romance sonámbulo” (1928) were published eight years prior to the outbreak of two different global conflicts, World War I (1914–1918) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). While the texts themselves do not speak directly of war, both do deal with political and social tensions that later escalated as the wars drew nearer. Specifically, both ballads present soldier-like figures as antagonists to the main character(s). These law-enforcement officers, in contrast with the highly detailed pairs of lovers in each text, are indistinct, faceless representations of authoritarian power. Their forceful and negligent actions reflect how these types of figures can be perceived by the public. Studying collective, or social, memory in post-authoritarian areas such as Spain, Argentina, Chile, and many others has become prevalent in the past few decades. While any nation with an authoritarian past inevitably will remember it communally, collective memory theorist Paul Connerton explains that this memory works against “an era of forced forgetting” imposed by “the new regime” (12). These ballads by Noyes and Lorca are part of the process of active remembering that forms the collective memory of the historical periods that they encompass. In her article, “The Politics of History and Memory in Democratic Spain,” historian Carolyn P. Boyd writes:

Symbolic or mnemonic cultural practices, such as oral traditions, sacred texts, rituals, commemorations, monuments, museums, and archives, create a social memory, or set of narratives about the past, that are typically not based on direct experience but that provide a matrix for individual identities and shape and sustain collective identities. (134)

³ See Sultana Wahnón's article “La recepción de García Lorca en la España de la guerra” for more information and examples.

Thus, the social or collective memories preserved in literary texts can, in certain ways, inform readers of their past, give them a visual impression of an era, and help form or maintain the “collective identities” that Boyd references. Part of what makes “The Highwayman” and “Romance sonámbulo” so significant and influential is their continued popularity over the decades.

These two poems have been in print and (re)translated regularly since their initial publications and have reappeared consistently in elements of popular culture such as advertising, literature, film, art, and music. Noyes wrote of “The Highwayman” in his 1953 autobiography *Two Worlds for Memory*:

During the last half century it has been reprinted in scores of anthologies and several hundred schoolbooks in England and America. Two cantatas have been based upon it It has been broadcast repeatedly during the last ten years in both England and America, and now, nearly half a century after its [publication], it has been elaborated for production in Technicolour . . . and distributed . . . to hundreds of cinema theatres. (38)

He is referring to the 1951 film of the same title directed by Lesley Selander. A few other multimedia examples that recreate or allude to “The Highwayman” include the 1929 recording of Noyes reading the poem (Amazon Music), the 1997 version sung by Loreena McKennitt on her album *The Book of Secrets*, the award-winning 1987 book edition illustrated by Charles Keeping, and the 2016 animated short film created by Oliver Chater, among many others. Davison writes of Noyes’s publications that the most popular among them tend to be narrative and/or have a refrain (Davison and Noyes 249). “The Highwayman” has both a strong storyline and a memorable refrain, lending it longevity among the English poet’s works. Attesting to its relatively recent popularity, “The Highwayman” was listed as number fifteen in the BBC’s 1996 publication *The Nation’s Favourite Poems* (Jones).

With regard to popularity, Beverly DeLong-Tonelli writes: “Probably the most extensively commented ballad in Federico García Lorca’s *Romancero gitano*, the ‘Romance sonámbulo’ has exerted an undiminishing hypnotic power over readers since the days when the poet himself recited it to friends” (289). The poem’s popularity has not decreased with time, as it continuously reappears in allusions and new media. Some eclectic media referring to “Romance sonámbulo” are a

2015 animated short film directed by Theodore Ushev called *The Sleepwalker (Sonámbulo)*, a version sung by Dúo Flamenco from their 2011 album *Verde*, and even a sixty-foot-long, fifteen-foot-high mural titled *Sleepwalking*, painted by Rose Johnson on the Jonquil Motel (Arizona, USA) in 2004. The examples mentioned here are just a few; in reality there may exist many thousands of media that allude directly or intertextually to either Noyes's or Lorca's poem. A simple library or internet search will result in information on an endless variety of referential media associated with either text.

