

## Candidate 5

**La Casa de Bernarda Alba by Federico García Lorca****'Analyse the different forms Lorca uses to convey the theme of repression in La Casa de Bernarda Alba and how effective they are.'**

*La Casa de Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca is a play which is, theatrically, saturated with repression of various forms. This essay will explore three key forms and consider which is most effective: Lorca's characterisation of Bernarda's tyrannical personality, the physical metaphor of the house itself and Bernarda's repression of the daughters' sexuality.

A key facet of repression is certainly Bernarda herself, <sup>1</sup>'tirana de todos los que la rodean'. In the absence of men, the latter assumes the patriarchal role. Accordingly, the play both opens and is titled <sup>2</sup>'La casa de Bernarda, allowing Lorca to emphasise that all the power lies with her. The unbalanced power dynamic is instantly introduced through the possessive use of 'de'. However, since Bernarda is governed by honour, she is more stubborn and obtuse than most men would be in the role of the husband and father. We learn, via <sup>3</sup>'Criada', <sup>4</sup>'Desde que murió el padre de Bernarda no han vuelto a entrar las gentes bajo estos techos'. Therefore, Bernarda is the victim of her own social expectations and the burden to carry them for her daughters. She fears opening up her house up to guests who may criticise it and, consequently, taint her honour and reputation. Bernarda's repression of her daughters can be divided into two key areas: physical and emotional abuse.

Bernarda's physical abuse is clearly exemplified when <sup>5</sup>'Sale Angustias por otra puerta, la que da al patio', to gaze longingly at Pepe el Romano. In response, Bernarda advances on her with her <sup>6</sup>'bastón' before <sup>7</sup>'(Le da.)'. Bernarda, when her daughters' compliance is threatened, employs physical abuse to retain her patriarchal position in the household. Her 'bastón' functions as a deterrent to keep the girls repressed. Indeed, she attempts to physically beat her daughters' natural sexual desires out of them. La Poncia endeavours to mediate the situation and reacts by exclaiming <sup>8</sup>'cálmate!' Lorca's use of a minor sentence as well as the word choice of <sup>9</sup>'corriendo' - in the stage directions - suggest a sense of urgency. The situation has reached a point where diffusion is required. Therefore, La Poncia's hasty reaction illustrates that Bernarda's physical abuse is not even justified by the cultural norms of the village. The extremity of Bernarda's repression with respect to anthropological analysis is supported by John Corbin who contends that <sup>10</sup> 'in this culture

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<sup>1</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p5

<sup>2</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p3

<sup>3</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p5

<sup>4</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p5

<sup>5</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p13

<sup>6</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>7</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>8</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>9</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>10</sup> The Modern Languages Review, Vol 95, No3 (Jul, 2000) p722

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parents seldom inflict pain to control their children...Certainly anyone who beat a child with a cane or any other instrument would be thought of as abusive'

Furthermore, Bernarda is equally, if not more, emotionally abusive to her daughters. Bernarda's biting response to a grieving Magdalena, <sup>11</sup>'Si quieres llorar te metes debajo de la cama' exemplifies this. Here, Lorca successfully establishes the latter's obsession with perfection. This fuels her emotionally abusive behaviour since, for Bernarda, healthy emotion is shameful and must be concealed. The idea of perfectionism is first introduced in the opening stage directions through her perfect, <sup>12</sup>'habitación blanquísima'. However, this obsession extends beyond having a perfectly clean house. La Poncia rants of how <sup>13</sup>'Ella, la más aseada; ella, la más decente; ella, la más alta'. Bernarda also desires perfect daughters and, above all, a perfect reputation. For example, when her daughters' are bickering over who has stolen Angustias's photograph of Pepe her main concern is that <sup>14</sup>'Estarán las vecinas con el oído pegado a los tabiques'. Bernarda chooses to prioritise the family's reputation over addressing the emotional pain which underlies the sisters' competitiveness. This form of repression is further developed when Bernarda scolds Magdalena <sup>15</sup>'(...que inicia el llanto.) Chiss'. The cutting 'Chiss' evidences both a lack of compassion and emotional intelligence. Wenceslao Gil refers to how Bernarda is both <sup>16</sup>'dictadora y asentimental' which, when juxtaposed with the traditional maternal figure, highlights the emotional bareness of the household.

