

The House of Bernarda Alba

Federico García Lorca



Study Guide

Prepared by The Classic Theatre of San Antonio
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Synopsis of the Play

The House of Bernarda Alba
drama of women in the villages of Spain

The play was completed in 1936, two months before the death of the author.

The action takes place in the home of Bernarda Alba after the funeral of her second husband. Bernarda has recently announced to her five daughters that there will be a mourning period of eight years, during which they must stay in the house and do needlework. Her daughters, between the ages of 21 and 40, have spent their lives being controlled by Bernarda Alba and are prohibited from any relationships. Because of this latest announcement of the mourning period, tensions are very high at the beginning of the play.

The first scene opens to a kitchen maid and Bernarda's servant discussing the recent funeral and the difficulty of living under the roof of Bernarda Alba. Next, a group of mourners passes through as the daughters and Bernarda enter. Bernarda accuses Angustias, the oldest daughter, of listening to the conversation of the men outside, something that is strictly forbidden. Angustias, the only daughter of Bernarda's first husband, has inherited money from her father. She has also inherited an equal share of the money from the death of Bernarda's second husband, making her the only sister with significant wealth. This newfound wealth has attracted attention and Angustias intends to become engaged to Pepe el Romano. Pepe is fourteen years younger than Angustias and the most handsome man in town. The other sisters are very jealous and angry that their older sister may escape the house with her wealth.

The youngest sister Adela, appears wearing a green dress, in spite of the rules for mourning and appears happy and lighthearted. She reacts with disbelief at the news of the impending marriage of Angustias and Pepe. Poncia, the house maid, realizes that Adela is in love with Pepe and encourages her to wait until the marriage takes place because her sister is likely to die during the birth of her first child. Adela threatens to run into the streets in the green dress but her sisters stop her. When Pepe el Romano is heard coming up the street, the sisters rush to get a look at him. The maid suggests to Adela that she get a peek of him from her bedroom window upstairs.

Bernarda finds Angustias wearing make-up and a purple dress. She forcefully removes the make-up until the other sisters arrive to see what the commotion is about. Maria Josefa (Bernarda's elderly mother) arrives, having escaped from her locked bedroom where she is kept a virtual prisoner. She announces that she wants to leave the house to get married. She also tells Bernarda that if she doesn't allow her daughters

more freedom, their hearts will be turned to dust. Bernarda forces her mother back into the locked bedroom.

Even though Pepe el Romano is engaged to Angustias, he has secretly been having an affair with Adela. The affair has given Adela new confidence and she becomes increasingly disobedient with her mother and defiant with her sisters. Martirio, another daughter of Bernarda, begins to fight openly with Adela because she is also in love with Pepe el Romano. While the women are sewing, Angustias realizes that someone has stolen her photo of Pepe. While Adela seems the obvious culprit, it is discovered that Martirio was the one who stole the photograph. Poncia warns Bernarda Alba that her daughters cannot survive without some freedom and suggests that perhaps Pepe should marry Adela. Bernarda will not hear of it. Outside, a commotion breaks out in the streets when an unmarried woman is being dragged by an angry crowd after killing her newborn baby. Adela is horrified to hear her mother yell, "Kill her!"

Bernarda gives Angustias advice on her impending marriage, telling her not to ask Pepe too many questions about why he is distracted. She informs her daughter that a proper wife puts up a good front, no matter what. Later, Poncia warns Bernarda that there is more to life than simply having everything look calm on the outside, but again, Bernarda refuses to listen. The kitchen servant and Poncia express concern that something bad is going to happen with Adela and her affair with Pepe. The servant

declares that the family is bad but Poncia disagrees and states that this is simply what happens when women do not have men.



Adela sneaks outside to meet with Pepe, and returns covered with straw from the barn. Martirio discovers her and the ensuing argument alerts Bernarda. When Bernarda learns that Adela has been secretly meeting Pepe, she is outraged and goes to find him with a gun in her hand. A shot is heard in the distance. Martirio tells the group that Pepe el Romano is dead even though she knows that Bernarda missed him and that he escaped. Upon hearing the news, Adela leaves the room and hangs herself. When she is discovered, Bernarda cares only about the honor of the family name and declares that the girl be dressed immediately as a virgin. The play ends

with Bernarda demanding that no tears will be shed and the word, "Silence"!

