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Symbolism of the Sea in Antonio Machado's "Proverbios y Cantares"

The ocean has always been a beacon to wanderers and artists alike. It is often the muse of painters and photographers, but it is also a theme that lends itself to most poetic situations, symbolizing everything from life to femininity. This is exemplified in Antonio Machado's "Proverbios y Cantares" from his 1912 book *Campos de Castilla*, particularly in the poems numbered 28, 29, 44, 45, and 47. Each of these five poems contain the sea which acts as a symbol and aids the poem in painting a more thorough picture of Machado's intentions. Understanding the possible meanings of the oceanic symbolism in his work is imperative to the overall impact of these five poems.

Campos de Castilla was published in 1912, then republished in 1917, and included a variety of poems written from 1907-1917 (Machado). The "Proverbios y Cantares" are starkly different from most of the poems in the book, as they take on a very unique, folk-like form. They are a collection of short but profound poems that are told from the perspective of the common man. "Proverbios y Cantares" loosely translates to "proverbs and folksongs," which are both things that make up folklore and folk culture. A proverb follows tradition and is generally simple enough to be passed down through generations in the form of a metaphor. They usually impart some kind of wisdom or truth that is based on the universal human experience. A folksong, much like a proverb, is something that is shared between the common people, and tends to exclude the elite of society. They are adaptable to the popular culture and typically organized as a rather brief

poetic musical composition. The “Proverbios y Cantares” of Machado’s *Campos de Castilla* are perfect examples of this.

Many of the themes and patterns found in *Campos de Castilla* can be seen in the life of Antonio Machado. Before he was to become one of the greatest Spanish authors of all time, he was born in 1875 in a rural area near Sevilla in Andalucía, the southern region of Spain where he spent much of his youth (Machado 35). During those two decades of living in the countryside, Machado learned a lot from his father, Antonio Machado Álvarez, who was a specialist in Andalusian folklore and spent most of his life studying it and attempting to raise awareness of its importance (Gibson). His father’s passion for folklore and tradition was easily imparted to his son.

Then, in 1883, Machado’s family moved to Madrid and he attended a very special school called Institución Libre de Enseñanza. This school was extraordinary because of its educational philosophy which welcomed teacher-student conversation and encouraged the teaching of values such as the importance and beauty of nature, honesty, equality, and literature (TheBiography). The impact that this school and Machado Álvarez had on Antonio Machado’s early writing are undeniable. The Cervantes Institution writes, “the intellectual environment of his early years [is] marked first by the figure of his father, a student of Andalusian folklore, and later by the spirit of the Free Institution of Education”

Antonio Machado later became a professor of French in Soria, a location which provided even more inspiration for *Campos de Castilla* (TheBiography). This was also where he met his wife Leonor who died shortly after the publication of said book. Machado eventually republished *Campos de Castilla* with the addition of poems which mourned her death (TheBiography).

Machado moved away from Soria after Leonor's death, but continued writing. He is notorious for his leadership and active participation in a Spanish group of authors who were known as the Generation of 1898, and his membership status in the Royal Spanish Academy of Language, to which he was elected in 1927 (TheBiography). Machado's support of the republic, democracy itself, and a society without nobility also played a part in influencing his writing of folk pieces and work for the common man. Sadly, his political voice was heard all too clearly before and during the civil war in Spain which lead to him being forced into exile in France where he died very soon after his arrival (Gibson). Machado's dedication to his beliefs was integral in his creation of works like "Campos de Castilla" because this dedication shaped the attitude of the book towards political and societal issues.

The five poems selected from "Proverbios y Cantares" are all drawn together by a specific contextual symbol, the repetition of the idea of the sea. Seda Ariken writes, in her article *Salvation or Catastrophe: Symbolism of Water in Literature*, "water appears as one of the leading symbols in oral and written literature since the beginning of history. As a must-have life source, water penetrates into literary works with a variety of symbolism. The theme and symbolism of water are mainly related to the ideas of catharsis, cleansing, life and re-birth" (1). The following five poems all include similar meanings for their aquatic symbols, but different implications.