Indeed, the house itself, restrictive and stifling in the sweltering heat, acts as a physical metaphor for repression. <sup>17</sup>'Mujer 3a' complains of how <sup>18</sup>'cae el sol como plomo'. Whilst trapped inside the daughters are at the mercy of their tyrannical mother and thus their personal development is stunted. Bernarda insists that, during the eight year mourning period, <sup>19</sup>'no ha de entrar en esta casa el viento de la calle'. However, she is not entirely successful in isolating her family from outside influences via the <sup>20</sup>'casa'. The windows of the house certainly embolden the women to educate themselves about the <sup>21</sup>'calle' and mix with their community - to satisfy their social need for belonging - without leaving the <sup>22</sup>'casa'. Additionally, Bernarda does not repress the maids to the same extent as her daughters. Lorca skilfully demonstrates this inequality when Bernarda orders<sup>23</sup>'(A Poncia) ¡Corre a enterarte de lo que pasa!'The maids are free to leave the confines of the house as

<sup>11</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p10

<sup>12</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p3

<sup>13</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p5

<sup>14</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p53

<sup>15</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p13

<sup>16</sup> Gil, Wenceslao: La mujer en casa cerrada: represión y opresión en La casa de Bernarda Alba de Federico, Hispanet Journal 1, Florida International University, 2008

<sup>17</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p11

<sup>18</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p10

<sup>19</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p14

<sup>20</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p8

<sup>21</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p8

<sup>22</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p1

<sup>23</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p63

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they are not bound to Bernarda by blood, and are of a lower social class. As Corbin argues: <sup>24</sup>'Bernarda views contact with the free and open 'calle' as a kind of pollution which her low-status servants can absorb, thus protecting the purity (...the high status) of her family', whilst her curiosity to learn of the local gossip is satisfied. This act, in turn, highlights Bernarda's obsession with family reputation. Moreover, Lorca conveys how the repressive boundaries of the house are permeable since they are also penetrated by air. An argument supported by Corbin who contends, <sup>25</sup>'Adela repeatedly rises and leaves to get some air. "Tomando el aire" is, in fact, a culturally neutral way women can explain being in the street or sitting in their doorway'. The patio itself acts as an entrance to the 'calle' – the free outside world beyond the grasps of Bernarda's repressed daughters. Angustias hears the story of <sup>26</sup>'Paca la Roseta' through <sup>27</sup>'oyendo la conversación que traían los hombres' who were socialising in the patio. These limited interactions allow the daughters some measure of human connection and, hence, Bernarda's influence is weakened by the seeping out of human emotions. The repressive heat the daughters are plagued by is another manner in which Lorca brings the <sup>28</sup>'calle' inside the house itself. With respect to pathetic fallacy, the heat physically and emotionally drains the daughters; it is as though the weather, in conjunction with the other factors, is destined to keep them isolated from the company of men. Angustias even confesses of how, <sup>29</sup>'afortunadamente pronto voy a salir de este infierno'. One can certainly consider the <sup>30</sup>'casa cerrada' as a pressure cooker, inside which there is a foreboding atmosphere that the building up of emotions is reaching a climax in which a release will be required.