Characters

Bernarda Alba

A matriarchal widow who rules over her household and her five daughters. She is very concerned with maintaining the appropriate roles for women in proper society. Her name is the Spanish version of the Teutonic name Bernard meaning, "having the force of a bear".

La Poncia

Bernarda's maid and confidante. She is the only character willing to challenge Bernarda's authority. The name means "swollen ankle" and is a character in a popular Spanish children's story about a friendly horse that hurts his ankle during a performance.

Angustias

The oldest daughter of Bernarda Alba. The only daughter from Bernarda's first marriage. She is described by her sisters as the ugliest daughter. She has inherited more money than the other sisters. She is desperate to leave the household and agrees to marry Pepe in spite of the fact that she knows he is only interested in her money. Her name means "anguishes" or "torments".

Magdalena

Several years younger than Angustias, she is the oldest daughter from Bernarda's second marriage. She is very unhappy about the death of her father. She cries more than her sisters and spends all day sleeping. Her name is from the Spanish idiom "llorar como una Magdalena" which means "to weep like Magdalene" from the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene who weeps at Jesus' feet.

Amelia

Another daughter to Bernarda, a few years younger than Magdalena. She is the most gossipy sister and submissive towards her mother. In Latin and Old German, her name means "industrious".

Martirio

Another daughter to Bernarda, a few years younger than Amelia. She is also described as unhappy and sickly. She had a previous relationship, which Bernarda ruined. She is

secretly in love with Pepe el Romano and steals Angustias photo of him. It is her manipulation that causes Adela to hang herself. She describes herself as being afraid of men. Her name means "martyrdom".

Adela

The youngest of Bernarda's daughters and the most beautiful and passionate. She is the only daughter who openly disobeys her mother. She refuses to wear her mourning clothes. She has a secret affair with Pepe el Romano until Martirio catches her and their argument causes the affair to be discovered. She hangs herself at the climax of the play. Her name is from the Spanish verb "adelantar" which means to go forward or overtake.

Maria Josefa

Bernarda's Mother. Spends the majority of her life locked in her room by Bernarda. She appears senile and longs to leave the house to be married and bear children. In spite of her apparent dementia, her words are often filled with truth and wisdom. Her name comes from the parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Maid

Another household maid. It is inferred that she may have been raped or had an affair with Bernarda's dead husband.

Prudencia

A friend of Bernarda's who comes to have dinner with her. Her name comes from one of the four virtues, Prudence, which means carefulness or caution.

Beggar with a child

Arrives in the first scene to beg for food and is turned away.

Major THEMES

Tragedy/Death

There is death throughout the play. The play begins with the funeral of Bernarda's second husband, father to four of her daughters. Each daughter reacts to this death differently. Next, there is the woman who is being dragged through the streets for having killed her newborn baby. Bernarda reacts by demanding, "kill her". Finally, there is the death of Adela, after she believes her lover, Pepe el Romano, has been killed.

Social Class

Social status of the family is extremely important to Bernarda Alba. This is made clear in the first few moments of the play when a beggar arrives with her daughter to ask for food. The maid turns her away, declaring that the scraps belong to her first because she is also hungry. In spite of the family's wealth, the servants are looked down on and expected to eat scraps. The family's social status is mentioned throughout the play.

Authority

Bernarda Alba repeats many times that she is the ruler of the family and that what she demands, the family will follow. Her authority is not to be questioned and while several characters challenge her, the family continues to submit to her will in spite of their unhappiness. In the end, the last word of the play is spoken by Bernarda, "Silence!" continuing this theme of authority to the final moment.

Beauty

There are numerous lines in the play that speak to beauty, either declaring a character beautiful (Adela and Pepe el Romano are two examples) or sickly and unattractive (Angustias and Martirio are two examples). There are also several instances where it is made clear that beauty is significantly less important than social status and wealth.

Oppression, particularly of women

"Needle and thread for women. Whiplash and mules for men." This quote from the play establishes early on that the role of women is clearly defined in Bernarda Alba's world. There are repeated explanations of how women are expected to behave in the company of men, never to ask questions and to put their own needs last after those of the men. This is probably the most powerful theme of the play.

Reputation

Reputation means everything to Bernarda Alba. It is more important to her than the death of her youngest daughter. At the end of the play when she is insistent that Adela be dressed as a virgin immediately after her death, the intention is to protect the Alba name from scandal.

