

## 4 Themes

### La reputación y el "qué dirán"

adinerado/a wealthy  
enviudar to be  
widowed  
soltero/a single  
empecinarse (en que)  
to be insistent  
a toda costa at all costs  
la obstinación  
stubbornness  
el "qué dirán"  
rumours, gossip  
(lit. 'the what they  
will say')

#### Key quotation

*Bernarda: Las lágrimas  
cuando estés sola. ¡Nos  
hundiremos todas en  
un mar de luto! Ella, la  
hija menor de Bernarda  
Alba, ha muerto virgen.  
¿Me habéis oído?  
¡Silencio, silencio he  
dicho! ¡Silencio!*

[Acto tercero]

Uno de los temas centrales que subyacen en la obra es la reputación, tanto de una persona como de una familia. Bernarda es una persona **adinerada**, que **ha enviudado** dos veces y que es de un estatus alto. Además, sus cinco hijas están **solteras**, y una de ellas, Angustias, es más rica que las demás. Esto ejerce una gran presión social sobre los personajes, y Bernarda está **empecinada en que** se mantenga el buen nombre de su familia **a toda costa**. Sin embargo, su obsesión y **obstinación** se basan más en el "qué dirán" que en el verdadero honor.

Lorca not only created a literary masterpiece, but was voicing a social critique of that time. Families living in rural and small-town Andalusia were under strict scrutiny from society, and this included the Catholic Church, which demanded observance of its conventions.

Andalusian society placed great value on wealth and respectability. Bernarda was married and widowed twice, and her first husband, the father of Angustias, was wealthy. This makes the oldest daughter more respectable and desirable for a suitor, Pepe el Romano — as La Poncia clearly points out that '...las demás mucha puntilla bordada, muchas camisas de hilo, pero pan y uvas por toda herencia'. Money and social background are so important that Bernarda rejected Martirio's suitor as 'su padre fue gañán' (i.e. a labourer).

Respectability and a high social position are also demonstrated in the play by the fact that the whole town went to the funeral and the *responsos* (prayers for the dead) and that a large group of women (200 in Lorca's stage directions) come to pay their respects. The servants, especially the Criada and La Poncia, have toiled incessantly to make the house sparkling clean, but Bernarda still finds fault with it; this attitude has to do with asserting her higher social status over her servants. Lorca's genius, however, lies in the way they utter insults in asides when a series of litanies are said for the eternal repose of Bernarda's husband. These, together with the hyperbolic wishes of well-being that they utter when they leave, show fake respect.

What Lorca is skilfully portraying is the concept and fear of *el "qué dirán"*, a fear still very common in Spanish society, which drives people to be extremely hypocritical; they appear respectable even if their private actions or thoughts are the very opposite. It was therefore in a family's best interest to try never to investigate them. La Poncia points to the consequences of *el "qué dirán"* when she talks about Paca la Roseta going away with a man on a horse: 'Dicen que iba con los pechos fuera y Maximiliano la llevaba cogida como si tocara la

guitarra. ¡Un horror!’ These are probably lies and exaggerations, but that person will be branded as an ‘easy woman’ from then on in the town.

This obsession with social acceptance constitutes a central theme of the play as it is the driving force within Bernarda’s character. She is so caught up in appearances that she is incapable of seeing what is really going on and so ignores the warnings from La Poncia that ‘aquí pasa una cosa muy grande’, even when La Poncia’s son saw Pepe leaving the window at 4 a.m. This flaw is a major one in Bernarda’s character, and leads to the tragic suicide of her daughter. Even after the death, Bernarda’s arrogance and obsession with respectability come to the fore, as she insists — in the final speech of the play — that it is more important to preserve the image of Adela as a virgin than to feel devastation at her killing herself.

## El amor y el deseo

En esta obra de teatro, existe el amor **fraternal** hacia la familia, pero este se encuentra **sofocado** por las **reglas**, y parece ser una obligación. Muchas veces, la envidia y los **celos** hacen que desaparezca. Lo que más prevalece entre las jóvenes (incluso en su abuela) es el deseo de tener una **pareja** amorosa y sexual. Este deseo está personalizado en Pepe el Romano, que, aunque no aparezca nunca en escena, es una fuerza social y **primitiva** en los personajes, que motiva la acción y el final trágico.