The poems' refrains (which are also their first stanzas) are widely recognized even by non-specialists and serve as additional evidence of their continuous popularity.⁴ Noyes's poem seems to have maintained its fame largely through primary and secondary education, as several studies and instructor resources—even today—still include or refer to it (see Lockwood; Waugh et al.). While he was and is well known among the public, Noyes has not received nearly as much critical attention as Lorca. It is worth noting also that Lorca's ballad has been translated multiple times into English (and other languages), though Noyes's is harder to find in translation.⁵ I propose that the texts' popularity and cultural importance are in large part due to their strong imagery.

The poems are too long to reproduce here in their entirety; however, both plots center on solitary men who are being pursued by law enforcement (soldiers or civil guards) while they are traveling to meet with their lovers, and both couples ultimately die.⁶ On the level of narrative, these poems are melodramas. Remarkably, both ballads begin with famous stanzas that share similar imagery of wind blowing through the trees, a ship on the sea, horses, and other elements of the natural landscapes:

⁴ In the section "Most Frequently Anthologized Authors and Titles" of the 1993 study *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*, Arthur Applebee includes Alfred Noyes as one of 122 authors who appear at least once in the seven anthologies/textbooks of English-language literature that he surveys. Noyes's regular inclusion in high-school curricula in the 1960s–1990s is a strong reason for his poem's current enduring status. Also see anecdotal evidence in Mallon's and Montague's articles.

⁵ See, for one example, "The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes translated into American Sign Language" on *YouTube*.

⁶ My reading that both pairs of lovers ultimately die is controversial, as not all their deaths are confirmed in the narratives.

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
 Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door. (Noyes, lines 1–5)⁷

Verde que te quiero verde.
Verde viento. Verdes ramas.
El barco sobre la mar
y el caballo en la montaña. (García Lorca, lines 1–4)⁸

In order to analyze these texts, I will refer to some of the ways in which ballads stabilize in memory as they have been explored by psychologist David Rubin in his book *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes* (1995), as well as the ideas of other critics of history, memory, and literature. Rubin's study focuses on memory in relation to poems passed on largely through oral tradition (such as ballads), and he explores how and why collective human memory can preserve certain types of oral poems with great success. Although the poems discussed here are static written texts, several of Rubin's concepts apply, especially those pertaining to imagery. Thus, this article analyzes the aspects of these two ballads which contribute to their longevity and memorability, and, therefore, to their standing as vessels for collective memory.

Regarding poems from oral tradition, Rubin asserts that instead of "one specific variant of a song . . . what is being transmitted is the theme of the song, its imagery, its poetics, and some specific details" (7). Expanding upon Rubin's claim, I argue that written ballads can function in a similar way, projecting specific visual images and pieces of verse (e.g., refrains) outwards from the text (and from history), thus promoting the collective memory of the work in general, and of certain important poetic elements in particular. Drawing content primarily from Rubin's chapter "Imagery," the following three sections suggest how specific

⁷ All quotes in this study from "The Highwayman" come from the following source: Alfred Noyes, "The Highwayman," *Forty Singing Seamen and Other Poems*, William Blackwood, 1907, pp. 35–43.

⁸ All quotes in this study from "Romance sonámbulo" come from the following edition: Federico García Lorca, *Poema del Cante Jondo / Romancero gitano*, edited by Allen Josephs and Juan Caballero, 24th ed., Cátedra, 2006.

components of both Lorca's and Noyes's ballads have led to their firm place in the collective memories of their respective languages and cultures. Having already seen some proof of their cultural longevity, we will assess the elements of these poems that make them memorable or recognizable to significantly large audiences. Part of the answer lies in the cognitive psychology of human memory in relation to imagery.

