

- **The opening scene of the play starts with a dreamlike child led by a shepherd. What is the significance of this?**

(I.i.1)

When the curtain rises, YERMA¹ is asleep with a sewing basket at her feet. There is a strange, dreamlike light. A SHEPHERD tiptoes in, staring at YERMA. He leads a CHILD dressed in white by the hand. The clock strikes. When the SHEPHERD exits, the light changes to the cheerfulness of a spring morning. YERMA wakes up.

VOICE SINGING (offstage):

Nana, Nana, Nana,
Nana, you will see--
We will build a little nest,
And that's where we will be.

YERMA: Juan, do you hear me? Juan!

JUAN (Offstage): Coming.

YERMA: It's time.

Water

- **In what sense does Yerma personify the meaning of her name?**

(I.i.2)

JUAN: When men stay thin, they get as strong as steel.

YERMA: But not you. When we got married, you were different. Now your face is pale-- as if the sun never touched it. **I wish you'd go down to the river and swim, and go up on the roof when the rain is pouring down on our house.** Twenty-four months we've been married, and you keep growing sadder, thinner-- as if you were growing backwards.

(I.i.3)

YERMA: Don't! Don't keep telling me what people are saying! I can see with my own eyes that's it's not true-- that **when the rain falls on the rocks, they soften and make the wild mustard grow, and people say it's useless. "That plant is useless." But I can clearly see its yellow blossoms moving in the breeze.**

¹ Yerma is derived from *yerma*, a "waste-land"-- or simply "barren." It is not a typical Spanish name.

(I.i.4-5)

Where are you coming from, love, my child?

“From the ice at the mountain’s crest.” [De la cresta del duro frío. → From the top of the cold mountain.]

What do you need, my love, my child?

“To be warmed by the cloth of your dress.”

She threads her needle.

Let the trees lift their branches up to the sun!

Let the fountains leap, and the river run!

Then, as if speaking to a child.

The dog is barking, out in the patio.

The wind in the trees is singing there.

The oxen follow the herder lowing,

And the moon is weaving braids in my hair.

What do you ask for, child, from so far?

She pauses.

“For the mountains of your white breast.”

Let the trees lift their branches up to the sun!

Let the fountains leap, and the river run!

She sews.

I tell you, my child-- it’s true, it’s true:

I am broken and torn for you.

My womb aches for you--

An empty cradle, craving you.

When, my child, are you going to come?

She pauses.

“When your flesh smells like jasmine.”

Let the trees lift their branches up to the sun!

Let the fountains leap, and the river run!

(I.ii.12)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Just the opposite of me! Perhaps that’s why you haven’t had a baby yet. **Men should be enjoyed**, my child! They should undo our braids and **give us water to drink from their own mouths. That’s what makes the world go round!**

YERMA: Yours, but not mine. **I have so many dreams, and I’m sure that my son will make those dreams come true. For his sake, I gave myself to my husband, and I keep giving myself to make sure he’s on the way-- but never for my own pleasure!**

(I.ii.12)

YERMA (*Sadly*): All doors are closed to girls like me who grow up in the country. Everything is half said, hushed up, because they say we're not supposed to know about such things. And you, too-- you, too, keep silent and walk off with the air of a doctor-- knowing everything, but denying it to **someone who is dying of thirst.**

(I.ii.15-16)

VICTOR (*Cheerfully*): Where is this beauty going?

YERMA: Was that you singing?

VICTOR: It was.

YERMA: And so well! I never heard you sing before.

VICTOR: No?

YERMA: **What a strong voice! Like a gush of water filling your whole mouth.**

VICTOR: I'm a happy person.

YERMA: That's true.

VICTOR: As you are sad.

YERMA: I'm not a sad person, but I have enough reason to be.

VICTOR: And your husband is sadder than you are.

YERMA: Yes, he is. That's his nature. [*Tiene un carácter seco.* → **He has a dry character.**]

VICTOR: He was always like that.

(I.ii.17-18)

JUAN: Let's stop this conversation. Go home!

Pause.

YERMA: Very well. Should I expect you?

JUAN: No. **I'll be watering the crops all night. We've had little rain, and it's my turn until sunrise. And I have to keep people from stealing our water.** You go to bed and go to sleep!

YERMA: (*Dramatically*): I'll go to sleep!

- ***In terms of depiction through water imagery: how do Yerma, Juan, and Victor differ?***

Love in Marriage

(I.i.2-3)

YERMA: We have no children... Juan!

JUAN: Yes.

YERMA: Do you think I don't love you?

JUAN: You love me.

