

## **Protagonist: Bernarda Alba or Pepe el Romano? In Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba"**

Humaira Tariq<sup>1</sup>, Ch. M. Shoaib Alam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>(Center for Undergraduate Studies, University of the Punjab, Pakistan)

---

**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to identify and point out the true protagonist in Lorca's "The House of Bernarda Alba." The researcher believes that although Bernarda enjoys this position in popular literary practice yet the character of Pepe is a more profound and influential one. The paper also shows that Pepe does not appear physically onstage, even once throughout the play, still the influence exercised by him has far reaching consequences in the making as well as the unfolding of the play. Pepe is responsible for all the action in the play and is such an influential figure that he is able to challenge Bernarda's control and cause mutiny in the house thus establishes his supremacy over Bernarda as the protagonist.*

**Keywords :** *Action, Challenge, Consequences, Control, Influence, Mutiny, Protagonist.*

---

No literature student is unfamiliar with the term, "Protagonist." It is an entity that comes under the microscope for intense examination while studying a literary text in any academic situation. However, for the purpose of absolute clarity the definition of protagonist is given here as, "The principal character in a literary work (as a drama or story)." [1] In Lorca's play, "The House of Bernarda Alba" although Bernarda is usually understood to be the principal character yet Pepe el Romano, due to the strong influence he exerts, can be acknowledged to steal the limelight of protagonism from Bernarda Alba, as will be further elaborated in the course of this paper.

In the play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Pepe el Romano exercises powerful influence on the house. Even though he does not appear physically on the stage yet his discernible presence is felt through his influence on the characters. Discussing the absence of men from the play, Robert Lima writes in his article, "Missing in Action: Invisible males in la casa Bernarda Alba", "It might be conjectured that a household without men was what appealed to the playwright in his theatrical documentation of a real Andalusian (read Spanish) family." [2] In the case of Pepe his apparent absence from the stage makes him all the more prominent. In the first act Girl tells Angustias at the funeral service of Antonio Maria Benavides, "Pepe el Romano was with the men in church." [3] This information given to Angustias shows that Angustias has some kind of relationship with Pepe. Such references to the absent character in the beginning of the play indicate his importance in the unfolding of the story and his consequent influence on other characters. The frequency with which Pepe is mentioned and discussed, increases in the later scenes of the play. His extremely prominent position in the play can be judged from the fact that he is the most talked of character in all the characters of the play. Magdalena says about him, "Pepe el Romano is twenty-five and he's the best catch for miles around." [3] Hence, The excessive talk about Pepe, by other characters is an indication of his influence on Bernarda's House.

Bernarda rules her house with an iron hand and her house is particularly feminine. No man is allowed to enter the house and Bernarda's attitude towards men is marked with stringency. We learn in the play that Enrique Humanes was interested in Martirio but Bernarda turned him away. For her Humanes was a man of lower origin but in the case of Pepe Bernarda's attitude is different. He is the only man she approves of. The comparable rejection of Humanes and approval of Pepe by Bernarda also reflects the influence and power that Pepe exercises over the house and even on Bernarda, making him a more powerful contender for the place of protagonist as compared to Bernarda. Bernarda approves of Pepe for Angustias even though it is known that he is only after Angustias' money. In the article titled, "The House of Bernarda Alba and Play without a Title" Gilmore expounds this situation as,

"From the outset, Pepe enjoys an unusually favourable position. His interest in marrying an unattractive, nearly forty-year-old spinster unsuitable for childbearing leaves little room to doubt Magdalena's contention that he comes to the house "for the money." [4]

The phrase "unusually favourable position" also highlights the importance of Pepe in the play. The match between Angustias and Pepe is completely inappropriate as Poncia says, "For Pepe to be with Angustias doesn't seem right to me, nor to other people, nor even to the air around us" [3] but Pepe's charisma is so strong that Bernarda does not pay heed to her word. Angustias realizes that she is not happy to be with Pepe, "I ought to be happy but I'm not" [3] even then she is willing to marry him. One can say here that there is some unmistakable force in Pepe that compels her to forsake her apprehensions and agree to marry him.

