IN La casa de Bernarda Alba, subtitled Drama de mujeres en los pueblos de España, there emerge patterns of systematic, repetitive negation which reinforce Lorca's overt portrayal of overwhelmingly vacant female lives. The play is very well integrated—the setting, the vocabulary, the details of every episode and the realistic or symbolic meaning of every action contribute to the unity of the negative impact. The totality of this negative impact can best be perceived through an examination of the techniques Lorca uses to create a world exclusively governed by negation in its many forms: rejection, emptiness, sterility, absence of sensation, loneliness, seclusion, futility and denial.

The setting of white, thick-walled rooms entered by no man during the play and populated by women dressed in black, exactly characterizes the negative atmosphere of this “documental fotográfico.” Further, the drama is framed by two deaths which, because of their antithetical nature, together suggest total annihilation—Act I begins with the funeral of an old man, and the play ends with the suicide of a young woman.

Bernarda expresses the obsessive domination of her household through negative, non-productive or destructive orders. The nature of her concerns becomes clear in the servants' conversation during the exposition of the play. Poncia complains that now that Bernarda is not eating she wants everyone to die of hunger. Bernarda keeps her insane but harmless mother locked in her room, and she does not permit people to enter her home. She also makes a fetish of cleanliness: "Limpia bien todo. Si Bernarda no ve relucientes las cosas me arrancará los pocos pelos que me quedan." It later becomes clear that in this play cleanliness symbolizes sterility, so what seems to be the virtue of keeping her house in order has in actuality a negative connotation.

In Bernarda's initial appearance her negative attitudes are summarized. Her first word is the command: "¡Silencio!" ("Silence" is also Bernarda's last word in the play and the word or its equivalent appears frequently throughout.) She complains that the room is not clean enough, and then ejects the maid. The conversation between Bernarda and the large group of female mourners is structured around her rejection of youth and vitality, represented by a young girl. At the beginning of the conversation the girl speaks to defend life: “Comer es necesario para vivir” (p. 1445); but Bernarda silences her with, “A tu edad no se habla delante de las personas mayores” (p. 1446). Halfway through the scene the young girl makes another attempt, this time mentioning the life force of the play, "Pepe el Romano estaba con los hombres del duelo" (p. 1447), and Bernarda contradicts her, although Pepe was there. Finally, as the women file out, the girl speaks Magdalena's name and probably would have uttered a phrase of comfort, but Bernarda's "Chiss" to stop Magdalena's tears also intimidates this representative of youthful vitality.

The most dramatic episode in which Bernarda rejects youth and life involves Adela, who provides the only splash of color in the white and black setting. In Bernarda's first encounter with Adela, she asks her for a fan, and Adela gives one to her, but the fan is decorated with red and green flowers and Bernarda throws it to the floor. In doing so she symbolically rejects her youngest daughter's passion and sen-
suality as represented by the colors red and green. Significantly, Martirio, who will be most responsible for Adela’s death, and who has already been deprived of a normal outlet for her passion and sensuality, then gives Bernarda her black fan.

Bernarda’s propensity to order almost exclusively non-productive or negative activity or to prohibit positive actions is constant throughout the play. After she pronounces her impressively hyperbolic statement that during the eight years of mourning not even the wind will be permitted to enter the house, in a master stroke of irony she tells her daughters what they may do during this time—they may make the sheets for their trousseau! This pathetic symbol of meaningless activity is central to the play—in Act II the girls work on the sheets which will never serve the purpose for which they are intended.

Bernarda’s attitude toward weeping is characteristic of her nature. She orders Magdalena not to cry, or if she must she should do so under her bed, even though these tears represent the girl’s grief after the loss of her father. Also, after Adela’s death one of Bernarda’s first reactions is to forbid weeping. Although Bernarda prohibits cathartic tears, which would bring relief and thus be “positive,” she complains because Martirio does not cry (“Ni lágrimas te quedan en esos ojos,” p. 1494) after Pepe’s photograph is found between the sheets of her bed. These tears, because they would increase the girl’s humiliation and misery, would in effect be a negative type of weeping, and thus Bernarda’s complaint is here completely in keeping with her perverse nature.