When referring to "imagery," this study considers both the imagery inherent in descriptive literary language and the mental imagery produced by that language in the mind of the reader or listener. Language and imagery are linked in how specific words and phrases evoke visual images. In his essay "A Berlin Chronicle," philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), a contemporary of Noyes and Lorca, relates memory, history, and imagery in a way that is similar to that of Rubin, though it predates the psychologist's work by about six decades:

Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: *the images*, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. (74–75; emphasis added)

In his book, Rubin summarizes studies that have tested, in several different ways, human memory capabilities regarding poetry. He uses the conclusions of these studies to determine which poetic elements promote memorability and which do not. Ultimately, Rubin shows that ballads which are easier to "image" (to visualize mentally), are easier to recall. What Benjamin addresses that Rubin does not is the idea that the images of the past mean something different to the people of a newer era. The significance of these now historical poems in the present will be explored below, with analyses of their imagery. The following sections contain explanations of poetic elements that stimulate memory and recall with examples from "The Highwayman" and "Romance sonámbulo."

1. PATH AND SEQUENTIAL IMAGERY

Early on in his book, Rubin discusses the concept of the visual “path,” and later elaborates upon sequential versus spatial imagery as a related topic (46–47). He details several studies supporting the claim that memory functions better if it has a spatially imageable path to follow, meaning that the narrative action moves regularly from one location to the next. In strikingly similar story trajectories within “The Highwayman” and “Romance sonámbulo,” both outlaw figures travel horseback on a path to meet with their beloveds at a house/inn, and the actions that follow their initial arrivals take place in different areas of the inn, house, or nearby countryside. Rubin writes that “the path uses the spatial component of imagery to compensate for the lack of sequential information in a single image” (47) and that “pathways, often reinforced by the story line, are used to . . . [maintain] the order of information” (50). These statements mean that the narrative of a ballad will be easier to remember if it describes a sequence of events that take place in different locations. That each storyline moves subsequent actions to a new site enhances the narrative path that our imaginations follow. Below are summaries of these two similar tales.

“The Highwayman” begins when the title character rides up to an inn; he speaks with his sweetheart Bess at her window, promising to return soon, then gallops “away to the west” (line 30); the next day the king’s soldiers come “marching up to the old inn-door” (35); they tie up Bess in her bedroom, where she can see “the road that *he* would ride” (40; italics in original); she struggles until her finger reaches the trigger of the musket that the soldiers placed under her breast; the Highwayman then comes riding again towards the inn, but Bess pulls the trigger to warn him away and dies; the Highwayman tries to retreat, but ultimately “they shot him down on the highway” (74). Many readers or listeners of a story tend to mentally envisage and visually order each action, illustrating in their own minds the events of a given narrative text and creating a visual reference to recall it. Rubin’s study shows that the constant movement of characters and the changes in their locations allow us to better recall the sequence of events as narrated.

Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo" is not as narratively concrete as "The Highwayman,"⁹ yet it maintains movement between scenes and characters, panning from one scene to the next almost like a film.¹⁰ The first two scenes illustrate a girl at her banister: "ella sueña en su baranda" (lines 5–8); in the third scene a wounded man comes to the girl's house and speaks with her father,¹¹ asking permission to exchange his possessions for home conveniences: "Compadre, quiero cambiar / mi caballo por su casa, / montura por su espejo, / mi cuchillo por su manta" (25–28). Unfortunately, the father replies negatively, saying "yo ya no soy yo. / Ni mi casa es ya mi casa" (33–34). The wounded man asks to go up to the banister; both men climb as the wind blows; the wounded man asks where the girl is; the father responds: "¡Cuántas veces te esperó!" (69). The next scene shows the gypsy girl dead, floating on the moonlit water in the cistern: "Un carámbano de luna / la sostiene sobre el agua" (77–78). Last, a group of drunk civil guards come knocking on the door. Though all actions take place in or near the house, they occur in changing locations, with enough variation and movement in how they are visualized to create a path. Furthermore, there is a circularity to this particular path, as the poem begins at the door of the house and ends there.