The first poem of those chosen to be analyzed is number twenty-eight in the "Proverbios y Cantares":

Every man in the world
Has two battles to make:
In dreams he struggles with God

And with the sea, when he's awake. (Machado 154)ⁱ

This proverb is about the never-ending curse that is the plague of human thought. The poem indicates that the trials of life are never over, even when man seems to be at peace. Here, the sea is a metaphor for these trials and hardships. With the tides perpetually coming in and out, the sea can never find a permanent peace, there is always another storm on the horizon. Mankind struggles with the sea when he is awake because the sea in this selection is a symbol of that which must be overcome in this life in order to find success. It is also a symbol which indicates that the battle of life is never really over. As long as men wake, they will fight.

The second selected poem is number twenty-nine, one of the most well-known of the collection:

Your own footprints, traveler, mark the path;
 there's nothing else to show the way.
 Only the footmarks that you leave
 on your life's journey day by day.
 As you travel you mark the path
 and when you turn around
 you see the path you make once in your life,
 which you can never tread anew.
 Traveler, what you think beaten paths,
 are ships' wakes on the surface of the sea. (Machado 154)ⁱⁱ

This poem details the intricacies of life's journey and highlights the concept of individualism. It is a beautifully short poem about the importance of finding one's own way in the world and not focusing on the paths of others. It speaks to a traveler and reminds them that

the only path that matters is the one that they make on their own and the only time that they should look back is in reflection. In the academic journal article entitled *Two Styles of Mental Functioning and Literary Language: A Phenomenological Psychological Reading of A. Machado and C. Cavafy. A Tribute to Zena Helman*, Latife Yazigi writes “Existence is sung by Machado in a harmonious march cadence. The repetition punctuates the flow. We are touched by the modulation and evolution of the poem that invite us to accompany the wayfarer’s steps in ‘making roads’” (319-320). The image of the sea in this selection lends itself to be interpreted as a metaphor for impermanence. The ocean on which these boats of life are leaving wakes is ever changing and constantly moving, much like the lives that sail upon it. This lack of consistency is what the sea itself is symbolizing.

The next poem containing oceanic symbolism is number forty-four, a shorter and more direct proverb:

Everything passes and yet remains,
 but our daily task
 is to be forever tracing pathways
 on the surface of the sea. (Machado 158)ⁱⁱⁱ

This proverb brings into question a common nagging thought: whether or not there is a purpose or meaning to life. The poem suggests that while time ticks on, things move and change, but the whole remains the same. This means that while humans are troubled with tasks that we find so vastly important, time still passes at the same rate and our effect on the grand scheme of life is almost meaningless. The imagery of wake trails on the water, as it was first introduced in number twenty-nine, yields a slightly different meaning here. Above, the sea symbolized a lack of permanence, here it is a lack of worth or importance. Like that of work that was completed on

a chalk board right before it is erased. One can work to put the art back on the chalkboard, but it will soon be erased again.

The fourth poem is number forty-five, a poem that proposes an overtly existential query to the reader:

To die ... Is it to fall like a drop of water into the limitless sea?

Or is it to be something different:

a person, without shadow or dream,

a solitary figure roaming a random path unseen? (Machado 158)^{iv}

The question offered in this proverb is one that has been asked since the beginning of human consciousness. What happens when we die? This existential curiosity has haunted mankind for millennia, and there doesn't seem to be a definitive answer on the horizon. Here, the sea seems to be a metaphor for the destruction of individuality. Once it has collided with the sea, each drop is indistinguishable from the rest of them, but it still contributed and that cannot be undone. The sea would not be the same without every drop, but no drop could be exclusively harvested from the body again.