Emotion vs. Reason

The major characters of *The House of Bernarda Alba* can be classified into two groups: those that are led by reason and those that are led by emotion. Bernarda Alba is clearly ruled by reason while Adela is ruled by her emotions.

Spain in the Time of the Play



Photo of soldiers during Spanish Civil War

Lorca was born into a period of Spanish history known as The Restoration. This was a difficult time in Spanish history with several groups attempting to share control of the government. Throughout this time, anarchy and fascism grew powerful. During World War I, Spain managed to remain neutral, allowing the country to supply both sides of

the war and prompting economic prosperity. During an uprising over the treatment of the people of Spanish Morocco, Spain lost control over much of the area. It was recovered, but the instability caused the country to become bankrupt and the prime minister to be ousted. Disgusted by the poor economic situation, the conservative party, known as the Fascists, were able to gain power, and the King fled the country in 1931. While the more secular party known as the Loyalists ruled the country, the conservative parties were gaining in strength and numbers. The insecure financial situation increased the instability of the government. The cities tended to support the Loyalists, also known as the Republicans, because they were generally more liberal and secular. The Fascists, or Nationalists, had more support in the rural, wealthy areas where Roman Catholicism was practiced widely. This division eventually erupted into the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The Fascists would take over the government entirely in 1939, with the dictator General Francisco Franco in power until his death in 1975.

About the Playwright



Federico García Lorca was born in Fuente Vaqueros, Spain in 1898. This was a small farming community near the city of Grenada. His family moved to Grenada when Lorca was eleven. His father, Don Federico García Rodríguez was described as a prosperous farmer. His mother, Dona Vincenta Lorca, was an educated former schoolteacher and a gifted pianist, who encouraged her son's interest in music and the arts. Due to a childhood illness, Lorca did not speak until he was three and had a limp for the rest of his life. From an early age Federico García Lorca called himself "Lorca" and his family and friends followed suit. In 1915, he attended Sacred Heart University, where he studied law, literature and writing. He also trained as a classic pianist and had a genuine passion for music. In 1916, his piano teacher died. In 1916 and 1917, he began traveling throughout northern Spain with one of his professors, who encouraged him to write his first book, *Impresiones y Paisajes* (Impressions and Land). His father assisted him in publishing the book, a small volume of his musings about his recent travels.

In 1919, Lorca moved to Madrid to attend the Residencia de Estudiantes, an Oxbridge inspired University. He spent most of his time with the painter Salvador Dalí, film director Luis Buñuel, poet Juan Romon Jimenez and, stage director Gregorio

Martinez Sierra. At Sierra's invitation, he staged his first play, *El maleficio de la mariposa* (*The Butterfly's Evil Spell*) at Madrid's Teatro Eslava. The play told the story of the impossible love between a cockroach and a butterfly and had an entire cast of bugs. The play was not received well and closed quickly. The audience's negative response was very upsetting for Lorca and left him depressed for many years afterward. Lorca was quoted at the time as saying about the evening, "To me this audience means nothing, nothing, nothing." For the next several years he turned his attention to writing poems and was very successful. Lorca would later say that his next play, *Mariana Pineda*, (which included settings by Dali) was his first play.

He published a book of poetry titled, *Libro de poemas*, in 1921. The themes of these early poems included faith, nature and solitude. He became very involved in the avant-garde artist community in Spain, sometimes referred to as the "Generation of 27". He was gaining popularity as a writer with the publication of his next two works, *Canciones* (Songs), and *Primer romancero gitano* (Gypsy Ballads). In 1928, Salvador Dali moved to Paris and publicly criticized the *Gypsy Ballads*, thereby ending the friendship. Lorca also wrote another play in this time period titled *The Love of Don Perlimplin and Belisa in the Garden*. It was during the height of his popularity in Spain that Lorca traveled abroad to New York City.

It has been reported that before his journey to New York City, Lorca suffered from a severe period of depression. He stopped reading his poetry in public entirely. Fernando de los Ríos, his friend and mentor, convinced him to make the trip to New York. He later called the city of New York, "Babylonian, cruel and violent" and "filled with modern beauty". He also spent time in Vermont and Havana, Cuba. His collection of poems, *Poeta en Nueva York* (*A poet in New York*) was written during this time. These poems were filled with the themes of alienation and isolation and the negativity of the materialistic society and its cruelty toward the underclass. Lorca was in New York during the stock market crash of 1929 and that experience is evident in the poems he wrote at the time. He also wrote two plays, *El Público* (*The Public*), and *Así que pasen cinco años* (*As The Years Pass*). Lorca called both of these plays "Impossible Theatre".