The sisters are sexually repressed on multiple occasions by Bernarda. In consequence, they are inept at courting men successfully; their biological instincts are warped by their sheltered upbringing. The frustration this sexual repression causes Adela is highlighted when she proclaims <sup>31</sup>'Yo hago con mi cuerpo lo que me parece!' Certainly, Bernarda's sexual repression of the sisters exposes, and even exacerbates, their spiteful nature. In particular, Pepe's alleged interest in Angustias is a key catalyst for their sibling rivalry. This is demonstrated when Magdalena callously remarks on how, <sup>32</sup>'Lo natural sería que te pretendiera a ti, Amelia, o a nuestra Adela, que tiene veinte años, pero no que venga a buscar lo más oscuro de esta casa, a una mujer que como su padre habla con la nariz'. Gil presents a similar argument when he analyses <sup>33</sup>'la privación de libertad contribuye, asimismo, a la exacerbación de los sentimientos'. Lorca successfully illustrates the power of the human sexual instinct via the daughters who, ultimately, place their sexual desires above their family loyalty. Lorca further demonstrates the daughters' sexual repression

<sup>24</sup> The Modern Languages Review, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Jul, 2000) p721

<sup>25</sup> The Modern Languages Review, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Jul, 2000) p721

<sup>26</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>27</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p18

<sup>28</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p8

<sup>29</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p35

<sup>30</sup> Wenceslao Gil: La mujer en casa cerrada: represión y opresión en *La casa de Bernarda Alba* de Federico, Hispanet journal 1, Florida International University 2008

<sup>31</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p41

<sup>32</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p27

<sup>33</sup> Wenceslao Gil: La mujer en casa cerrada: represión y opresión en *La casa de Bernarda Alba* de Federico, Hispanet journal 1, Florida International University 2008

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when <sup>34</sup>'Martirio', in a melancholy fashion, asks Adela to <sup>35</sup>'Lo que puedes hacer es tefirlo de negro'. Martirio is referring to a fan and her pessimistic outlook is reflected by her acceptance of 'tefirlo de negro'. The latter's sexual development has been diminished by Bernarda and hence she is unable exhibit the same zest for life and curiosity as Adela. Lorca further stresses the Martirio's self-torturous submission by naming her Martyr.

Naturally, each form of repression inhibits the daughters with varying degrees of success. Nevertheless, Bernarda's physical and emotional abuse pervades as the most effective form of repression. In support of this argument one can consider, as discussed, the permeable nature of the house's repressive boundaries and that Adela still successfully enters into a relationship with Pepe el Romano, despite the sexual repression imposed upon her. One could view Adela's death as evidence that Bernarda's sexual repression was effective. However, after her death Adela has already transcended the barrier to freedom and elected to not live under the sexual repression she has previously suffered. Therefore, the previous form of sexual repression was not entirely successful. Gill argues that <sup>36</sup>'el confinamiento—que podría ser tachado casi de arresto domiciliario por la autoridad competente—va a ser impuesto por Bernarda. La madre fálica y dictatorial decide'. This analysis cements the viewpoint that the tyrannical Bernarda herself is the central vehicle for repression. Indeed, from the outset she is described as <sup>37</sup>'¡Mandona! ¡Dominanta!', a narrative which is continued throughout the play. The house only functions as a physical metaphor for repression because Bernarda is the head of the household and thus, in a sense, it is merely an extension of her. Moreover, the sexual repression imposed upon the daughters and, to a lesser extent, the servants is all at the behest of Bernarda. Therefore, Bernarda is employed as the organising force behind all forms of repression in the play.

In conclusion, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca is a play which utilises various forms to demonstrate the stifling repression of Bernarda's daughters and their effectiveness. Despite attempts at rebellion, the final outcome of the play suggests that the repression has, overall, been effective. Ultimately, Adela's tragic suicide provides a release valve for the pressure cooker of repressed emotions Lorca has constructed. Once more, the family sinks into 'un mar de luto'.

Word count: 1648

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<sup>34</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p28

<sup>35</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p28

<sup>36</sup> Wenceslao Gil: La mujer en casa cerrada: represión y opresión en *La casa de Bernarda Alba* de Federico, Hispanet journal 1, Florida International University 2008, p2

<sup>37</sup> La Casa de Bernarda Alba p4

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