As Rubin has shown through his memory studies, "Paths are easier to learn than random lists . . . [and] the path ensures that items are not easily omitted" (47). Though Lorca's poem is more surreal than Noyes's, both ballads have dynamic, imageable trajectories due to the changing spaces of the scenes, which result in clearly mapped out, easier-to-remember story lines. These memorable visual narratives are a compelling reason for the longevity and popularity of the ballads among their respective audiences. Alongside the dynamic actions in these tales, the storyline within each poem is dramatic and emotionally charged. Storytelling, as Walter Benjamin defines it, is "the art of repeating stories," and in these two poems we see parallel tales that are culturally significant, yet universal in some respects ("Storyteller" 91). Common

⁹ See Beverly DeLong-Tonelli's article, in which she argues that Lorca's poem has no well-defined plot.

¹⁰ It is relevant to this comment on visual effect to note that Lorca wrote a surrealist screenplay called *Viaje a la luna* (1929) soon after publishing the *Romacero gitano* (1928).

¹¹ Others have interpreted this man in other roles (e.g., husband). See Allen's article.

elements such as forbidden love, death/tragedy, and a hero pursued by law enforcement, for example, appear in countless stories worldwide.

2. SPECIFIC VERSUS ABSTRACT OBJECTS

Many verses in Lorca's and Noyes's poems contain specific descriptions of objects, people, movement, colors, or other details that enhance imageability, and therefore memorability, for readers or listeners. There is a wealth of evidence from psychological studies that humans recall specific concepts and objects much better than abstract ones (Rubin 54–56). This may seem self-evident, but it is significant that ballads, as well as other traditionally oral forms of poetry and song, tend to use concrete, specific, bizarre, or colorful objects and descriptions as promoters of memorability. Rubin offers as an example of this claim a comparison of two sentences: 1. "Truth is good," and 2. "The cow kicked the ball" (54). The first sentence gives nothing specific to "image," whereas the vision of a cow kicking a ball contains two specific objects plus the movement of both. It is much easier to "see" this image in the mind's eye; it is also unusual, and therefore easier to recall. "Increasing the concrete, imageable nature of a story will increase the number of specific details and links among ideas that can cue recall," Rubin writes (56). Therefore, the more concrete, specific, exaggerated, or strange an image is, the more likely it is to be memorable (55). Below, some examples are analyzed of specific concrete images which are symbolically important within the ballads. Because both narrative poems are, in their own way, love stories, many details are dedicated to giving visual life to the main characters.

Human features and descriptions are an important facet of the imageable landscapes created by both Noyes and Lorca. The recurring description of Bess in "The Highwayman" portrays her "Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair" (lines 15, 85). In "Romance sonámbulo" the gypsy girl is repeatedly described as having "verde carne, pelo verde" (lines 7, 23, 75). The hair of both women is described in movement. Bess's black hair falls down the side of the balcony: "the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast; / And he kissed its waves in the moonlight" (28–29). The gypsy woman, previously with a "cara fresca, negro pelo," now has green-tinted hair that is floating in the moonlit water (71). The continuous motion of the women's hair lends to the images of them a life-like, cinematic quality.

The detailed descriptions of the women's hair and eyes—"black-eyed" (lines 14, 69, 84) and "ojos de fría plata" (lines 8, 76)—serve to visually define these women and to make them highly imageable characters. As such, readers are more likely to be impacted emotionally upon learning of their deaths, both of which are likely caused by suicide. Bess herself pulls the trigger of a musket aimed at her to warn her lover, the highwayman, away from the soldiers who wish to capture him:

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest;
 They had bound a musket beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast! . . .
 The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at last was hers! . . .
 Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
 The highwayman came riding,
 Riding, riding!
 The red-coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still! . . .
 Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!
 Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
 Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
 Her musket shattered the moonlight,
 Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him—with her death.
(Noyes, lines 41–42, 50, 58–60, 62–65)

