**The House of Bernarda Alba Essay Questions**

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1. 1

**Would it be accurate to call *The House of Bernarda Alba* a feminist work?**

Lorca's play confines itself to only female characters. It explores their suffering under a world that allows men to follow their whims and expect forgiveness, while women are held to impossible standards. The play implicitly condemns attitudes that preclude female sexuality and force women to subscribe to unrealistic moral codes. Through Bernada, it provides its most damning commentary - so harsh are the expectations placed on women that a powerful matriarch herself reinforces those skewed values and acts like a man, as though the only way to have power is to ignore and betray her own femininity. And yet to call Lorca's play feminist is perhaps to subscribe too political a vision to it. His interest is in universal humanist themes - sex, death, repression - and to understand it only as a tract for women's rights would be to risk missing its more poetic exploration of larger themes. Regardless of how one answers the question, a feminist lens does provide some insight into the play.

1. 2

**Identify the tragic force of the play and the way it brings doom to Adela.**

In a tragedy, the tragic force is that immutable force that a character attempts to battle, causing suffering and eventual defeat. In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, one could make an argument for a any of several of tragic forces. Perhaps the tragic force is sexuality. Adela is, like all her sisters, at the mercy of her sexual passions, consumed by them. However, where her sisters internalize their lust and it turns to bitterness, Adela forces it outwards and risks the shame and potential harm of a public affair with Pepe. One could argue that by trying to master her sexuality, Adela is defeated, as though her sexuality were too strong. One could also argue that the shackles placed on women provides the tragic force. By attempting to combat her limitations as a woman, Adela goes too far and dies. Another possible tragic force is repression. The real antagonist to Adela is her mother, who represents the forces of repression that Lorca would have understood from living in a newly fascist Spain. We see this when Adela breaks Bernarda's cane. What Adela wants more than Pepe or to fulfill her sexuality is to be free of shackles, of moral strictures, and of expectations. It is this repression more than anything that she combats, and which ultimately forces her to her tragic end.

1. 3

**Do a character analysis of Pepe el Romano. What do we know about him, what does he represent, and how does he factor into the play?**

Though Pepe is, like the other men of the village, never seen onstage, his presence looms as a major character. Much of the play is built of symbols, and Pepe is no different. In the simplest way, he is the catalyst for the play's main conflicts. By bringing the possibility of marriage to the Alba household, he is offering not only sexual freedom in a respectable venue, but also freedom from the tyranny of Bernarda. What he offers is so strong that it engulfs all the girls, to the point that he as a person almost does not matter. They do, however, continue to note his handsomeness, and indeed, his name, which translates to "the Roman," clues us into the way he is viewed as a hero. And yet what Pepe also represents is the ugly side of a man. The women never acknowledge Pepe's abhorrent behavior in courting both Angusitas and Adela. He represents the male license to misbehave and to treat women as objects, that is granted by women themselves. Pepe has been charged with too much power for him to ever live up to it, but so heavy are the chains of repression that he never would have to if he were to bring to any of the sisters the freedom they so desperately desire.

1. 4

**Explain Lorca's use of theatricality. In what way is his play like his poetic work?**

Lorca, as both a playwright and poet, attempts to write a play that is less the telling of a story than the exploration of a theme. He wants to create characters that are both believable in their specificity and evocative in their symbolic weight. As such, all his characters have unsubtle symbolic qualities while still possessing individual, esoteric traits. Names are used to indicate the type of people the daughters are; Bernarda unflinchingly personifies repression while being unlike any other character in theater. Lorca accomplishes this balance through his precise use of language, through the rhythmic use of silence, and through the haunting atmospheric effect of his theatricality. His precise descriptions of the color of rooms, the use of strange devices (like Maria Josefa's song), and the heightened moments all create an atmosphere of claustrophobia and visceral unease. In the end, the story of this play is extremely simple - what matters is the experience of feeling locked in the world of the daughters.

1. 5

**What does Maria Josefa represent, and how does Lorca accomplish this representation?**

Maria Josefa is a strange character. Bernarda's old mother, locked away because of her seeming senility, plays the role of a prophet. She brings wisdom through madness. What she represents is freedom, a freedom that finds its outlet in imagined sexuality. There is surely something sad about the fact that to find freedom, she has to retreat into her own fantasies, and yet the old woman is able to find peace in her fantasies of living with a new husband by the sea, finding sexual satisfaction in a pastoral landscape away from civilization. In her second scene, when she sings, Lorca indicates a certain innocence in her character through her use of a lamb as a baby. The warnings she brings when she enters are the costs of repression and the importance of freedom and fantasy. Through her senile yet atmospherically haunting scenes, Lorca paints Maria Josefa as the only true individual other than Adela, though the former's freedom comes from being close enough to death to be willing to toss off the shackles of conformity and expectation.