The “mother-daughter talk” with Angustias about her fiancé consists of a depressing series of negative recommendations. Angustias tells her mother that Pepe seems distracted and that when she inquires about what is bothering him, he answers evasively. Bernarda advises: “No le debes preguntar. Y cuando te cases, menos. Habla si él habla y míralo cuando te mire. Así no tendrás disgustos” (p. 1513). Angustias says that she believes Pepe is hiding things from her and Bernarda continues: “No procures descubrirlas, no le preguntes, y, desde luego, que no te vea llorar jamás” (p. 1514).

At the end of Act II, when Poncia tells Bernarda that the townspeople are going to kill the young woman who murdered her illegitimate child, Bernarda issues her most destructive order of all “Si, que vengan todos con varas de olivo y mangos de azadones, que vengan todos para matarla . . . ¡Matadla! ¡Matadla!” (pp. 1505-06). Here Bernarda outdoes herself—she even manages to give the order to kill an intensified life-denying meaning because her wrath is not directed toward the crime of murder of the newborn babe, but is aimed against the transgression which gave it life: “Y que pague la que pirotea la decencia . . . ¡ Carbón ardiendo en el sitio de su pecado!” (pp. 1505-06).

Bernarda’s refusal to allow pleasure is constant. When Adela shows delight in the beauty of a summer evening, Bernarda cuts short her enjoyment by announcing bedtime—she repeats the order to retire three times, and in a perfect example of a non-productive command awakens Magdalena in order to send her to bed. Bernarda does not permit Adela to get up from the dinner table to drink water, but tells the servant to bring a pitcher to the table. Since Adela’s thirst symbolizes desire, this order implies that only under Bernarda’s authority will she ever be able to find fulfillment. One of Bernarda’s most devastating orders involving her daughters’ sexuality occurred previous to the action of the play when she prohibited Enrique Humanas from initiating a courtship with Martirio. On the realistic level, by preventing one of her most passionate daughters from marrying, and on the symbolic level by rejecting humanity, Bernarda prepared her home for tragedy.

At the beginning of Act III there is a strange episode, given Bernarda’s insistence
upon excluding everyone from her home and consistently negative attitude toward everyone and everything. A visitor is present, and Bernarda is glad to have her there; in fact, she detains her when she starts to leave after a long visit. The guest’s name, Prudencia, offers the key, especially since her “prudence” causes her progressive non-involvement in life and the suppression of her own humanity. In response to her family troubles she does not intervene, but instead seeks refuge in the church. In fact, her visit to Bernarda is a stop on the way to the evening rosary, and Prudencia remarks that soon she will have to remain at home because she is going blind and the children would jostle her in the streets. Thus, she will be almost totally isolated from worldly sensations, and her refusal to partake of the dessert of cheese and honey which Bernarda offers to her also underlines her refusal to accept sensual pleasure. Therefore, Prudencia is a perfect model for the hermetic existence which Bernarda imposes on her household—far from being an outsider, Prudencia really belongs in Bernarda’s home as a type of idol.

Each of the five daughters reacts in a different way—ranging from passive acceptance to reckless rebellion—to Bernarda’s negative world. Amelia is the personification of negation—a nonentity. Angus- tias, the only well-to-do sister, plans to enter into a loveless marriage in order to escape the stifling environment. After thirty-nine years of repression, she approaches her wedding in a joyless, automatic way, and when she discusses Pepe her speech is full of negative expressions. Martirio’s passion, which cannot find an outlet, has curdled into hate: “Tengo el corazón lleno de una fuerza tan mala, que, sin quererlo yo, a mí misma me ahoga” (p. 1528). She expresses her malice through negation; for example, near the end of Act III, in an impressive demonstration of the use of negative vocabulary she rejects Adela and states her absolute refusal to permit her relationship with Pepe, an appropriate preparation for her lie which causes Adela’s death. Magdalena usually contributes to the negative mode by stating unpleasant facts, predicting unhappy events, criticizing and complaining. She succinctly expresses the hopelessness of their situation—“Y ni nuestros ojos si-