While the reason for the gypsy girl's death in "Romancero gitano" is less clear, the succession of events, being cast as a "niña amarga" (line 68), and the declaration that she waited so long, combine to suggest an Ophelia-like probable suicide by drowning. Ultimately, both pairs of lovers suffer the same fates: the women both die by their own hand, and the men are shot (or stabbed) to death. In contrast to Bess and the gypsy girl, however, the males are described with the details of their clothing rather than their bodies. This difference may be seen as problematic in a gender-studies context today. The women are portrayed by and valued for their body parts/bodies, which they themselves choose to destroy. Bess does this in the hope of saving her highwayman; while the gypsy girl has unknown motives, one possible reading is that her despair in waiting for her lover prompted suicide. The tragedy and emotional

impact of the deaths of these visually vibrant young lovers also contributes to their memorability, much like in *Romeo and Juliet*.¹²

The two fugitives—as both main male characters in the ballads might be called because both are pursued by law enforcement—are also described in detail, for the same reasons as their beloved women. With more known details, readers or listeners more easily “image,” sympathize with, and recall these characters. The entire second stanza of Noyes’s poem is dedicated to visualizing the highwayman:

He’d a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky. (lines 6–10)

In addition to a detailed description of his seemingly fashionable clothing, the highwayman’s weapons or tools of the trade are listed; later a whip, stirrups, and rein are also mentioned. According to Rubin’s theory, specific objects and colors enhance the image’s (or character’s) memorability. These concrete details make the character more real and enhance the reader’s empathy for and recall of him. Since the audience empathizes with the more familiar, attractive, and easily “seen” protagonists, it is then easy to set us against the antagonists. Another individual who receives some significant attention in “The Highwayman,” Tim the ostler, is described in detail in order to characterize him as an adversary:

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked;
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay,
But he loved the landlord’s daughter,
The landlord’s red-lipped daughter.
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say—
(lines 16–20)

¹² There are some interesting narrative parallels between “The Highwayman,” “Romance sonámbulo,” and William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, notably the balcony scenes, forbidden romances, and the almost simultaneous deaths of both lovers.

This description demonizes and reduces the intelligence of Tim the ostler, giving the audience a visual target to blame for any negative outcome. His physical appearance portrays the ostler as ill (“peaked”) and irrational, presumably for love of Bess (or jealousy). Contrasting with the description of Bess’s black eyes, Tim has an absence of them—“hollows of madness” (line 18)—whose image further alienates him from the audience. With these visual details, Noyes thus creates a memorable set of main characters who carry forward the action of the narrative. It is Tim, presumably, who tells the soldiers what the highwayman communicates to Bess.

Lorca’s main male outlaw character in “Romance sonámbulo” is also described through his clothing and certain objects associated with his profession. The following verses, unmarked dialogue, signal his first appearance in the poem as he speaks to someone who is likely the gypsy girl’s father:

Compadre, quiero cambiar
 mi caballo por su casa,
 mi montura por su espejo,
 mi cuchillo por su manta.
 Compadre, vengo sangrando,
 desde los puertos de Cabra. (lines 25–30)

Readers can infer a somewhat detailed visualization of this character from his tools and, a few lines later, a description of his clothing: “Trescientas rosas morenas / lleva tu pechera blanca” (lines 41–42). These clues lead the audience to imagine a man in riding clothes, a white shirt, and several bleeding wounds on his torso. Given that he has come, wounded, from Cabra,¹³ it is inferred that he is being pursued by law enforcement. This man’s change of heart is conveyed in the above verses in which he desires to exchange his tools of the trade for the comforts of home. These specific objects are highly imageable, and metaphorically communicate his willingness to abandon his old life for a new one, as if it might save him.

In contrast, “King George’s men”¹⁴ (line 35) in “The Highwayman” and the civil guards in “Romance sonámbulo” are left as non-specific,

¹³ The editors of *Romancero gitano* note that Cabra is an Andalusian town that was famous for its *bandolerismo* in the nineteenth century (236).