YERMA: I know girls who trembled and cried before they got into bed with their husbands. Did I cry the first time I went to bed with you? Wasn't I singing as I lifted the linen sheets? Didn't I say to you, "These sheets smell just like apples!"

JUAN: That's what you said.

YERMA: My mother cried because I didn't mind leaving her. And it was true. No one was ever happier to get married. And yet...

JUAN: Quiet!

YERMA: And yet...

JUAN: Stop it! It's hard enough for me to be hearing all the time--

YERMA: Don't! Don't keep telling me what people are saying! I can see with my own eyes that's it's not true-- that when the rain falls on the rocks, they soften and make the wild mustard grow, and people say it's useless. "That plant is useless." But I can clearly see its yellow blossoms moving in the breeze.

JUAN: You have to wait!

YERMA: Yes! Wanting!

(I.i.5-6)

MARÍA: In the middle of all this, I feel embarrassed.

YERMA: What did your husband say?

MARÍA: Nothing.

YERMA: Does he love you very much?

MARÍA: He doesn't tell me so, but he comes close to me and his eyes quiver like two green leaves.

YERMA: Did he know when you...

MARÍA: Yes.

YERMA: How could he tell?

MARÍA: I don't know. But on our wedding night he kept saying it, over and over, with his mouth pressed to my cheek-- so many times that I feel as if my baby is a fiery dove that he slipped into my ear.



The Annunciation (detail) by Filippo Lippi
(Florence, Italy, ca. 1449-1459)

(I.i.11-12)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Tell me-- do you like your husband?

YERMA: What?

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Do you love him? Do you want to be with him?

YERMA: I don't know.

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Don't you tremble when he comes near you? Don't you feel that you're dreaming when he brings his lips close to yours? Tell me.

YERMA: **No. I have never felt like that.**

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Never? Not even when you danced?

YERMA: *(Recalling)*: **Perhaps. One time... Victor...**

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Go on.

YERMA: **...took me by the waist, and I couldn't say anything to him because I couldn't talk. Another time, this same Victor, fourteen years old-- he was a strapping young shepherd-- took me in his arms to help me over a ditch² and I began to tremble so hard my teeth rattled! But I've always been shy.**

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: What about with your husband...

YERMA: **My husband is another matter.** My father brought him to me and I accepted him. Happily! That's the simple truth! **From the first day we were engaged, I began to think about having children. And I saw myself reflected in his eyes. But very tiny, very manageable-- as if I were my own daughter.**

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Just the opposite of me! Perhaps that's why you haven't had a baby yet. **Men should be enjoyed, my child!** They should undo our braids and give us water to drink from their own mouths. That's what makes the world go round!

YERMA: Yours, but not mine. I have so many dreams, and I'm sure that my son will make those dreams come true. For his sake, **I gave myself to my husband,** and I keep giving myself to make sure he's on the way-- **but never for my own pleasure!**

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: **And the result is, you're empty!**

YERMA: No, not empty-- I'm filling up with hate! Tell me: is it my fault? Must you look for a man to be a man, nothing more? Then, what are you going to think when he leaves you lying in bed with sad eyes, staring at the ceiling, while he turns over and goes to sleep? Should I lie there thinking about him, or about what can come shining out of my breast? I don't know, but you tell me, I beg you!

(II.i.21)

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN *(Looking out)*: The flocks are all leaving together.

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: It's a flood of wool! Sweeping over everything! If the green wheat knew what was coming, **how it would tremble!**

² *acequia*: literally, an irrigation channel

(II.i.23)

THIRD WASHERWOMAN:

Join together flower with flower
When summer dries the reaper's blood.

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN:

**Open your womb to sleepless birds
When winter trembles at the door.**

(II.ii.33)

VICTOR: I've come to say goodbye.

She trembles slightly, but recovers her composure.

(III.ii.46)

FEMALE:

In the river in the mountains,
The despondent wife was bathing.
**Up along her naked body,
Tiny water snails were climbing.
The sand along the river edge,
The breeze of early morning,
Set her laughter all afire,
Made her shoulders tremble,
Oh, she was naked, laughing,
The maiden in the water!**

(I.ii.14)

YERMA: Why did you get married?

SECOND GIRL: Because they married me off. Everybody gets married! If we go on like this, no one will be left single except the children! Well, anyway-- **the fact is, a girl gets married long before she goes to the church.** But the old women are dead set on all this. I'm nineteen years old and I don't like to cook or clean. Well, now I have to spend the whole day doing things I don't like! And what for? **Why is it necessary for my husband to be my husband? We did the same thing when we were engaged that we do now. Old people's foolishness!**

(I.ii.16-17)

VICTOR: You came to bring his dinner?