Pepe figures as one of the most influential characters of the play also because he rules over the hearts of Bernarda's daughters. Where Bernarda exercises fear and restraint in her daughters there Pepe is the symbol of love and liberation. In the first act, when the daughters learn that Pepe is coming towards the house they rush to "go and see him!" which indicates the fascination he holds for them [3]. J.L. Styan comments on the condition of the girls in, "Modern Drama in Theory and Practice" in these words, "They are locked up in the house, and human nature fights back as each feels sexual desire for the unseen Pepe el Romano." [5] Maria Josefa's remark about Pepe and the girls, "You all love him." [3] is a very telling comment in this regard. Angustias, Martirio and Adela have a stronger relationship with Pepe than the other two daughters of Bernarda. Angustias' association with Pepe is due to her engagement with him. He is important to her as he embodies a means of escape from the house which is, in the words of Fredrick Lumley, "...a prison, of jealousy, bigotry, unhappiness, ruled by the rod of iron of Bernarda." [6] Angustias voices her feelings thus, "Fortunately I shall soon be getting out of this hell." [3] On the other hand, Adela is madly in love with Pepe. She voices her possessive stance in these words, "Pepe el Romano is mine" [3] Adela's love for Pepe brinks on disaster as she is willing to take reckless steps for him. Exposing the intensity of her passion she says, "I'll be whatever he wants me to be. The whole village will be against me, pointing their fiery fingers and burning me up...I'll put on the crown of thorns worn by every woman who's loved by a married man." [3] She is willing to cross all social and moral boundaries for Pepe. Pepe's strong influence on Adela is clear from her words, "No body but Pepe tells me what to do." [3] In addition to Adela, Martirio also loves Pepe. In "The House of Bernarda Alba and Play without a Title", John Gilmour, writes about this situation, in these words, "Not only is Adela desperate for Pepe, but Martirio is as well." [4] In the beginning Martirio is hesitant in admitting her love for Pepe. It is only towards the end of the play that she says, "Let me be honest and say it. I do! ...I love him!" [3] In this way Pepe, being the center of attention and means of fulfilment of sexual desire, commands great control over the girls and thus figures in the play as a pivotal character.

Pepe's importance in the making and execution of the play is also apparent from the fact that all the action that takes place in the play, is related to him. Fredrick Lumley talks of him as "...the mysterious character of Pepe el Romano, who is behind the action in the play but never actually appears..." [6] In the first act when Maid announces, "Pepe el Romano is coming down the street!" [3] The stage directions tell the reader, "Amelia, Martirio, and Magdalena are galvanized into action." [3] This shows the importance of Pepe in their lives. The "uproar going on" in the house "right in the middle of the afternoon heat" is also related to Pepe because Angustias is unable to find Pepe's picture [3]. It results in beating of Martirio by Bernarda and an exchange of harsh words in the family. The confusion, that whether Pepe left the house at one in the morning or at half past four, is also a source of action in the play. The quarrel between Martirio and Adela in Act III and the final scene of the play also revolve around Pepe and are explicitly related to him. Adela, the youngest daughter of Bernarda, so much so takes her own life for the sake of Pepe's love. Nearly all the action of the play is in one way or the other related to Pepe el Romano justifying his position as the protagonist of the play.

Pepe is the reason of Bernarda's house turning into a "battle-ground of a house" [3] It is under his influence that the daughters start fighting among themselves and Pepe becomes so dear and important to them that, "not even the ties of blood mean anything any more." [3] He embodies a destructive force for Bernarda's daughters. In the article, "The House of Bernarda Alba and Play without a Title" this aspect is discussed as, "Although he is never visually present on stage, Pepe's prominence is communicated through his disruptive effects on the daughters." [4] From the beginning of the play we get to know that none of the daughters is happy with the marriage settlement of Angustias and Pepe. As Magdalena says about the marriage to Martirio and Amelia, "You're not pleased, either of you." [3] And this unhappiness springs from each daughter's furtive desire to get name joined with Pepe. Angustias senses her sisters' hostile attitude towards her due to the planned marriage. She comments on Adela's behaviour in these words, "She's eaten up with envy." [3] Pepe is also the fuel for the constant bickering between Adela and Martirio in the play. When Poncia remarks that, "Nobody sees a woman in her petticoat." [3] Martirio says, "[pointedly, looking at Adela] Sometimes they do!" [3] She is suggesting licentious behaviour on Adela's part for Pepe's gratification. The whole issue of the lost picture of Pepe el Romano creates great discord between the daughters of Bernarda. The gulf between the sisters, already in place because of the incorrigible Pepe, is further widened due to this incident. In this scene, Magdalena says to Adela and Martirio, "You're mad, both of you" [3] and Adela accuses Martirio, "It was something else building up inside you, bursting to get out." [3] Thus one can sense the hatred between the daughters build up gradually and Pepe is the sizzling force behind it. Martirio's aggressive state is verbalised by Poncia, "She's a sink of poison. She knows she won't get Romano, so she'd wreck the whole world if she could." [3] At the end of the play the hatred between Adela and Martirio reaches its highest stage. After admitting her love for Pepe, Martirio says to Adela, "We're not the same blood any more; I'd like to look on you as my sister, but for me you're just another woman now." [3] Adela's condition is no different from Martirio's as she says, "They tell us we should love our sisters. God must have abandoned me to dwell in darkness, because I look at you as I'd

never seen you before.” [3] All this intense hatred is generated among the daughters due to Pepe and so pure and strong bond as that of sisterhood is relinquished and forgotten for the sake of this one man.