¹⁴ Presumably King George III of Great Britain (1738–1820).

largely featureless groups of characters who embody abstract authoritarian violence and hopelessness. Contrasting with the specific imagery making the two pairs of lovers visually concrete and memorable, the abstract groups of authority figures symbolize state-sanctioned oppression and inhumanity. Fear of the “red-coat troop” (Noyes, line 34) or “guardias civiles” (García Lorca, line 81) is amplified because we cannot easily visualize them. Notably, in both ballads the soldiers are or become drunk when they enter into action against the protagonists: “They said no word to the landlord, they drank his ale instead” (Noyes, line 36); “Guardias civiles borrachos / en la puerta golpeaban” (García Lorca, lines 81–82). These faceless groups of soldiers, though not visually detailed, perform important narrative actions and help readers place each ballad in its historical context. Noyes’s ballad likely takes place in the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, while Lorca’s takes place in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

3. COLORS AS SYMBOLS

This section focuses on color as a highly symbolic element within literary imagery, especially in these two ballads. In Rubin’s chapter “Imagery,” he writes that “studies provide evidence for viewing imagery as a ‘picture or movie created in the head’ in which size, distance, color, shape, location, and intermediate steps in the movement of objects all function much as they would in perception” (41). This means that readers mentally imagine colors as we perceive them with our eyes and, with this awareness, we are more likely to attach meaning to them. The most prominent and significant colors in these poems are red and green.

Related to both emotion and oppression, the color red maintains a strong presence in the visual imaginaries of both ballads. In “The Highwayman,” the color red serves as a visual marker for the two main characters and symbolizes the abstract notions of love, violence, and death. The highwayman, with his coat of “claret velvet” and “blood-red” spurs (lines 7, 73), and the landlord’s “red-lipped daughter” (19) Bess are illustrated with red details (in addition to two references to King George’s men as “red-coats” [line 60] or a “red-coat troop” [line 34]). This portrays the characters in “The Highwayman” as more vibrant and imageable, but also marks them for a tragic, violent death, all of which enhances memorability.

The images of the men's blood-soaked wounds in Noyes's and Lorca's poems are described in a surprisingly similar manner. In both images, the blood-red color contrasts with the white of a shirt or a lace collar. Readers can assume from the placement of the wounds in the upper chest and throat regions of the two men that they are likely fatal:

Blood-red were his spurs i' the golden noon; wine-red
 was his velvet coat,
 When they shot him down on the highway,
 Down like a dog on the highway,
 And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch
 of lace at his throat. (Noyes, lines 73–75)

¿No ves la herida que tengo
 Desde el pecho a la garganta?
 Trescientas rosas morenas
 Lleva tu pechera blanca.
 Tu sangre rezuma y huele
 Alrededor de tu faja. (García Lorca, lines 39–44)

Noyes clearly associates the “blood-red” spurs and “wine-red” coat with the highwayman's violent demise, presumably caused by a musket ball, just like the death of his beloved Bess. Lorca's outlaw is already wounded when he arrives at the house, with his injury both literally and poetically described as a wound from his chest to his throat and three hundred dark roses on his white shirt. This fresh wound, which continues to seep blood, is probably fatal, as is that of the highwayman. These men, bleeding to death for trying to reach their lovers, become martyr-like, tragic figures who die or are dying for love.

Bess, the landlord's daughter, is described in red both to highlight her youth, beauty, and optimism for love as well as to suggest the impending violence against herself and her lover. Some early descriptive images of her include: “Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair” (Noyes, line 15) and “The landlord's red-lipped daughter” (19). The color red characterizes this woman in life and foreshadows a violent death. Bess's life, like that of the highwayman, also ends covered in red: “He [the highwayman] turned; he spurred to the Westward; he did not know who stood / Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own red blood!” (66–67). The visual link between the red color of blood and the “red-coats” (60) reinforces the soldiers' propensity to

commit violence or otherwise prompt violent events to occur. Their uniforms visually indicate their ominous role in this tale.