Martirio says they will join the enraged group, Adela pleads with her family “¡Que la dejen escapar! ¡No salgáis vosotras!” She continues to shout “¡No! ¡No!” (pp. 1505-06) while her mother orders the girl’s death.

In Act III there is a sharp contrast between Adela’s sensual awareness and the others’ inability or refusal to perceive sensations: Angustias has gone to bed and Magdalena is sleeping in her chair when Adela asks her mother why a certain rhyme is recited when a falling star is seen.8 Bernarda has no answer: “Los antiguos sabian muchas cosas que hemos olvidado” (p. 1516), Amelia remarks that she closes her eyes in order not to see them, and Adela’s “no” is really an affirmation: “Yo, no [cierro los ojos]. A mi me gusta ver correr Ileno de lumbre lo que esta quieto y quieto años enteros” (p. 1516). Martirio states that these things have nothing to do with them, Bernarda declares that it is better not to think about them, and after Adela further extols the beauty of the night, Bernarda orders everyone to what she hopes will be the oblivion of sleep.

Adela’s heroic struggle against living death fails, and her suicide may be considered to be the triumph of negation in La casa de Bernarda Alba. She hangs herself on the basis of Martirio’s lie that Pepe is dead, and after her death her vital act is repeatedly denied by her mother: “¡Mi hija ha muerto virgen!” (p. 1532).

Even the rare affirmations in La casa de Bernarda Alba are usually distorted by the negative mood. The tone is set the first time the word “si” is used, for while the bells ring after Antonio María Benavides’ death, the maid shouts in bitter mockery: “Si, si. ¡Vengan clamores! ¡Venga caja con filos dorados y toalla para llevarla! . . . Fastidiate, Antonio María Benavides” (p. 1445). Bernarda uses the word “si” rarely, and always in a context of criticism, complaint, contradiction, limitation, or of ordering death. One of her most interesting contributions to the patterns of negation is “En esta casa no hay ni un si ni un no—mi vigilancia lo puede todo” (p. 1518). Amelia, very much in character, utters only one “¿si?” in the entire play, and Magdalena never uses the word at all. Martirio joins her mother in affirming that Librada’s daughter should be killed, but the second time she uses the word constitutes one of the few true affirmations in the play, the admission of her love for Pepe: “¡Sí! Déjame decirlo con la cabeza fuera de los embozos. ¡Sí! Déjame que el pecho se me rompa como una granada de amargura. ¡Le quiero!” (p. 1527). And, of course, this positive emotion is for the unattainable, and generates the fierce jealousy which causes her sister’s death. Adela’s two affirmations are used in an attempt to protect her private life. Angustias employs the word in progressive recognition of her loss of Pepe, from the “¿Sí?” in Act II when Amelia states that he must have left at about 1:30, to the “Sí” said twice to confirm that Pepe’s photograph is missing from her room, and finally, just before the disaster, “Sí. Esta noche no viene Pepe” (p. 1516). Even Poncia employs the word with a negative connotation when she tells of her violent attack against her husband, “Sí, y por poco le dejo tuerto” (p. 1477), and later she utters a qualified “¡Eso sí! Pero . . .” (p. 1500), but she also uses the term in a positive way to suggest the only hope to save the family from disaster—that Pepe should marry Adela. Appropriately, María Josefa employs the word in its most vital sense—“Sí, crias y crias y crias” (p. 1524)—in reference to her imaginary children.

