Sexual Nihilism in The House of Bernarda Alba by Garcia Lorca: A Literary Onomastic Vignette

Grace Alvarez-Altman

The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los

Repository Citation

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@brockport.edu.
In May, 1955, the Milanese journal *Tempo* asked the most outstanding contemporary literary critics of Italy the following question: If you had to save twenty books in a new universal flood, which ones would you choose? Among the twenty chosen were: Gabriel d'Annunzio; T.S. Eliot; William Faulkner; García Lorca for his *ROMANCERO GITANO*; William Faulkner; André Gide; Ernest Hemingway; James Joyce; Kafka; D.H. Lawrence; Thomas Mann; Luigi Pirandello, Marcel Proust, etc. The aesthetic merit of the corpus of Federico García Lorca's work as poet, dramatist, and lyricist is based on his mysterious poetic virtue. Beyond the dramatic, he philosophically depicts the human fearful five: malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander (I Peter 2:1), in a manner most relevant to the 20th century mind. Here we have a universal au-
Through the microscope of literary onomastics we will consider Lorca's most popular play in U.S. universities and colleges: THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA. The five formal approaches to literature are: Humanistic; Sociological; Archetypal; Psychological; Aesthetic. Literary Onomastics goes beyond these five formal approaches. In literature we have established that there are 12 families of names with 112 categories (families: diactinic-charactonyms, personality traits; anomynical-nameless; neologisms; computerized; chimerical; invented; elliptic), 6 techniques (synechdochic-10 types), or polyanthroponomical where one character has numerous names, and Typologies (one relevance to ontology or cosmology - that is, universal concepts of names).

Non-political Lorca, a pantheistic rebel within a classical literary orb, cruelly chained, brutally murdered during the Civil War (Little World War), was considered a mysterious political risk to talk or write about in Spain during Franco's 39-year dictatorship which ended in 1975. Franco's death has opened up a pandora's box of Lorquian studies from within Lorca's unknown grave.

Nihilism, even though it was first used by the Russian revolutionary anarchists during the reign of Alexander II, existed during Buddhist times as a metaphysical teaching of Mahayana, the
doctrine of the VOID, termed NEGATIVISM. This develops into the existentialist concept of Dostoyevsky, often cited as a forerunner of existentialism, in which REASON only leads to formulate generalizations that will let you down. Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, developed the concept of NIHILISM by defining REALITY as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window which reads: Pressing Done Here. If you brought your clothes to be pressed, you would be fooled; for only the sign is for sale. To Lorca the theater is poetry that elevates itself from the books, becomes human, speaking, shouting, screaming until it gets desperate. In his last play HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA we perceive not only the existentialism but the Hindu onomastic concept in juxtaposition with the Christian-Roman. By choosing Anguish and Martyrdom as names for two of the five daughters we are reminded of how the Hindus conceived of proper names which, though denotative of individuals, had "universals" as their connotation. Here we have implied the universal "spinsterhood."

The play itself is a polaroid instamatic photograph impregnated in the mind of Lorca as he spied on the neighbors in Valderrubio, Granada. The old widow Bernarda Alba with tyrannical vigilance rules over her five unmarried daughters:

As they were prisoners deprived of all free will, I never spoke to them...but I could see
them pass like shadows, always silent and
dressed in black...it was a mute and cold hell
under the African sun, the sepulchre of live
people under the inflexible rule of the gloomy
incarcerator. 4

There actually existed in real life a lover of one of the un-
fortunate girls, called Pepe. The only male character of the play
never appears on stage. However, there are slight rumors of his
passionate lovemaking and panting with Adela, in the barn. The
constant talk about him by the five daughters and all the women
makes him an invisible character, omnipresent and at times even
more powerful than the tyrannical Bernarda Alba. The audience
senses a forceful silhouette as he passes by the windows courting
ANGUISH, the oldest daughter.

Bernarda, from two germanic words 'berin' and 'hard,' means
"daring, strong bear." Alba from the Latin 'albus' means 'dawn or
white,' which became a very popular name among the Israelites.
White walls, white patio, white floors, everything immaculately
white representing piety, purity, sinlessness, is visible on stage.
Bernarda defends, first of all, the old, and hateful to Lorca, code
of honor, for which the Spanish language has two words. Honra is
the "horizontal concept" of society while honor is the "vertical
personal concept" emanating from God above. Secondly, she must
defend the family from "el que dirá la gente" (neighbors' gossipy tongues). The Christian code of virginity was more rigorously enforced in Spanish tradition than in any other western culture after the tragic incident of losing their country to the Arabs or pagans. This was due to the defloweration of the daughter of the ruler of Ceuta in 711. Such a historical incident served to augment the priestly misogynists in Spain. Anguish and Martyrdom, the two less attractive of the five daughters, within an onomastic framework of universality represent women subjugated to (according to Lorca) not human forces combating each other but telluric forces. The "daring bear" within a halo of whiteness and purity is a selfish, merciless matron who forces her five daughters ranging from 20-39 years of age into a pit of despair. After returning from the requiem for the deceased father, Bernarda sentences not only the five daughters but her own mother and old servant in this manner.