YERMA: Yes.

She looks at him. Pause.

What do you have there?

Pointing to his face

VICTOR: Where?

YERMA (*Rising and approaching VICTOR*): **Here-- on your cheek. Like a burn.**

VICTOR: It's nothing.

YERMA: To me, it looks like...

Pause.

VICTOR: **It must be the sun.**

YERMA: Perhaps.

Pause. The silence deepens, and with no outward sign, an intense struggle between the two begins.

Trembling.

Do you hear that?

VICTOR: What?

YERMA: Don't you hear crying?

VICTOR (*Listening*): No.

YERMA: **I thought I heard a child crying.**

VICTOR: Yes?

YERMA: **Close by. Crying as if he were drowning!**

VICTOR: There are always lots of children around here who come to steal fruit.

YERMA: No. It was a baby's voice.

Pause.

VICTOR: **I don't hear anything.**

YERMA: **It must be my imagination.**

She stares at him. VICTOR stares back, then slowly turns away as if afraid.

JUAN enters.

- *At the beginning of the play, Lorca makes a point of how physically weak Juan is, as if he were “growing backwards” (12). Why is this important? Does he see himself as defective in this way (as Yerma does)? Does insecurity about his manhood perhaps explain why he does not worry about the lack of children in the marriage? Perhaps both are meant to embody alienation from their normal gender roles?*
- *In Act I, Juan tells Yerma, “You know I don’t like you going out [...] You’re better off here.” (4). Does this attitude stem from love or control? Does he really fear that she might stray? Wouldn’t the legal and cultural protections afforded to men be enough to inhibit potentially bad behavior?*
- *If Juan is never home and has not given her a child, how could he expect her to be happy in the house? Does he not care about Yerma’s happiness?*
- *In Act I, we get four female perspectives on relationships to men (Yerma, María, the Vieja Pagana, and the child of Dolores). What is the role for men in each of these conceptions? Are any of these points of view endorsed by the play?*
- *Is Victor a rival for Yerma’s affections? Does Yerma love Victor?*
- *Why does Yerma hear a child crying when she speaks with Victor in Act I, Scene 2? Why would she picture it as drowning? Why can Victor not hear it? Why does Yerma ultimately conclude it was her imagination?*
- *Juan is often away from the house, often at night (e.g., “I’ll be watering the crops all night. We’ve had little rain, and it’s my turn until sunrise. And I have to keep people from stealing our water. You go to bed and go to sleep!” [18].) Is Juan just a hard worker, or is this a hint that he does not love Yerma, or even that he has eyes for other women (and might be acting on these desires)?*

Question from the quiz:

2. At various points in the play Yerma makes it clear that the only romantic feelings of love she has ever felt for a man have been for Victor, yet she never contemplates leaving Juan for Victor or suggests aloud that she would have been happier had she married Victor. Similarly, García Lorca implies that Victor has feelings for Yerma by the manner in which Victor interacts with Yerma, yet,

if judged solely by his words, Victor would seem the biggest supporter in the play of Juan and Yerma's marriage.

Assuming it is not simply a defect in the play, why would García Lorca avoid the obvious dramatic possibilities of a more explicit love triangle? Explain in a short paragraph.

Motherhood's Effect on Women

(I.i.4)

YERMA:

**"For the mountains of your white breast."
Let the trees lift their branches up to the sun!
Let the fountains leap, and the river run!**

She sews.

I tell you, my child-- it's true, it's true:
**I am broken and torn for you.
My womb aches for you--**
An empty cradle, craving you.
When, my child, are you going to come?

(continues in I.i.9, at end of scene)

YERMA (*Passionately*): **That's it! Much deeper!**

I tell you, my child, it's true, it's true!
I am broken and torn for you!
My womb aches for you,
An empty cradle, craving you.
**When, my child, are you going to come?
"When your flesh smells like jasmine."**

(I.i.6)

YERMA: You must have been singing, yes? I sing. You-- tell me--

MARÍA: Don't ask me. **Have you ever held a live bird tight in your hand?**

YERMA: Yes.

MARÍA: **Well, it's the same-- but in your blood.**

YERMA: How beautiful.

(I.i.6-7)

MARÍA: Now, look here, child! You are talking like an old woman. Listen to me. You can't complain about these things. My mother's sister had one after fourteen years-- and if you could have seen the beauty of that child!

YERMA (*Eagerly*): What did he do?