Irony also contributes to the patterns of negation in La casa de Bernarda Alba, because even episodes which apparently represent life really show death motifs in disguise. For example, there is a moment in the play in which masculine vitality almost succeeds in penetrating the thick walls when the reapers pass and the girls run to look at them through the window.
of Adela’s room. But this moment is also charged with negative symbolism. The reapers, unlike their counterparts, the woodcutters in Bodas de sangre, who obviously associate themselves with death, are represented as virile men, completely identified with the life force. But the reapers’ song, which in the context of the scene is understood to allude to love, may also be interpreted as describing death:

Ya salen los segadores en busca de las espigas; se llevan los corazones de las muchachas que miran. Abrir puertas y ventanas las que vivís en el pueblo, el segador pide rosas para adornar su sombrero.

( pp. 1486-87 )

Adela is the sister who is most eager to see the reapers, and since her death is caused by her eagerness to experience life, this episode is a perfect symbolic representation of her fate.

Other forces with which Adela identifies as exemplifying life also ironically denote the contrary. The lightning bolt which Adela tacitly likens to her own sudden burst of energy has an extremely brief existence. It is also an agent of destruction, and both Poncia, when she predicts lightning will strike, and Bernarda, when she wishes for the strength of lightning to quell the rebellion in her home, stress the destructive aspect of lightning. Adela is elated by the beauty of the stars, but Martirio remarks in a presaging statement: “Esta se puso a mirarlas de modo que se iba a tronchar el cuello” (p. 1515). Similarly, the horse seems to Adela to “llenar todo lo oscuro” (p. 1515), and the horse is identified with Pepe, but has also been associated with destruction wrought by passion which cannot find an outlet when Bernarda says early in Act III that if he is not let out he will knock down the walls.

Even the ironic meanings of the girls’ names intensify the negative impact of the play. Adela’s name, which apparently describes her nature of being the one to go forward toward love, “He tenido fuerza para adelantarme” (p. 1526), may also be interpreted to suggest that she is the first to die. The names Martirio, Magdalena and Angustias, which connote suffering based on faith, sacrifice and love, intensify the negative, empty sense of the drama because these characters have no spiritual dimension. The girls do not find consolation in religion—the appearance of Prudence, the beata, to whom religious resignation gives peace, underlines this by contrast. Also, there is an additional context of irony in their names, which recalls Galdós’s ironic use of classical names in Doña Perfecta, with which La casa de Bernarda Alba has been compared for other reasons. All three girls show the signs of suffering suggested by their names without the experiences or the positive traits which give this suffering meaning. Angustias agonizes, but she has no son to cause her sorrow, Magdalena weeps, but she has no reason for penance, and Martirio endures great suffering, but is incapable of sacrifice. In fact, the latter is a selfish, hypocritical person dominated by hatred—exactly the opposite of the character of a religious martyr. She has faith in nothing and acts mechanically: “Yo hago las cosas sin fe, pero como un reloj” (p. 1458). A saint’s name is also used ironically to emphasize Pepe’s defective character: after the disappearance of his photograph, Amelia remarks, “Ni que Pepe fuera un San Bartolomé de plata” (p. 1490). Saint Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles, is identified with Nathaniel, about whom Jesus said, “He aqui un verdadero israelita, en quien no hay engaño ni doblez.”

Allusions to the birth and death of Christ are also placed in ironic contrast with the events in the lives of these spiritually deficient individuals to intensify the mood of futility in La casa de Bernarda Alba. María Josefa’s name suggests a combination of the female and male principles in the birth of Christ, and the lamb which she says is her baby signifies the agnus dei.
—the mention of Bethlehem in her song confirms Lorca's intention. María Josefa appears with the lamb while Adela is in the barnyard with Pepe, thus the grandmother presents a lyrical-allegorical interpretation of Adela's situation. At the end of the play Bernarda shouts that her daughter died a virgin, and she will attempt to sustain this contention with silence and ceremony. The crown of thorns which Adela says she will put on suggests the crucifixion, and of course a female Pontius Pilate, "Poncia," witnesses Adela's death.