The final poem of this selection is number forty-seven, possibly the most perplexing of the group:

There are four things in the world

of no use in the sea:

anchor, rudder and oars

and fear of ceasing to be. (Machado 158)^v

This poem is, at first, very confusing, as it seems to contradict prior knowledge of what it takes to captain a ship. However, it is important to criticize this poem with the understanding that

the sea is a metaphor for life and all of the difficulties that come along with it. This poem is about the quelling of existential dread. An anchor is used to stop a ship, and this is of no use on the sea of life because it is necessary that a sailor continues forward. Moreover, like proverb number twenty-nine indicates, there is no direct or proper course, one must simply make their own way in the sea of life – this negates the need for a steering rudder or paddling oars. This leaves the last item Machado warns the reader of its lack of use: fear of ceasing to be. The reason for a lack of an anchor is to keep the boat moving at all times, having a deep fear of ceasing to be is pointless when sailing without an anchor because there is nothing to stop you on your path except for events outside of your control. The point of this is that sailing through life's sea should be second nature to a sailor without fear of sinking.

Each of these poems have their own take on life and its many facets. Poem 28 is about life's curse and the pain of always having to fight through life, whether it be physically or mentally. Poem 29 is about life's journey and finding oneself. It reminds the reader not to get caught up in the actions of others and the impermeant aspects of this world while prompting them to follow their own path to their own destinations. Poem 44 is about finding life's purpose and how it isn't changed by miniscule actions. Then, poem 45 brings the reader into existential curiosity, asking the reader to consider the options that could be presented when a person dies. This poem also explores the destruction of individuality by offering the idea that people are just drops of water in a larger body. Lastly, poem 47 is about suppressing the existential dread introduced in poem 45. It shows the reader that the equipment which one would expect to be vital to life is not as fundamental as previously imagined. It reaffirms Machado's assertion that life is not something which humans control, merely something they experience.

Antonio Machado's "Proverbios y Cantares" are true folk works, each poem describes a communal theme that expresses an innate truth and speaks to the common man. These poems reveal Machado's ties to his early education and the synthesis of his liberal education at Institución Libre de Enseñanza with his father's teachings. It is a common trait of proverbial wisdom to bring themes and subjects to the works that are familiar to all. The sea in these poems is only one example of the simple motifs found repetitively in Machado's *Campos de Castilla* which accomplish this familiarity.

The symbol of water in art and literature is subjective and vast, much like any artistic theme. Additionally, every reader's interpretation and opinion about an artwork is just as valid as the next. In her book *Antonio Machado*, Alice McVan writes "the sea as his wonderful and all-encompassing symbol, charged with multitudes of meanings ... came to signify God, hope, life, death, and all things intangible" (qtd. in Schwartz 1). Her analysis of Machado's sea brought her to a similar conclusion, the sea is a versatile and deeply philosophical symbol that can be interpreted many different ways. Each of the five poems above included the sea as a symbol for some aspect of life and the human experience. The understanding of the conceivable meanings of the oceanic symbolism in Machado's "Proverbios y Cantares" and the consideration of Machado's early life drastically alter the overall impression of the poems. After analyzing these poems and the life of Antonio Machado, it is clear that the symbol of the sea can be interpreted to be deeply connected to life itself and how the people who live it manage to thrive, persevere, and keep sailing.

ⁱ Todo hombre tiene dos batallas que pelear. En sueños lucha con Dios; y despierto, con el mar.

Machado, Antonio. *Campos de Castilla* (Spanish Edition). Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Caminante, son tus huellas el camino, y nada más; caminante, no hay camino: se hace camino al andar. Al andar se hace camino, y al volver la vista atrás se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar. Caminante, no hay camino, sino estelas en la mar.

Machado, Antonio. *Campos de Castilla* (Spanish Edition). Kindle Edition.

iii Todo pasa y todo queda; pero lo nuestro es pasar, pasar haciendo caminos, caminos sobre la mar.

Machado, Antonio. *Campos de Castilla* (Spanish Edition). Kindle Edition.

iv Morir... ¿Caer como gota de mar en el mar inmenso? ¿O ser lo que nunca he sido: uno, sin sombra y sin sueño, un solitario que Avanza sin camino y sin espejo?

Machado, Antonio. *Campos de Castilla* (Spanish Edition). Kindle Edition.

v Cuatro cosas tiene el hombre que no sirven en la mar: ancla, gobernalle y remos, y miedo de naufragar.

Machado, Antonio. *Campos de Castilla* (Spanish Edition). Kindle Edition.

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