Love and desire are two central topics that are intertwined in this play. In the relationship between the women that live in Bernarda Alba’s house, love is overshadowed by her strong character.

Audiences are likely to be shocked by the way Bernarda treats her frail mother, María Josefa, who she locks up in a back room. This character’s significance becomes clear when we see, in the third act, that the ‘crazy’ María Josefa has a lot of love to give and wants to get married by the sea, and that she wants to have babies (she holds a sheep and pretends it is her child). This is a powerful dramatic metaphor which tells the audience that love is not rational, but an emotion that makes us act in irrational ways; it makes us dream, and if we lock it up, like Bernarda did with María Josefa, rather than controlling it, it will continue to live and grow, and will strive to come out, as it is essential in all of us.

Love between sisters is also present in the play, as the five sisters have a very close relationship. We can see instances of such sisterly love when Amelia asks (a cynical) Martirio if she has taken her medicine. Such instances of care and attention, however, are overshadowed by a much stronger sense of envy and jealousy.

The central theme of the play, the one that underlies the actions of Bernarda’s daughters, is the desire to be loved and to fulfil this essential need. Bernarda’s

### TASK

1 Encuentra cinco ocasiones en las que es evidente la importancia del “qué dirán” en la obra.

fraternal brotherly/  
sisterly, fraternal  
sofocado/a suffocated  
las reglas rules  
los celos jealousy  
la pareja partner  
primitivo/a primeval

### Key quotation

*Adela: Ya no aguanto el horror de estos techos después de haber probado el sabor de su boca. Seré lo que él quiera que sea.*

[Acto tercero]

**TASK**

2 Encuentra en la obra dos citas en las que quede claro que el amor está presente en el corazón de uno de los personajes, y dos citas en las que el motivo de accionar de un personaje sea el deseo carnal.

quejarse (de)  
to complain  
en voz baja in a low  
voice  
imponer to impose  
el bástón walking stick  
infligir un castigo  
to inflict a punishment

**Key quotation**

*Adela: (Haciéndole frente.) ¡Aquí se acabaron las voces de presidio! (Adela arrebata un bastón a su madre y lo parte en dos.) Esto hago yo con la vara de la dominadora. No dé usted un paso más. ¡En mí no manda nadie más que Pepe!*

[Acto tercero]

imposition that the mourning will last for 8 years and that 'no ha de entrar en esta casa el viento de la calle' creates a clear conflict amongst these young women, who would naturally want to have a lover. We find out that Adela, a young girl who is 'en edad de merecer' (i.e. ready to have a lover) is seeing Pepe el Romano in secret after he comes to visit her sister Angustias' window. Adela is full of passion and bravery to defend this love. Pepe el Romano is the embodiment of sexual desire and of passionate love. We as an audience are constantly reminded that, like the stallion, which Bernarda calms down by asking the servants to give him freedom but not the mares, men will want to possess the bodies of the daughters. However, Bernarda will not set the girls free to fulfil their natural urges.

Jealousy drives Martirio to lie when, after Bernarda shoots at Pepe el Romano but misses, she says: 'Se acabó Pepe el Romano'. This proves what Martirio has declared before: that in matters of love, two women that fight for the same man become enemies even if they are related. This final act of jealousy is fatal, as it triggers Adela's exit and her suicide.

**La autoridad y el orden**

Uno de los aspectos que sobresalen en esta obra es que Bernarda actúa con mucha autoridad. Los otros personajes **se quejan de** que es "mala, más que mala", que tiene "lengua de cuchillo" e incluso que es una "¡Vieja lagarta recocida!", pero todo esto es dicho **en voz baja**, ya que Bernarda **impone** su autoridad y un orden superficial, y se cree invencible. Usa su **bastón** para golpear el piso e imponer silencio, o incluso para golpear a personas para **infligirles un castigo**. Sin embargo, Adela, la más joven de las hijas, toma su bastón y finalmente, al partirlo en dos, rompe con la imposición dictatorial de su madre, dejando así en claro que su pasión, y no su madre, dicta sus emociones.

