



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring 2013

The role of sex in the depiction of gender and class conflict in *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg
and *The House of Bernada Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca

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ABSTRACT

What we see through the play is the gradual reassertion of patriarchy and male rule. Jean sexually conquers Miss Julie and Pepe conquers Adela, bringing about disruption of social order and inversion of social hierarchy once these males transgressors enter the household. Sex is used in *Miss Julie* and *Bernada Alba* as a great social equalizer. By having a sexual relationship with women of superior status, the male transgressors bring themselves to conquer the females of high society, bringing them disgrace and ruin.

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Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring2013

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-3-no-1spring-2013/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Chung-Chin-Yi-1.pdf>

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social norms bring about their own downfall as they have transgressed the proper role of women in society.

The sex is brought on by different factors. In *Miss Julie* the atmosphere of midsummer night creates a wild and revelling atmosphere with passion overflowing, leading Miss Julie to indulge in hedonistic sex and wine. (Strindberg 8) In *Bernada Alba* the oppressive gloom of the mourning of the father combined with Bernada's matriarchal control on them leads them to be excessively stifled and indulge in sexual passion when she has an outburst of sexual feeling for Pepe. (Lorca 160) Jean has sex with Miss Julie to humiliate her and attempt to transcend his social class. Pepe is seduced by Adela and feels genuine passion for her.

One should note that sex is associated strongly with shame because the affairs are not performed within the context of a marriage. While Adela seems victorious that she has 'enjoyed' Pepe and Miss Julie tells Jean there are no more barriers between them, the social fabric that held the two households together is ripped apart by their one act of sexual transgression.

The sexual dynamic between males and females is unequal. Males are allowed to have multiple partners while a woman who loses her chastity loses her name as well. Having been ravished by Pepe and Jean, male transgressors of an inferior social status, Miss Julie and Adela lose their name and honour. Sexual and gender inequality proves greater than class and social hierarchy. Male dominance proves a mightier barrier than social class or status as their one

sexual act is enough to throw the entire family into disgrace and thus lower the dignity of the households they belong to.

To continue on the sexual dynamic, males possess the power to assert themselves over females in sexual intercourse. Hence Jean conquers Miss Julie and she is reduced to a servant's whore, (Strindberg 31) whereas Pepe's disgracing act drives Adela to suicide as she has been conquered and lost her family name. (Lorca 185) While Miss Julie and Adela come from female dominated backgrounds initially, patriarchy and the law of the father gradually reasserts itself through their sexual liaisons with these men of lower social status and they lose all standing they have in society without having considered the social implications of their act as there is broader sexual liberty for men than women. So Miss Julie is reduced to a servant's whore and bitch while Adela loses her name and Bernada is frantic to declare she died a virgin. (Lorca 185) In these plays thus sex is an instrument of corruption and disgrace, a means to transcend social hierarchy, and a sin which brings out a fall from the garden of Eden as purity is tainted by sexual sin.

In terms of authorial intention, Miss Julie humiliates women, there is an idea that women are naturally inferior to men in a social Darwinist philosophy. Miss Julie was written during a time where Strindberg had great contempt for women as he suspected his wife of having an affair with other women. Hence the hatred and denigration of women reflected in the vulgar language towards women and Jean as a sexual conqueror and Nietzschean overman who conquers and destroys Miss Julie proving men are the superior sex. Bernada Alba is sympathetic to the plight of women. It is based on the real life observation Lorca made of a gloomy household in mourning over the death of a father and the strong sense of oppression that ensued, leading the daughters to be suffocated by the oppressive atmosphere of mourning and to break out in sexual

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passion with a handsome transgressor and the implications of that fall with a man of lower social class which leads to disgrace the household. Bernada Alba is more feminist in its outlook.

The sex Jean has with Miss Julie is scandalous because she is of a higher class than him. It is normal for him to have sex with Christine because she is from the same social class as him. The love between Adela and Pepe is physical and spiritual, Pepe is only attracted to Angustias for her wealth, and Materio has a spiritual, twisted unfulfilled passion for Pepe.