In “Romance sonámbulo” the image of the gypsy girl, bathed in the green light of the moon, embodies a color that has come to symbolize this poem and book of poems (*Romancero gitano*). The famous refrain, again, shows a monochromatic landscape:

Verde que te quiero verde.
Verde viento. Verdes ramas.
El barco sobre la mar
y el caballo en la montaña. (lines 1–4, 83–86)

The poem has gained so much symbolic power within the realm of Spanish literature and popular culture that, in many cases, just the word *verde* can conjure up the imagery and refrain of this specific poem. Of the color green in “Romance sonámbulo,” Beverly DeLong-Tonelli writes:

[T]he color which pervades the entire poem . . . ultimately will prove to be of overwhelming structural import in its twenty-three appearances In this case, the listener is confronted with a chromatic symbol which elicits a multiplicity of conceptual responses: a reference to nature encompassed in well-ordered boundaries of sea and mountain and populated by objects appropriate to their location; an inevitable allusion to the youth-fertility-death cycle traditionally symbolized by green; and a more modern suggestion of dream and the illusory reality of the surrealists, so devoted to the use of iridescent lunar colors to evoke hidden consciousness. (289–90)

In his article, Rupert Allen explains “green as a *chthonic symbol*” (345), referring to Lorca’s inclination to explore or portray the connections between living beings, death, putrefaction, and their return to the earth. He elaborates:

Green, it is true, is the color of growing plants, the color of foliage. But equally important, it is the color of decomposed flesh. ‘Bad’ flesh appears as green, whether in a bruise, a gangrenous member, or in a rotting corpse. Within the chthonic cycle green appears as life at the vegetative stage, but as death when it reaches the stage of human or animal flesh. (347)

Though it can be and has been read in many ways, the symbolic color green does indeed appear to represent and foreshadow, in this poem, the death of the gypsy girl and that of the man who seeks her. The green tinge to her skin, described both at the beginning and end of the poem, and the coldness of her eyes leave little doubt about her state: “Verde carne, pelo verde, / con ojos de fría plata” (García Lorca, lines 7–8, 75–76). The multifaceted, symbolic power of green overpowers (and colors) the other objects visible in the poetic landscape of “Romance sonámbulo,” lending the ballad its nocturnal atmosphere. As such, we have a poem whose color encompasses the action, making all objects and movement uniquely imageable and therefore highly memorable.

As seen in the descriptions above, specific images and prominent colors, such as red and green, illustrate both texts. The shared imagery and repeated references to certain colors call attention to these ballads’ cultural roles in preserving and transmitting traumatic memories from the past to the present. Red, with its multilayered meanings (blood, beauty/youth, love, violence, death), in these cases is a strong visual marker that fixes characters and narrative violence in the collective cultural memory. Green, as mentioned previously, has become an iconic color related to “Romance sonámbulo,” of Lorca’s poetic work as a whole, and of the spirit of the story that he tells. These details and colors reach out from the texts in a cinematic way and fix themselves in cultural memory with their specific and vividly colored images.¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The above sections illustrate the idea that, in Noyes’s and Lorca’s ballads, the important, memorable elements are the imagery, storylines, certain repeated verses, and a few other key details (Rubin 7). The imageable path that each follows, the specific features of and objects that we visualize with the characters, and dominant symbolic colors are important visual elements that help audiences remember these narrative poems. The diffusion of Lorca’s and Noyes’s ballads is evident in the multitude of media that both have produced and continue to produce. This dissemination is made possible in part by the memorable elements of the texts, notably their strong imageable scenes and storylines, that

¹⁵ For cultural history studies of the colors red and green, see Michel Pastoureau’s books on these colors (and others), cited in the References.

urge people to recreate in new media all or part of each poem. As Walter Benjamin writes regarding storytelling:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (“Storyteller” 90)

In addition to being memorable and remembered for roughly a century each through the present, these poems document government-sanctioned violence and the resulting sociocultural trauma experienced by rural or marginalized populations in eighteenth-century England and late nineteenth to early twentieth-century Spain. “The Highwayman” refers to “King George’s men” as the perpetrators of violence (this does not seem to have caused any political stir when it was published); several of Lorca’s poems in the book *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*), including “Romance sonámbulo,” refer to violence enacted by the Spanish Civil Guard against the gypsies,¹⁶ a historically and currently marginalized population in Spain.¹⁷ Both poets have composed ballads that are not only visually appealing and narratively enduring, but that make social statements opposing authoritarian violence against the background of tragic love stories. The movement of the action, specific imageable details and colors, and concrete images of the main characters allow readers and listeners to recall and even sympathize with those who are persecuted, even if they are outlaws.