Lorca returned to Spain 1930 and was invited to direct a government sponsored theatre company of students, which toured Spain, giving rural audiences an opportunity to see classic Spanish theatre. The performances were free to the public. The interpretations of the classic texts were radical and modern. Lorca wanted to bring theatre to rural areas that had never been exposed to it before. Until 1936, the group toured to 74 villages with thirteen different productions.

During this tour, Lorca wrote his most famous plays often referred to as the "rural trilogy". The plays included *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*), *Yerma*. *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*) was written later and Lorca was never able to see it produced. *Blood Wedding* was first produced in Madrid and was directed by the author. It was extremely successful and Spanish versions were produced in Argentina and Mexico and translations were staged in Moscow, Paris and the United States. *Yerma* was also produced in Spain and was wildly successful with over 100 performances. His other lesser known works, were also being staged worldwide including *Marina Pineda*, *La zapatera prodigiosa* (*The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*), *El retabillo*

de don Cristóbal (The Puppet Play of Don Cristobal). His work of this time challenged the accepted norms of not only popular theatre, but the conventions of the roles of women in society and other taboos including sexuality and social class.

In spite of the warnings of his friends, Lorca left Madrid to spend the summer of 1936 in his hometown of Grenada. Two days later, the Spanish Civil War erupted. Within weeks, the Fascists executed Lorca's brother in law, the mayor of Grenada. The same day, August 16, 1936, Lorca was arrested. After several days of captivity, Lorca was executed. Lorca was most likely executed because of his influential families allegiance to the Republic and his celebrity as a radical playwright and poet. He was buried in an unmarked grave in a grove of olive trees. In an attempt to eradicate his existence, much of Lorca's work was banned for many years.

Poetry collections

- *Impresiones y paisajes (Impressions and Landscapes 1918)*
- *Libro de poemas (Book of Poems 1921)*
- *Poema del cante jondo (Poem of Deep Song; written in 1921,published 1931)*
- *Suites (written between 1920 and 1923, published posthumously in 1983)*
- *Canciones (Songs written between 1921 and 1924, published in 1927)*
- *Romancero gitano (Gypsy Ballads 1928)*
- *Odes (written 1928)*
- *Poeta en Nueva York (The Poet in New York 1940)^[53]*
- *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías (Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías 1935)*
- *Seis poemas gallegos (Six Galician poems 1935)*
- *Sonetos del amor oscuro (Sonnets of Dark Love 1936, not published until 1983)*
- *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems (1937)*
- *Primeras canciones (First Songs 1936)*
- *The Tamarit Divan (poems written 1931-4 and not published until after his death in a special edition of Revista Hispanica Moderna in 1940).*
- *Selected Poems (1941)*

Plays

- *Christ: A Religious Tragedy (unfinished 1917)*
- *El maleficio de la mariposa (The Butterfly's Evil Spell: written 1919–20, first production 1920)*

- *Los títeres de Cachiporra (The Billy-Club Puppets*: written 1922-5, first production 1937)
- *Retablillo de Don Cristóbal (The Puppet Play of Don Cristóbal*: written 1923, first production 1935)
- *Mariana Pineda* (written 1923–25, first production 1927)
- *La zapatera prodigiosa (The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*: written 1926–30, first production 1930, revised 1933)
- *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín (Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in his Garden*: written 1928, first production 1933)
- *El público (The Public*: written 1929–30, first production 1972)
- *Así que pasen cinco años (When Five Years Pass*: written 1931, first production 1945)
- *Bodas de sangre (Blood Wedding*: written 1932, first production 1933)
- *Yerma* (written 1934, first production 1934)
- *Doña Rosita la soltera (Doña Rosita the Spinster*: written 1935, first production 1935)
- *Comedia sin título (Play Without a Title*: written 1936, first production 1986)
- *La casa de Bernarda Alba (The House of Bernarda Alba*: written 1936, first production 1945)
- *Los sueños de mi prima Aurelia (Dreams of my Cousin Aurelia*: unfinished 1938)

Discussion Questions

- 1) All of the characters in this play are women? Why do you think the playwright chose not to have any male characters? Do you think the audience needs to meet Pepe el Romano?
- 2) The play begins with two servants speaking about the household. Why do you think the playwright chose to begin the play with minor characters?
- 3) 1898, the year of Lorca's birth, was the same year that Bertolt Brecht was born in Germany and Ernest Hemingway was born in the United States. Look up both playwrights and make comparisons between the three.
- 4) Look up some of the paintings of Lorca's friend Salvador Dali. What do you think these paintings reflect of this time period in Spanish history? Do you think looking at these paintings gives any insight into the mindset of the community of artists Lorca was a part of?