In terms of literary technique, Strindberg uses the animal copulation between Diana the bitch and the gatekeeper's dog to foreshadow Miss Julie's liaison with Jean. (Strindberg 5) In terms of diction, Miss Julie uses command words towards Jean, (Strindberg 17) having pretensions to greater social authority initially, and then is seduced by his flattery and sweet talk; eventually Jean uses command words and vulgarities on Miss Julie, denigrating her by calling her a bitch and a whore. (Strindberg 48) Christine is used as a foil to Miss Julie as she is completely submissive to Jean and accepts women's subordinated role in society. Jean evokes the image of a garden to connote the garden of Eden in order to depict his desire as pure and free from lust, whereas in reality it is the opposite. Miss Julie is high up in the pillar Jean cannot ascend and he hides behind a tree to connote the remoteness of their social disparity, but all this is conquered and equalized in the sexual act Jean has with Miss Julie to bring her down from her social class. (Strindberg 31) It is significant that both plays take place in settings in which

patriarchy seems initially inverted. The count is absent and the father of the Bernada household has just died.

However what we see through the play is the gradual reassertion of patriarchy and male rule. Jean sexually conquers Miss Julie and Pepe conquers Adela, bringing about disruption of social order and inversion of social hierarchy once these males transgressors enter the household. Miss Julie initially takes place in the kitchen, a domestic abode in which servants abide, it is the arena of Jean and Christine and hence Miss Julie is out of her depth when she enters this realm and is seduced by Jean. The stable, where Miss Julie played games with her fiancé, is a place of ownership of animals, the same way she treats her fiancé as an animal in commanding him to jump over her whip. Eventually Jean lures Miss Julie into his room where he is the authority and commander and asserts himself sexually over her. (Strinberg 85) She gradually declines after the incident and descends to a servant's whore, losing her social power and demeaning herself. When Jean talks about setting up a hotel by the lake overseas, it is a fantasy in which Miss Julie will just be his servant and his slave, inverting the social hierarchy and reinforcing patriarchy.(Strindberg 87) Place is thus very significant in Miss Julie as it sets the atmosphere in which gender conflicts take place and social reversals occur according to the action that plays out in the very appropriate setting that foretells the action.

Bernada Alba takes place in largely white washed walls and settings, (Lorca 5) amidst funereal gloom as the family is mourning the death of their father. It is significant that white is used because white symbolizes purity, which is about to be tainted by Adela's sexual transgression with Pepe. The house is also largely confined where men are kept out as Bernada views them as dangerous and inferior, so the compound becomes largely like a prison. It is significant that this matriarchy is about to be betrayed by a sexual liason with a male of inferior

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social status, thus inverting the social order and bringing about destruction to the household. White symbolizes purity but also oppression because it cannot be tainted, once the sexual sin takes place and the house is dishonoured chaos breaks out. Hence in *Bernada Alba*, the white walls and funereal atmosphere symbolize a chaste prison that is corrupted by one act of Adela's sexual sin with Pepe, which brings destruction and ruin to the household. (Lorca 5) Marterio is used as a foil in contrast to Adela as she does not consummate her passion with Pepe. Imagery of the rapier and the rose being taken is used to connote the sexual intercourse that takes place between Pepe and Adela. (Lorca 188) The stable is a place of animal passion, they do not rise above animal instinct in reducing themselves to animal lust in the heat of the moment. When Bernada talks to Prudencia about mare mating with horse it mirrors the human situation. (Lorca 176) Sex is depicted as animal instinct and carnal as the men take the woman in the village out for a night and impregnate her, sex is pure lust in both plays and very physical and carnal.

Hence sex is used in both plays to bring about the downfall of women who have had affairs with those beneath their class and station. Sex is thus the great equalizer of class and social difference in both plays.

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Bio-note- Chung Chin-Yi has completed doctoral studies at the National University of Singapore. She has 4 years of teaching experience at NUS, teaching exposure modules and higher level electives.