1. 6

**How is color used in *The House of Bernarda Alba*?**

Lorca describes his play as a "photographic document" and sets up his color scheme to evoke the image of a black-and-white photo. The first two acts are set in fully white rooms, and all the women are expected to wear black dresses. This would theatrically create an extreme pallor that would both capture the play's "photographic" nature and also create a creepy feeling. The black and white color scheme also fits in with the themes of the play. Where Bernarda keeps an extremely white house – she wants no depravity or sin in her home and hence keeps it squeaky clean – the irony is that all her daughters, and she herself, are black on the inside, rotting under their repression. So when a character enters wearing a bright color, like Adela in her green dress in Act I, the contrast is striking. It is an apt symbolic representation of the way her pronounced individuality is in stark contrast to the repression all around her.

1. 7

**Lorca intended his play to be pure realism. Is *The House of Bernarda Alba* a realistic work?**

The play concerns characters that one might find in the real world (in fact, Lorca based them on people he once knew). They have realistic psychological problems, and instances of poetic language are surprisingly few. Yet the play is difficult to label completely realist for two reasons. The first is its theatricality, which is pronounced and extreme. The bigger reason is that the characters are pronouncedly symbolic. The repression Bernarda represents is stifling, and the daughters are embroiled in their own personalities. The whole play works in symbols – the green dress, the cane that Adela breaks, the stallion – so that even though these symbols could exist in the real world, they are too strongly the work of a focused poet who wants to communicate something larger than just a 'realistic' story.

1. 8

**Defend Bernarda Alba as a sympathetic character.**

It is not easy to defend the tyrant Bernarda as sympathetic. She uses her cane and intensity to force her daughters into a painful and repressive life. She seems to care more about how she is perceived by neighbors than about the happiness of her own girls. Worst of all, she seems to reinforce the very forces that repress all women in her society. Yet it is precisely through understanding these forces that one can see Bernarda as sympathetic. Perhaps what Lorca hates much more than the tyrant are the forces that create the tyrant. While Bernarda seems to care a lot about how she is perceived, the truth is that the townspeople are harshly devoted to their gossip and judgments, so much so that they force a young girl to murder her baby rather than own up to giving birth out of wedlock, and ultimately to die for her mistake. So Bernarda is not entirely incorrect in living by those values. In a perverse way, Bernarda thinks she is doing the right thing for her daughters – she understands that the world represses and punishes women for their sexuality and that the only way to be successful is to show the strength of a man. Because her daughters do not have that strength, she tries to keep them safe from those tragic forces of conformity and repression in the world, but ironically she herself is the most repressive force of all to that end. One can argue that Bernarda is sympathetic because it is the forces of the world, not her, that are the villain, and in the rare moments when we see her pain (such as when she learns about Adela's death), we see how distraught she is about acting in the way she believes she must.

1. 9

**How does La Poncia fit into the household? In what ways is she different from the other women, and in what ways is she representative of the same forces?**

La Poncia, the trusted and long-time servant, is both separated from and totally immersed in the dark energies of the Alba household. The main way in which she is separated can be understood through class. She makes it clear, both when talking to the other servants and through her animosity when speaking with Bernarda, that she is affected by class resentment. Much of her anger comes from that resentment, and in that way she can never totally sympathize with the girls and their repression. However, it is precisely this resentment that makes her a perfect fit for the household. Everyone in that house is a victim of resentments born of repression, and everyone but Adela lets it consume them. So even though La Poncia is particularly rotted by class rather than by sexual repression, she and Bernarda are so close because both of them understand that the world yields this animosity, especially in women. The competitiveness between La Poncia nad Bernarda reflects the competitiveness that exists between all the girls, making the larger point that women in particular are subject to such bitterness. So in the end, what makes La Poncia best fit into the Alba household is the camaraderie they all share as a result of being women in a world that represses them.

1. 10

**Discuss religion in the play. Do characters give respect to their religion?**

In a certain way, characters give extreme respect to religion. The rituals of Spanish Catholicism are treated with honor – consider the bells that everyone acknowledges or the way Bernarda leads a call-and-response before dismissing the mourners. However, religion seems yet another repressive force overall. For Prudencia, religion is only a crutch to manage her regret over having banished her daughter. The fact that she was not allowed, under her society's strictures, to have challenged her husband's decision to banish the daughter, means that religion only presents her with a way to make peace with rather than challenge the status quo. Further, religion is only another venue through which the pettiness of humans can be seen. Bernarda expresses the belief that a woman should only look at a man in church, and Prudencia will soon quit going to church because she is being mocked. In the end, while Lorca does not make any blanket condemnation of religion, he does present it as unable to transcend the greater repressive and destructive forces of humanity.