In turn, the audience is conditioned to question the actions of the authority figures, as they are characterized as drunk without being assigned any personal visual details with which the audience can identify or sympathize. Moreover, their exact motives for seeking the protagonist men are unknown. Thus, these soldiers or guards are remembered as faceless, abusive characters to be feared. Rubin’s explanation of the

¹⁶ Other poems from the *Romancero gitano* that refer to the Spanish Civil Guard (*la guardia civil*) or to soldiers in general include “Reyerta,” “Prendimiento de Antoñito el camborio en el camino de Sevilla,” “Muerte de Antoñito el camborio,” “Romance de la guardia civil española,” and “Martirio de Santa Olalla.”

¹⁷ See the following article for more information on contemporary attitudes in Spain towards the gypsy populations: “The Role of Values in Attitudes towards Violence: Discrimination against Moroccans and Romanian Gypsies in Spain” by José Luis Álvaro et al.

cognitive psychology of human memory shows that readers and audiences remember ballads well through their imagery, lending them and their messages longevity. The endurance of such popular narratives (whether in poetry, prose, or another format) then colors contemporary consumers' view of state-controlled authority figures, perhaps sowing distrust or wariness of them in future eras. As Connerton writes of collective or social memory: “. . . our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past” (2). Seeing the past through a narrative lens is a tool that is widely used to visualize history.

The function of literature as a tool for social (and political) commentary is doubtless another reason for the continuing popularity of Alfred Noyes's “The Highwayman” and especially Federico García Lorca's “Romance sonámbulo.” Lorca tragically died at the very hands of the nameless authoritarian troops that he describes in *Romancero gitano*. According to Franco-era government documents released a few years ago (c. 2015; Kassam): “[Los] motivos por los que se cree que fusilaron a Federico García Lorca se pueden leer en un informe de 1965 procedente de la Jefatura Superior de Policía de Granada. En el informe definen al poeta como ‘socialista y masón’ y le atribuyen ‘prácticas de homosexualismo’” (“Asesinado”). In his chapter “Lorca's Deathly Poetics,” Robert Reid-Pharr writes:

The intolerance of Catholicism, the sequestration of women, the oppression and ‘naming’ of homosexuals, the vulgarity of capitalism, the bloodletting of the Spanish Guardia Civil, and importantly the denaturing of the artist's talents, the clipping of his wings, were for the martyred writer not only the social realities in which one might find oneself enmeshed, but also the defining configurations of modern intellectual and artistic practice. (78)

“Romance sonámbulo,” being a product of and about its time, reflects a painful reality for many marginalized populations living during the first decades of the twentieth century. Lorca himself expressed solidarity with these groups; as he is quoted in Wahnón: “Yo creo que el ser de Granada me inclina a la comprensión simpática de lo perseguido, del gitano, del judío, del negro . . . del morisco que todos llevamos dentro” (413).¹⁸ Of course, Spain is only one nation of many where

¹⁸ Sultana Wahnón notes that this quote was originally published as part of an interview, “Estampa de García Lorca,” in *La Gaceta Literaria* (15 Jan. 1931), and later reprinted

oppression was built into culture and politics not so long ago. It is vital that literature and artistic works such as Noyes's and Lorca's ballads, as well as countless other texts produced as results of authoritarian abuse, continue to be read, recited, and remembered by significant audiences in the present. Preserving historical narratives allows the public to access and remember past wrongs and, hopefully, to endeavor not to repeat them in the present.

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