5) Generation of 27 was a group of influential Spanish poets in Madrid who spent time together between 1923 and 1927. The group included:

Rafael Alberti
Vicente Aleixandre
Dámaso Alonso
Manual Altolaguirre
Luis Cernuda
Gerardo Diego
Jorge Guillén
Emilio Prados
Pedro Salinas

Look up one of these poets. What are the differences and similarities in the lives and writing style between the poet you chose and Federico García Lorca?

6) Below is a short poem by Lorca. Ask someone in the class who speaks Spanish to read the Spanish version out loud and then have someone else read the same poem in English. What do you think is the biggest difference between the two versions? Do you think the English version is any less beautiful or compelling?

Adelina de paseo

La mar no tiene naranjas.
ni Sevilla tiene amor.
Morena, qué luz de fuego.
Préstame tu quitasol.

Me pondrá la cara verde,
zumo de lima y limón,
tus palabras, pececillos,
nadarán alrededor.

La mar no tiene naranjas.
Ay, amor.
Ni Sevilla tiene amor!

Adelina walking

Oranges
do not grow in the sea
neither is there love in Sevilla.
You in Dark and the I the sun that's hot,
loan me your parasol.

I'll wear my jealous reflection,
juice of lemon and lime-
and your words,

your sinful little words-
will swim around awhile.

Oranges
do not grow in the sea,
Ay, love!
And there is no love in Sevilla!

Keeping in mind the experiment with the poem, *Adelina Walking*, how much of the play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, is lost when it is translated from Spanish to English. If you have read the play in Spanish, do you think the English translation by Emily Mann that you saw did a good job of capturing the original intension of the author?

7) After you have read the play, imagine your production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Make notes on how you would create the set, the costumes, the lighting and sound. After you have seen the production, compare the choices made by designers to the notes you made. What differences did you notice? Were some of the choices the same and did you think they worked to move the story along? What choices did you agree or disagree with?

8) Choose the character you like best in the play. How do you imagine this character played? Who in your class would you cast in the role? After you have seen the production, spend some time thinking about your vision of the character in comparison to the actress you saw embody the role. Do you think the actress was able to bring the character to life in the way you imagined? What choices did she make that you agreed or disagreed with?

9) After seeing the production, discuss it. Did you think it was a good play? Did you enjoy the story? Did the production meet your expectations? What aspects of the overall production did you like the most? What aspects did you like the least?

10) Pretend you are a journalist writing for a major newspaper or website. Write a review of the play after you have seen it. Review the overall production and the individual acting. Be sure to include production values including design elements of costumes, make-up, set, lighting, and sound design. Review it assuming it will be published. Does knowing your review could be read by the actors, designers, and directors affect what you decide to write? Do you think a critique should be honest, without worrying about the feelings of the artists involved?

12) Review the section of the study guide on themes. Choose one of the themes and answer the following questions. What about Lorca's life do you think caused him to write about this theme? What do you think Lorca wanted to express about this theme? Do you think he was able to make a clear statement?

13) Review the section of the study guide on characters. You probably noticed that the characters have names that reflect their personalities. Why do you think the playwright chose these names for the characters? Do you think the actors you saw play the characters were able to portray their "namesake"?

Resources

A website created by the Academy of American Poets

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/163>

The website for the Theatre Company Repertorio Español, founded in 1968 which is devoted to producing high quality plays from Latin American, Spanish and Hispanic-American theatre. This link is for a general Lorca study guide.

<http://www.repertorio.org/education/pdfs/lorca.pdf>

A foundation created by the publisher of *Poetry* magazine, devoted to the proliferation of poetry in culture.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/federico-garcia-lorca>

State Theatre of New Jersey has an excellent study guide for Bernarda Alba on their website under the section called Keynotes. www.statetheatreNJ.org

A video of an interesting production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the Macalester College Theatre and Dance department

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itExL7T4RsA&feature=fvst>

El Teatro Español production of *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, excellent Spanish production

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AecRttmXjGE>

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