Throughout the play it is demonstrated that Bernarda's negative attitudes have completely permeated the house and have contaminated its inhabitants, even as Bernarda and her daughters complain about how gossip in the town embitters life, and they, in turn, are very active gossips. Those who are persecuted by Bernarda and complain about her tyranny often model their actions on her example, and this situation increases the density of the web of negation. For instance, an imitation of Bernarda's rejection, especially of youth and life, occurs before her first appearance when the maid (who soon after is the first to be rejected by Bernarda) rudely orders away a beggarwoman and her young daughter. The maid refuses to give left-over food to the poor woman, and then cleans up her traces in an attempt to erase all signs of life. Similarly, Adela, who will be the one to suffer most from the repression of her natural impulses and from being under constant vigilance, is the first to cause another to be reprimanded for an attempt to perceive life: she reports to her mother that Angustias was listening to the men's conversation after the funeral. Very soon after this, Adela is the object of a symbolic illustration of the collective nature of this repression. She appears before her sisters in a new green dress which she had intended to wear on her birthday to go to the noria to eat watermelon. Of course now after her father's death she will be deprived of the outing in which she was to have eaten the red and green fruit, but the most complete darkening of her bright color is caused by her sisters. Martírio tells her that she should dye her dress black and Magdalena suggests that she give it to Angustias (who has been called "lo más oscuro de esta casa" (p. 1464), for her wedding with Pepe el Romano. Adela was unaware until this moment that Pepe intended to marry her sister, so there is a sharp contrast between Adela's green symbol of sensuality and her desolation upon hearing the news. Another important dramatic illustration of this collective oppression involves the representative of spiritual freedom, María Josefa. At the end of Act I, while Bernarda shouts, "Encerrada," all the women help lock her up.

Although all the action occurs within the walls of Bernarda's home, hopelessness is intensified throughout the drama by reminders that the situation is intended to characterize all women's lives in Spanish towns. To suggest that no woman escapes, a representative of every female status and age either appears on the stage or is mentioned: single young ladies, old maids, wives, widows, engaged women, mothers, an abandoned wife, a common-law wife, a grandmother, girls who have lovers, and a participant in an incestuous relationship, all of whom are overwhelmed by the same atmosphere of negation. The few narrated examples of vital fulfillment emphasize the male's pleasure and are carefully distanced: the sexual orgy involving Paca la Roseta, and the visit of the accordion-playing prostitute in a spangled dress who will serve fourteen reapers and their green-eyed leader have a mythical quality like the pictures of nymphs or legendary kings which hang on the wall in Act I. Besides, the people involved in these episodes are not from the town "[Paca la Roseta] no es de aquí. Es de muy lejos. Y los que fueron con ella son también hijos de forasteros. Los hombres de aquí no son capaces de eso" (p. 1456).
It would require a line-by-line commentary of La casa de Bernarda Alba to show the full impact of negation in the play—on the most superficial level the frequent use of the word “no” is symptomatic. Phrases which suggest the absence of sensation are ever-present, and Bernarda casts a shadow over the sisters’ rare moments of laughter. Even María Josefa, in her state of dementia employs the rhetoric of negation: “Nada de lo que tengo quiero que sea para vosotras. Ni mis anillos ni mi traje de ‘moaré.’ Porque ninguna de vosotras se va a casar” (p. 1470). The atmosphere of negation also causes Poncia to follow Bernarda’s example in frequently uttering negative statements which are as varied in tone and purpose as is her position in the family. Since she is the one person in the play who tries to convince Bernarda to act reasonably, perhaps her most important contribution to the patterns of negation is her acknowledgment of defeat: “Cuando una no puede con el mar, lo más fácil es volver las espaldas para no verlo” (p. 1520).