MARÍA: He howled like a young bull, as loud as a thousand cicadas singing at once! And he wet all over us, and pulled on our braids! And when he was four months old, he covered our faces with scratches!

YERMA (*Laughing*): But those things don't hurt!

MARÍA: I'll let you know--

YERMA: Bah! I've seen my sister nursing her baby with her breast covered with scratches and it was very painful. But it was good pain-- fresh, new, necessary for health.

MARÍA: They say children cause a lot of suffering.

YERMA: That's a lie! Mothers who say that are weaklings, complainers! Why do they have them? Having a child is no bed of roses! We have to suffer for them to grow up. It must drain half our blood. But that's good, healthy, beautiful! Every woman has enough blood for four or five children, and if she doesn't have them, it turns to poison, as it will with me.

- *What is María's purpose in the play?*
- *What is Yerma looking for in motherhood? What kind of satisfaction does she believe she will derive from the experience?*
- *Juan is gets angry at Yerma because she is always telling him that she wants children. Yerma frustrates him because Juan does not want kids. Juan says they "don't have children to waste money on" (3), but how is this attitude fulfilling male gender norms? Are the relevant gender norms equally powerful for both sexes? Why is Juan fine about not having children, but Yerma is filled with self-loathing-- to the point where she worries her blood will turn to "poison" (8)?*

Honor

(I.i.3-4)

JUAN: You have to wait!

YERMA: Yes! Wanting!

Taking the initiative, YERMA embraces her husband and kisses him.

JUAN: If you need anything, let me know, and I'll bring it. **You know I don't like you going out.**

YERMA: I never go out.

JUAN: You're better off here.

YERMA: Yes.

JUAN: **The streets are for people with nothing to do.**

YERMA (*Somberly*): Of course.

(I.ii.10)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: And the result is, you're empty!

YERMA: No, not empty-- I'm filling up with hate! Tell me: is it my fault? Must you look for a man to be a man, nothing more? Then, what are you going to think when he leaves you lying in bed with sad eyes, staring at the ceiling, while he turns over and goes to sleep? Should I lie there thinking about him, or about what can come shining out of my breast? I don't know, but you tell me, I beg you!

She kneels.

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Oh, what a flower in full bloom! What a beautiful creature you are! Leave me alone! Don't make me talk anymore. **I don't want to talk to you anymore! It's a question of honor³ and I don't belittle anyone's honor!** You'll find out. Anyway, you shouldn't be so childish!

(I.ii.17)

JUAN: What are you still doing here?

YERMA: Talking.

³ Honor is a common preoccupation in Spanish literature from medieval times, and Spanish authors as diverse as Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, and Benito Pérez Galdós have written important works exploring the concept. In general, a person's honor depends less upon intrinsic merit than on public opinion. Even appearing to be compromised can damage one's standing in the community, and individuals were socialized to (theoretically) value one's honor above one's life.

VICTOR: Stay well!

He leaves.

JUAN: You should be at home.

YERMA: I stopped for a moment.

JUAN: I don't understand what kept you.

YERMA: I heard the birds singing.

JUAN: Oh, fine! That's how you start people talking!

YERMA (*Firmly*): Juan, what are you thinking?

JUAN: I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about other people.

YERMA: To hell with other people!⁴

JUAN: Don't swear! It's ugly in a woman.

YERMA: How I wish I were a woman!

JUAN: Let's stop this conversation. Go home!

- ***What does honor mean to Juan? To Yerma?***
- ***Is Juan an honorable man? Is he meant to be unsympathetic?***
- ***Does Juan think that Yerma loves Victor, or is his concern more about honor? ("That's how you start people talking! [...] I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about other people" [17] .)***

Religion

(I.ii.12-13)

YERMA: Then God help me!

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Not God. I never cared for God. When are you going to realize that he doesn't exist? It's men who have to help you!⁵

⁴ *¡Punalada quo le den a las gentes!*: a Spanish expression that literally means, "May they stick a knife in them!"

⁵ Although Spain was a strongly Catholic country in 1934, the Republican government of 1931-33 had somewhat undermined the power of the Catholic Church, notably by curbing the influence of religious orders such as the Jesuits. However, this denial of God was an extremely controversial addition to the original audience of the play (and the source of much controversy in conservative circles).

YERMA: But why are you telling me this, why?

PAGAN OLD WOMAN (*Leaving*): **Though there should be a God, if only a little one, to throw thunderbolts at men whose rotten seed dams up the joys of the fields!**

YERMA: I don't understand what you are trying to tell me.

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Well, / understand! Don't feel sad. Keep your hopes up. You're still very young. What do you expect me to do?