During the eight years of mourning the wind from the street won't enter this house. We'll pretend that the windows and doors are walled with bricks. That's what we did in the houses of my father and grandfather. 5

Anguish actually is the patron saint of the church of Granada (Virgen María Nuestra Señora De La Angustias). Lorca's favorite
childhood game in the family patio was "saying mass" to this patron saint while neighborhood children and members of his family watched in awed reverence. The Latin *angustus* from 'ango' also corresponds to the throat that contracts and tightens because of fear. Anguish is a neurosis that according to Freud, who unconsciously employed a masculine model for both sexes, creates a syndrome of irritability, respiratory disorders and dizziness. The dreadful apprehension of anguish that the thirty-nine year old daughter displays is a direct toxic effect of sexual frustration, excitation and enforced abstinence. In ecclesiastical Latin 'angustus' becomes synonymous for 'afflictions and tribulations.'

The word 'angustia' first appears in the Spanish language during the XVth century with the meaning of narrowness, critical situation. Here implied is the narrowness of the birth canal, creating an erotic critical situation of unfulfillment. The first time Anguish appears on stage, we hear Bernarda reprimanding her for paying attention to rumors about Pepe el Romano being at the mass in church. In this case, however, he is anxious to get a glimpse of a good marriage prospect. He is supposed to be planning to propose marriage to Angustia since she has just inherited a great fortune. Bernarda retorts sharply:

> Women in church shouldn't look at any man but the priest and him only because he wears
skirts. To turn your head is to be looking for the warmth of corduroy.  

Spanish children first learn about the supreme value of chastity in men and virginity in women through the stories of the saints and martyrs. In the Hispanic world, Martirio (Martyrdom) is a mystic name meaning "to testify, to witness, to suffer unjustly for a cause." During the fourth century there were two Bizantine Martyrs and since then Martirio has been a Spanish anthroponym. Spain is the land of western mysticism, which is a direct conscious union of the soul with God accomplishable in this life by three stages. The purgative, or the first stage, excluding all external forces, forgetting the outside world and concentrating within, is practiced in the First Act of the play, Casa de Bernarda Alba, by vocal prayers. The character Martyrdom is chastity itself, revealing the teleological meaning of virginity which remains still a mystery to many. In many primitive civilizations defloration of the bride is a ritual, public or private, performed by a priest or stranger. This practice originates from the dreadful fear of "spilling blood." Lorca rebels against all social forces creating any norms stifling woman's freedom. He was a true advocate of women's liberation.
I will always sympathize with those who have nothing but especially with those whose tranquility and peace of mind are denied.

Martyrdom appears for the first time on stage to witness the disrespect of Adela towards Bernarda. The youngest and prettiest daughter, Adela, gives Bernarda her brightly colored fan which in itself constitutes an insult to the recently deceased father.

"Take mine, take mine." submissively says Martyrdom.

"And you?" Bernarda answers.

Martyrdom, sweltering with heat but with a martyr complex, replies, "I'm not hot."

"Well," retorts Bernarda, "Look for another, you'll need it eight years."

Martyrdom, in company of the entire cast, is to remain completely attired in black, including the fans used, until she is thirty-two years old. Bernarda has previously manipulated events to keep a certain Enrique Humanes from courting Martyrdom, thus intermeddling with any possibility of marriage for Martyrdom. By remaining in sexual abstinence, which according to the church brings about an energetic self-reliant woman of action, she may become a woman who is guided by the head. This brings to mind what Honoré Balzac said:
A woman guided by the head and not the heart is a social pestilence: she has all the defects of a passionate and affectionate woman, with none of her compensations: she is without pity, without love, without virtue, without sex.

Lorca makes it evident that the traditional sexual abstinence produces well-behaved weaklings who later become frustrated physically and spiritually. Martyrdom is speaking to the audience:

It's better never to look at a man. I've been afraid of them ever since I was a little girl...God has made me weak and ugly and has definitely put such things away from me. 9

Anguish, the thirty-nine year old daughter, is rebuked by Bernarda with a cruel slap across the face and sent to her room because she eaves-dropped while the men in the patio, who came to pay their respects to the deceased father, told stories. Bernarda wants to know what the men spoke about. The servant willingly tells:

They were talking about Paca La Roseta. Last night they tied her husband up in a stall, stuck her on a horse behind the saddle and
carried her away to the depths of the olive
grove.

"And what did she do?" asked Bernarda, turning
her head to make sure that Anguish remained in
her room.

Well, she was just as happy, this Paca La
Roseta. They say her breasts were exposed and
Maximiliano held on to her as if he were play­
ing a guitar. 10

One day the servant announces that Pepe el Romano will be
passing by the house. SURREPTITIOUSLY a libidinous craze possesses
all the five daughters. All four, except the youngest daughter,
run to the front windows to see the handsome Pepe. Adela, the
rebel, places herself half dressed in front of her bedroom window
to make sure of a conquest. How successful she is! Man possesses
her and drags her to doom or liberation. One dark moonless night,
after midnight, Pepe proposes marriage to Anguish — what joy!
These are the second-hand words told by Anguish herself to her
sisters, which Pepe spoke to her in an unaltruistic manner:

Angustias, you know, I am after you. (then
leaning closer to the window bars) I need a
good well-brought up woman, and that's you if
it's agreeable. 11
Enlarging upon C.G. Jung's concepts of woman psychology, Toni Wolff, with whom I agree, has all the psychological functions of women divided into four personality types: 12

MATERNAL, HETAIRA, AMAZON, MEDIUMISTIC

1. MATERNAL: Most prevalent is "mothering which tends to become smothering"; possessiveness rushes up from the unconsciousness — priority in life is CHILDREN, so we see BERNARDA ALBA, who by the way hated both her husbands.