It could be argued that although authority is ever-present in this play, authoritarianism takes precedence in most instances. The way Bernarda exercises her authority on her daughters is the root of her downfall and is essential to the play, as it has a strong impact on the other characters. Her main justification for such treatment comes in the form of tradition: she imposes an extremely long *luto* on her daughters, forbidding them to leave the house for 8 years; she does not stop to consider that they are young and that they have needs. In fact, she refuses to think about this.

A simple innocent act such as handing her a fan that is not the correct colour can get Bernarda fired up and incite her to become violent. She bangs the floor with her stick to impose silence, much as a judge would do in a courtroom. She hits Angustias with her stick when she finds out her eldest daughter has been listening to the men in the patio, and she also hits Martirio when she learns that she has hidden Pepe's portrait from Angustias. This repression has an adverse effect; other characters hate her even more and seek revenge. The women that

come to the house clearly despise her for her arrogance; la Criada plans to steal food from her as she considers her to be mean, her mother calls her 'cara de leoparda' and even La Poncia says that one day she will spit on her for a whole day. This clearly shows that Bernarda's authority is not earned, it is merely imposed.

Adela keeps her romance with Pepe el Romano secret from her mother, but her wish to live life to the full is stronger than her fear of defying her authority. We therefore see Adela wearing her green dress, even if it is just to feed the chickens, and we hear that she has furtive encounters with Pepe el Romano until 4 a.m., in clear defiance of her mother's rules. When Bernarda finally finds out that the young Adela has been having relations with the man and wants to hit her, Adela stands up to her and states that Bernarda's dictatorship is over. Her act of grabbing her mother's stick and breaking it in two is symbolic of standing up to dictatorial authority and elicits the empathy of the audience.

## La tradición

En la obra *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, la tradición **se convierte en** un tema que dicta las acciones y reacciones de los personajes. La **falta de libertad**, la **tristeza** y la **angustia** que experimentan las mujeres de la casa se deben a que han de cumplir con las tradiciones de llevar el negro del luto, de aceptar las órdenes de los padres, incluso cuando **atentan contra** la felicidad propia, y de dar la bienvenida a la casa a personas que claramente no sienten simpatía. Cada personaje tiene un rol "tradicional" que debe cumplir, y sus verdaderas intenciones tienen que ser reprimidas.

While Lorca wanted to criticise the Andalusian society of his time, he also portrayed it, and tradition is an underlying theme of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Lorca even issues a warning on the first page: '*El poeta advierte que estos tres actos tienen la intención de un documental fotográfico*'.

As soon as the curtains open in the first act, we see a traditional house, which has to be decorated in a very particular style according to the author, who stipulates the colour of the walls, what the furniture should be like and even the themes of the paintings hanging on the walls. We then hear the tolling of bells and see the Criada complaining that she has to hear them time and time again, as is customary when there is a funeral. The mourning period of 8 years that Bernarda imposes on her single daughters is also a tradition, clearly exaggerated for dramatic effect, and is an essential part of the play.

When Bernarda receives the mourners in the first act, she knows that they talk about her behind her back, but she cannot refuse them entry, and the men have to stay outside and be looked after, as was customary. The play also includes traditions that symbolise freedom of spirit and light: this is clear in the visit of the *segadores* who sing, bringing some much-desired happiness and relief to the women who are locked in Bernarda Alba's oppressive house.

## Build critical skills

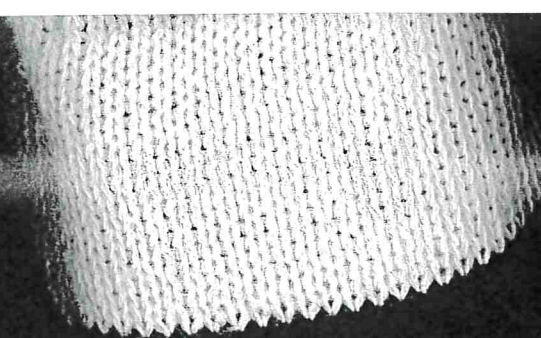
1 ¿Qué características trata de resaltar Lorca en Bernarda? ¿Cómo lo hace?

convertirse en  
to become  
la falta (de) lack (of)  
la tristeza sadness  
la angustia anguish  
atentar (contra)  
to threaten

## Key quotation

*Bernarda: En ocho años que dure el luto no ha de entrar en esta casa el viento de la calle. ... Así pasó en casa de mi padre y en casa de mi abuelo.*

[Acto primero]



**TASK**

3 Además del luto, menciona por lo menos dos tradiciones que se observaban en la época y que crean un ambiente dramático en la obra. ¿Cómo logra acentuarlo el autor?