The hatred between sisters reaches such intensity that Martirio becomes instrumental in Adela's suicide. She misleads Adela into believing that Pepe has been shot and when Magdalena asks her why she said so, she replies, “For her benefit. I'd like to drench her in blood.” [3] These words of Martirio expose her destructive intentions for Adela. In “The House of Bernarda Alba and Play without a Title” this betrayal by Martirio is described in these words, “...Adela takes the word of a jealous and untrustworthy sister of Pepe's death...and rushes immediately to put an end to herself.”[4] The entire conflict in the play is due to Pepe el Romano. It clearly establishes his influence on the house of Bernarda Alba and his exceptionally important place in unfolding of the play

As a final proof of my argument that Pepe is the rightful protagonist of the play as opposed to Bernarda, I will expose that how he is able to challenge even Bernarda's authority and command in the play which is indispensable for presence of the strong aura of her character. Christopher Soufas Jr. writes about this influence of Pepe in these words, “From very early on, it becomes apparent that the house does not belong to Bernarda in any meaningful sense but in fact to another off-stage player who has been able to disturb the privacy and silence that Bernarda so covets.” [7] She does all she can to keep her daughters under her control but Pepe's intervention callously disrupts her autonomy. In the beginning Bernarda remains ignorant of her daughter's passions and of the strong influence that Pepe exercises on them. Her inability to judge the critical situation is commented on by Gilmore in these words, “...the inappropriateness and insufficiency of Bernarda's response to such powerful developments...”[4] These “powerful developments” are directly related to Pepe. After the picture incident, which takes place again due to Pepe, Bernarda apprehends losing control over her daughters for the first time, as she says, “I must make them feel the weight of my hand.” [3] One wonders that if the picture of Pepe is able to instigate such “uproar” in the house, what destruction would his actual appearance cause. After this incident, Poncia and Bernarda realize that Pepe is a threat to the harmony of the house as Poncia says, “*he* must be got away from here.” [3] Maid also senses a challenge posed to Bernarda's authority in the house. As she says, “Bernarda thinks she's a match for everybody. She doesn't know the power a man has over a house full of women.” [3] And that man is unmistakably Pepe el Romano. Adela tarnishes the honour of her highly orthodox and conformist family, by going to Pepe at night time. In Act III, Adela breaks Bernarda's stick and says, “That's what I do with the tyrant's rod.” [3] The rod is the symbol of Bernarda's authority and when it is broken by her daughter, her authority is clearly challenged. Furthermore Adela says about Pepe, “He will rule over everyone in this house. He's out there, breathing like a lion.” [3] These words of Adela embody a direct challenge to Bernarda's authority in the house due to Pepe's character. Gilmore comments on this as,

“Bernarda's pretensions to control are thus discredited almost from the outset since the spectator clearly understands that something more powerful is making its uninvited presence felt in her private scene.” [4]

That “something more powerful” than Bernarda is Pepe el Romano and he has achieved that power through the influence he has on the house and its inhabitants. The undermining of Bernarda's authority, which is the hallmark of her personality and character, by Pepe is a clear a manifestation of his position in the play as its protagonist over Bernarda. Gilmore's words are again worth quoting here, “Pepe eventually takes from Bernarda something that she values much more highly, her moral authority.”[4]

Maria Josefa remarks in the play, “Pepe el Romano is a giant” and indeed he figures as the giant in the play and other characters appear ant-like in front of him. Bernarda Alba is no doubt an important character in the play, as the title of the play carries her name yet when compared to Pepe, the supremacy is unmistakably Pepe's, as the justified protagonist of the play.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (London, Merriam-Webster Inc., 2008).
- [2] Robert Lima, Missing in Action: Males in La Casa de Bernarda Alba, *Lorca, Bunuel, Dali: Art and theory*. Eds. Manuel Delgado Morales and Alice J. Poust. (Cranbury: AUP, 2001. 136-147).
- [3] Federico Garcia Lorca, The House of Bernarda Alba, *Plays by Lorca* (London: Penguin, 1992).
- [4] John Gilmore, The House and Bernarda Alba and Play without Title, *The Major Plays* ( London: Granta Books Ltd., 1987).
- [5] J.L.Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1986).
- [6] Fredrick Lumley, *Trends in 20th Century Drama*. (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960).
- [7] Christopher Soufas Jr. Lorca beside Artaud: Parallel Developments of a Modernist Mise-en-scène, *Lorca, Bunuel, Dali: Art and Theory*. Eds. Manuel Delgado Morales and Alice J. Poust. (Cranbury: AUP, 2001).