2. HETAIRA: Companionship is prevalent; "Father or Husband" is priority, not children. Totally dependent on men (seductress is an example). ANGUSTIAS, having only one more year to pass the average life span, is only interested in a companion and with her inherited money she can buy one.

3. AMAZON: Independent, self-contained, concerned only with her own achievement — equality with men; fulfillment is not dependent on man or children. She misuses love relationships. ADELA is the epitome of the Amazon type who prefers death to a life devoid of total independence of her feelings, sensations,
thinking and intuitions. SUICIDE-solution: the CAREER WOMAN falls primarily into this trap.

4. MEDIUMISTIC: Prevalent and principal role is mediator --having a cross to bear like Florence Nightingale, Joan of Arc, or Susan B. Anthony, whether political (the Love Canal syndrome), social (abortion), religious (cults, etc.), psychological (liberty of spirit and action). MARTYRDOM carries the torch in this play under this type of female personality. Even though she hates Adela she fights for freedom of action by stealing Pepe's picture, placing it under her pillow and defying all the rules and regulations of family tradition and religious decency.

If you are a woman, to which one of these categories do you belong? Don't be too quick to answer because our hearts are very deceiving; the only truth in our lives, according to Lorca, is a constant Anguish and daily Martyrdom.

García Lorca's technique in nominology is versatile and unique. Common everyday objects he liked to call by fantastic and
capricious names, many times invented ones, while poetic things he called by their proper substantive names.

There is no mention of love, which Pepe has reserved for his passionate love affair with Adela. Every night after saying goodbye to Anguish, Pepe spends the time from one-thirty to four in the morning in the barn with Adela, until Martyrdom finds out.

Adela: You know better than I he doesn't love her.

Martyrdom: I know.

Adela: You know because you've seen—he loves me, me.

Martyrdom: (desperately) Yes.

Adela: (close before her) He loves me, Me! He loves me, me!

Martyrdom: Stick me with a knife if you like, but don't tell me that again. 13

Martyrdom involuntarily steals a picture of Pepe that belongs to Anguish which she keeps under her bedcovers. She starts to experience a "dream-state" wave of heat which increases the flow of blood as an extraordinary excitable sexual phantasy. When she finds out that Adela possesses the body of Pepe her wrath and jealousy turn into rage for she too loves Pepe. This type of rage is an archaic type of reaction to frustration. In psychological
terms there is a massive emergency discharge intended to release a
flood of unmastered excitation in a total or partial absence of ego
control. Martyrdom now is devoid of family sentiment, experiencing
an excruciating torment, a paroxysm, a wound so deep (for Bernarda
has deprived her marrying Henrique Humanes) as to render her a
submissive weakling.

Angustias' last words in the play are directed to Adela in a
tone of agonizing lament:

You're not getting out of here with your body's
triumph, Thief, disgrace of this House. 14

Angustias' most critical state of anxiety is experienced when she
hears the shot from Bernarda's gun intended to kill Pepe. Adela,
secretly carrying in her womb Pepe's child, knows that the village
will stone her to death. Such is the custom in the light of the
most immoral, unpardonable sin, sex out of wedlock. Fleeing from
the exacerbated glare of Angustia, Adela runs to her room and hangs
herself. Upon discovery of the lifeless body, Bernarda commands
that the church bells are to toll twice because her daughter died a
virgin, a virgin, and no one is to cry nor ever reveal the truth of
the matter. Martyrdom, gazing unflinchingly at her dead hanging
sister, says:

A thousand times happy she, who had him. 15
Sexual nihilism\textsuperscript{16} sets in upon the household with a mood of despair and emptiness of human existence. We might behold Anguish and Martyrdom as one entity representative of the excruciating torment and aching misery forced upon women cruelly subjected to live in a world that stifles the most potent human force. The prospect of an additional three years, added to the eight of mourning for the so-called dead virgin sister, will make Bernarda, the "daring bear," victorious. They will now remain virgins and achieve a superior being like angels\textsuperscript{17} in an atmosphere devoid of eroticism and libidinous forces. The cord used by Adela to hang herself is ironically used by Bernarda to forever tighten and constringe the grip of the "Anguish and Martyrdom" forced upon the universal world of "spinsterhood" not only limited to Spain.

Perhaps the typology of the function of literary names can be aggrandized by incorporating a third step: relevance to onomastic ontology.

Grace Alvarez-Altman
State University of New York
College at Brockport
NOTES


6. Ibid., p.162.


10. Ibid., p.167.

11. Ibid., p.179.


15. Idem.