The religious values of the era are not treated uncritically by Lorca: he creates irony when short insults are directed at Bernarda in a low voice by the visitors, and immediately afterwards they start chanting litanies and prayers. When talking about priests there is also some sarcasm, as La Poncia insinuates that women lust after them. Bernarda states: 'Las mujeres en la iglesia no deben mirar más hombre que al oficiante, y a ése porque tiene faldas'.

The traditional way of courting a woman in Andalusia at the time was by approaching her *reja*, as Pepe does with Angustias, and it is this custom that allows him to visit a second window, that of Adela, later in the night.

The play ends tragically with another reference to tradition. When Adela takes her own life because she thinks her mother has killed Pepe, Bernarda represses her feelings and those of the other daughters and servants, and states: 'Llevala a su cuarto y vestirla como si fuera doncella. ... Avisad que al amanecer den dos clamores las campanas'. Traditions are invoked to keep up appearances rather than to respect a time-honoured custom.

## La libertad

lorquiano/a written by  
Federico García Lorca

maltratar to abuse

seguir los designios  
de to follow the path of  
(metaphorical)

el encierro  
confinement

el caldo de cultivo  
(para) breeding ground  
for (lit. *broth to grow*)

el desenlace  
denouement

En esta obra **lorquiana**, podemos ver desde el principio que lo más deseado, y lo imposible de obtener para los personajes, es la libertad. La libertad total es gozada por los hombres, que no se ven. Ellos tienen relaciones con mujeres poco respetables, y pueden **maltratarlas** y ser perdonados, pero las mujeres no son libres de actuar libremente ni de **seguir los designios de** sus emociones. Este **encierro** en una casa, impuesto por Bernarda sobre sus hijas y su madre, y el encierro de Bernarda, impuesto por la sociedad, constituye un **caldo de cultivo** perfecto **para** un **desenlace** dramático.



▲ Las puertas de la casa de Bernarda Alba están cerradas con llave

The atmosphere of imprisonment is clear from the very beginning of the play, with servants cleaning the floors and moaning about Bernarda's dictatorial rule, but stating that they could not survive without her protection.

As soon as Bernarda utters the words 'En ocho años que dure el luto no ha de entrar en esta casa el viento de la calle. Haceros cuenta que hemos tapiado con

ladrillos puertas y ventanas', we know that this imposition on five young women will have dramatic consequences. They are literally incarcerated, and each reacts in her own way.

Adela represents the fight of the human soul for love and freedom. From the moment Magdalena reports that her younger sister wore her green dress to go and feed the chickens, she feels pity for her young spirit full of hope that will not be fulfilled. This small act of defiance is indicative of the inner struggle for freedom. The climax of this fight comes when Bernarda tries to dominate a passionate Adela, who takes her walking stick and breaks it in two, saying '¡Aquí se acabaron las voces de presidio! Esto hago yo con la vara de la dominadora'.

María Josefa, Bernarda's insane elderly mother, a secondary character, emphasises the fight for freedom. Bernarda keeps her under lock and key, but she keeps shouting — much like an inner voice of conscience — to be let out. When she finally comes on stage, she states that she will not be silenced like the other women, that she will not be shut in: '... yo me quiero ir a mi pueblo. ¡Bernarda, yo quiero un varón para casarme y tener alegría!', to which Bernarda's reaction is repressive and soul-destroying: '¡Encerradla!' As a reminder of the inner fight for freedom, María Josefa makes a last entrance in the third act, right before the climax, with a lamb in her arms, singing a song and saying that she wants to marry her man by the sea. This poetic moment conveys the idea to the audience that stripping someone of their liberty can drive a person mad.

### Key quotation

*Adela: (Rompiendo a llorar con ira) ¡No, no me acostumbraré! Yo no quiero estar encerrada. No quiero que se me pongan las carnes como a vosotras.*

[Acto primero]

### Build critical skills

2 ¿Cómo nos afecta la presentación del final de la obra, el hecho de que Adela se suicide por el hombre que ama y que Bernarda trate de ocultar el suicidio?