Lorca’s concluding negative stroke in the play is to invert the meaning of an important positive symbol, the ocean, which, especially to María Josefa, represents freedom, fulfillment and fertility. The sea is far from the riverless well-town in which a “claustrophobic sensation of constriction” prevails, but it does offer an illusion of possible escape. In Bernarda’s last speech, however, while she orders the oblivion of silence, she also turns the positive ocean symbol into a negative one, “Nos hundiremos todas en un mar de luto” (p. 1532), thus signaling the final domination of negation in La casa de Bernarda Alba.

NOTES

1Lorca’s use of white in this play is discussed by Sumner M. Greenfield, “Poetry and Stagecraft in ‘La casa de Bernarda Alba,’” Hispania, xxxviii (1955), 456-61. See also J. Rubia Barcia, “El realismo ‘mágico’ de ‘La casa de Bernarda Alba’” Revista hispánica moderna, xxxi

2Federico García Lorca, Obras completas (Madrid: Aguilar, 1969), p. 1441. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and cited by page numbers in the text.

3Sumner M. Greenfield, op. cit., treats this aspect of the play.

4Eric Bentley remarks that in staging La casa de Bernarda Alba “The problem is to combine clarity with lightness. ‘Silence’ is the first word Bernarda speaks and the last. She speaks it many times. She and others use synonyms like hush and sh! and quiet! The pattern of repetition has to be effective without being oppressive” (In Search of Theater [New York: Vintage, 1959], p. 212).


6The wind as fertility symbol is also probably meant here. Lorca used the wind in this way in “Peciosa y el aire,” for example. See Jeremy C. Forster, “Aspects of Lorca’s Saint Christopher,” Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, xliii (1966), 109-17; and Rupert C. Allen, The Symbolic World of Federico García Lorca (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), pp. 30-33.

7Prudencia’s visit also provides the only time in the play that Bernarda indicates approbation of anything or anyone. Prudencia relates that since her husband quarrelled with his brothers over the inheritance, “no ha salido por la puerta de la calle” (p. 1507). Instead, he uses a ladder and climbs over the walls and the barnyard. Bernarda remarks, “Es un verdadero hombre” (p. 1507). Apparently, Prudencia’s husband has attained Bernarda’s ideal life condition: he has found a way to go out while metaphorically remaining indoors. Bernarda’s own method of intransigently secluding herself without sacrificing knowledge of the town’s events is to send Poncia to spy, but this is a far less satisfactory method than the one invented by Prudencia’s husband. Bernarda also approves of Prudencia’s husband’s refusal to pardon his daughter. The juxtaposition of Prudencia’s visit and the horse in heat is important, but the meaning of the horse has been discussed too often to need further treatment here.

8An essential article to add to the understanding of this passage is Judith M. Bull, “‘Santa Bárbara’ and La casa de Bernarda Alba,” Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, xliv (1970), 117-23.

9See Judith Bull on this point also.

10See Stephen Gilman, “Las referencias clási-
Patterns of Negation in "La casa de Bernarda Alba"

In addition to colors which symbolize Adela's sensuality, she is also associated with fertility symbols: hens, eggs, and a rabbit.

G. Torrente Ballester comments: "La moral del pueblo en que Bernarda vive es todo lo contrario de una moral primitiva; es, por el contrario, la moral racionalizada y decadente hecha de preceptos negativos, limitaciones y constricciones, que precipita el cristianismo al evaporarse" (Teatro español contemporáneo [Madrid: Guadarrama, 1968], p. 241).

Rupert Allen, op. cit., p. 48. This phrase appears in Allen's chapter on Lorca's "Niña ahogada en el pozo," a discussion which sheds light on Lorca's negative attitude toward wells and his symbolic use of them.

The "mar de luto" becomes even more intensively negative when it is recalled that the phrase "mar de llanto" would be appropriate here. But Bernarda has prohibited tears, so Maria Josefa's sea full of foam-tossed waves which symbolize the continuing generations becomes a dry, black place in which there is no hope for future life.

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