(I.ii.14)

SECOND GIRL: Anyway, since you and I don't have any, we live more peacefully.

YERMA: Not me.

SECOND GIRL: I do! What a nuisance! On the other hand, my mother does nothing but give me herbs to make me pregnant, and **in October we're going to see the Saint-- the one who gives babies to any girl who begs eagerly. My mother will beg. Not me!**

YERMA: Why did you get married?

SECOND GIRL: Because they married me off. Everybody gets married! If we go on like this, no one will be left single except the children! Well, anyway-- the fact is, a girl gets married long before she goes to the church. But **the old women are dead set on all this. I'm nineteen years old and I don't like to cook or clean. Well, now I have to spend the whole day doing things I don't like! And what for?** Why is it necessary for my husband to be my husband? We did the same thing when we were engaged that we do now. Old people's foolishness!

YERMA: **Hush! Don't say such things!**

SECOND GIRL: **You'll call me crazy, too! Crazy, crazy! (*She laughs*) I can tell you the one thing I've learned in life: All the people are stuck in their houses doing things they don't like. You're better off out in the middle of the street! Sometimes I go down to the river, sometimes I climb up and ring the church bells, and sometimes I drink a little anisette.**

YERMA: **You're a child.**

- *Throughout the play, the women seem to agree with Yerma's definition of womanhood as being (at least partially) functionally equivalent to motherhood. The Second Girl does not agree. Why the contrast? What is her function in the text? What does the Second Girl's self-identification as "crazy" or Yerma's dismissal of her as a "child" suggest about societal attitudes about resistance of normalizing pressures?*

- ***To what extent is Yerma the ideal woman for her time, culture, and place?***

Passage from “Elegy, December 1918 (Granada)”:

“You are the mirror of an Andalusia
that suffers silently gigantic passions
rocked by fans and by mantillas folded
over throats trembling with blood and snow
and scratched with the red trail of gazes” (43-47)

Procreation as a religious imperative:

Genesis, Chapter 1

²⁷ And God [Elohiym] created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it.

Genesis, Chapter 38

¹ About that time Judah [fourth son of Jacob and Leah] left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. ³ She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. ⁴ She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. ⁵ Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

⁶ Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the LORD [Yahweh], and the LORD took his life. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.” [Deut. 25.5-10: if a man dies childless, his brother is obligated to marry the widow, and the first son is reckoned as the offspring of the deceased] ⁹ But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste [lit.: “spoil on the ground”] whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. ¹⁰ What he did was displeasing to the LORD, and He took his life also. ¹¹ Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up” -- for he thought, “He too might die like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

cf.: (I.ii.17-18):

YERMA: Very well. Should I expect you?

JUAN: **No. I'll be watering the crops all night.** We've had little rain, and it's my turn until sunrise. And I have to keep people from stealing our water. You go to bed and go to sleep!

YERMA: (*Dramatically*): I'll go to sleep!

Freudian reading:

- Repression is the mind's attempt to repel unpalatable desires and impulses towards pleasurable instincts by excluding those desire from one's consciousness-- holding or subduing it in the unconscious.
- The ego mediates between the demands of the id and super-ego, but the process is imperfect
- That which cannot be integrated generates anxiety, leading to repression.
- Repression is the mind's defense mechanism.
- We repress that which causes mental discomfort.
- It is a process of both normal psychic functioning as well as mental aberration.
- It is a means by which the unconscious is expanded at the expense of the conscious mind.
- Sublimation is a mature type of defense mechanism where socially unacceptable impulses or idealizations are consciously transformed into socially acceptable actions or behavior, possibly resulting in a long-term conversion of the initial impulse.

Shepherds and Sheep

(I.ii.15)

VICTOR'S VOICE (*Singing*):

Why are you sleeping alone, shepherd?

Why are you sleeping alone, shepherd?

My blanket is wool.

My blanket is warm.

Why are you sleeping alone, shepherd?

YERMA *listening*

Why are you sleeping alone, shepherd?

My blanket is wool.

My blanket is warm.

Your quilt of dark stone, shepherd.

Your shirt of frost, shepherd.

Gray winter reeds

Your bed at night.

The needles from the oak, shepherd,

**Underneath your pillow, shepherd.
And if you hear a woman's voice,
It's the broken voice of water.**

Shepherd, shepherd.

What does the mountain want, shepherd?

There are bitter weeds on the hill.

What child is killing you?

There are sharp thorns on the hill.

- *Victor sings of mountains and hills. What is the significance of this?*
- *How is García-Lorca addressing economic class in the play? Why shepherds? Why rural, southern Spain?*