

## CHARACTERS

**YERMA**, a young, childless woman

**MARÍA**, Yerma's friend

**JUAN**, Yerma's shepherd husband

**VICTOR**, Yerma's childhood friend, object of her  
unspoken desire

**OLD WOMAN**, dispenses information and tempts Yerma  
with forbidden alternatives to her problems

**DOLORES**, a conjurer

## PLOT

As *Yerma* begins, the audience hears a stylized cradle song which introduces the theme. Yerma has been married for two years to Juan, a farmer of ample means, and she is still awaiting a child. Juan, interested almost exclusively in his fields and land, feels little urge toward fatherhood.

When her husband leaves for the fields, Yerma is left in an empty house and alone with her thoughts. She passes her hand over her barren belly, begins her sewing, and sings to her yet unconceived child. The poem that she recites is the second of a series of songs that in and of themselves tell the story of the play. The first is a lullaby off in the distance to a child Yerma cannot see. The second is the expression of her need for a child in her life. It is also a hymn to nature, a recitation of the function of the fecund world, of which she is not a part.

María, a friend of Yerma's, enters with a favor to ask of her, María is on her way home from the store, where she has purchased everything that she is going to need for the new arrival in her home: she is pregnant, and after just five months of marriage. Yerma is painfully aware of the fact that she and Juan have been married for two years and twenty days-- Yerma keeps track of the passing of time. She wishes for Yerma, the superior seamstress, to sew some of the clothing needed for the new baby. Yerma agrees to María's request and is anxious to question her about the pain and great joy of motherhood. Yerma is curious to know every detail of how it feels to be pregnant. Yerma fears that if she too doesn't conceive soon, her blood will turn to poison.

The couple's friend, Victor, sees Yerma making diapers (presumably for María's baby) and thinks that Yerma is pregnant. He hardly needs to remind her that there is a definite lack of children in her home. His advice, when he learns the truth: try harder. Yerma feels instinctively an attraction to him as a man who could fulfill her maternal ambitions, but even more strongly she feels bound by honor to be faithful to Juan.

Yerma takes Juan his dinner in the fields. On the road home, she encounters an Old Woman who insists that passion is the key to conception. Yerma admits a secret longing for Victor, but none for Juan. The Old Woman has fourteen children-- five died and nine survived, all males. Yerma has just one question to ask her, but the Old Woman, anticipating what it will be, refuses in advance to answer it: one does not discuss such matters. Yerma will not be put off and wants to know why she is "dry." The Old Woman has her ideas on the subject but refuses to voice them. In talking to an Old Woman, Yerma first conceives the notion of using magic to help achieve maternity.

She then meets two girls whose attitudes astonish her. One has left her baby untended. The other is childless and glad of it, although her mother, Dolores, is giving her herbs for pregnancy. Yerma files this information away in her mind for future reference.

As the Second Girl leaves, Yerma hears Victor's voice singing. In Victor's presence, Yerma thinks that she hears a baby crying, as if submerged somewhere. What she "hears" is the child that she believes she would have had if she had married Victor. They stare at each other until Victor, fearfully, averts his eyes. At that moment, Juan arrives and sees Yerma and Victor together. Juan is furious that his wife is speaking publicly to another man. She will give the neighbors ammunition for gossip about them. He sends his wife home to sleep; he will spend the night irrigating the land.

The second act begins with a stylized chorus of Washer-women, who alternate between gossip and song, all of it bearing on Yerma and her plight: "Woe unto the barren wife!" They insist that women who want honor have to earn it; that Yerma has so trampled upon the good name of the family that Juan has had his two spinster sisters move in with him to keep an eye on his wife's behavior; and that women who want to have children, do. The women are the voice of the town, the voice of society, the voice of nature, into none of which Yerma is able to fit.

When the scene changes, Juan, now suspicious of Yerma's conduct, has brought his unmarried sisters into the house to watch her. The relation between Yerma and Juan is becoming more strained. Juan believes men belong in the fields and women in the home. He is forced to be on the alert at every moment to be certain that Yerma is not doing anything to tarnish his reputation or even give the appearance of doing something that might tarnish his reputation. Yerma insists that just as men have their lives, so do women-- all except her, since she has no children to tend.

Victor returns to the house for his third and final appearance in the play, but only to say good-bye; his leaving is obviously an honorable way of separating himself from Yerma. Following his elderly father's advice, he is moving with his two brothers to another location. Yerma lets Victor know that she has never forgotten the one occasion, long ago, when he took her in his arms. What she felt with him at that moment can never change. Unbeknownst to Yerma, Juan has purchased Victor's flock of sheep. He is prospering economically while his wife withers emotionally. Victor gives Yerma his hand and wishes her peace for her home. Yerma stares at the hand that Victor has touched, grabs her wrap, and takes the opportunity to flee to meet the conjurer Dolores, while her husband accompanies Victor as far as the arroyo.

In the first scene of the third act, at dawn, Yerma is in the house of Dolores the conjurer, who praises Yerma for her courage. Yerma had shown no fear in the cemetery at night when Dolores performed the ritual that was to make Yerma fertile. Dolores assures her that now she will conceive. Despite Dolores's insistence that Juan too wants children, Yerma knows the truth and laments the fact that she needs his participation in the process and cannot produce children alone.

Voices are heard outside of the house. They belong to Juan and his two sisters, who have followed Yerma. This is a new affront to Juan's honor, finding his wife in the home of a witch.

It is the dark of night in the last scene of the play, which takes place at a hermitage high in the mountains. The stage is filled with barefooted women making offerings. Yerma joins in the chorus of women singing a hymn to fertility. Suddenly two figures appear with great masks. One represents male and the other female; they are the very faces of nature. They engage in an erotic song and dance in which the Male has a horn, full of phallic significance, which he shakes at the Female. In the midst of the excitement, the Old Woman approaches Yerma with the answer to her question from act 1 and the solution to Yerma's problem. Her barrenness is the fault of Juan, who is of weak seed, unlike Yerma's, which is strong. At the pagan rite, there are more men than women, all eager to impregnate the married women who have not been able to have children with their husbands. The Old Woman's son is one of the men only too eager to offer his services. The Old Woman wants Yerma to leave Juan and to live with her son and her. The very suggestion is repulsive to Yerma's sense of honor. Juan appears at what is the final affront to what is left of his honor and reputation, the presence of his wife at a fertility rite that amounts to little more than a sexual orgy. For the last time, he confronts his wife, then tries to embrace her and be affectionate, to make her understand that he wants her for herself and not as a means to any other end. When he asks her to kiss him, instead she strangles him. With her own hands, Yerma murders her husband and kills any hope that she might one day become a mother.

### **MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS**

#### **Sterility**

- Yerma means "barren"
- cultural ideals are barren, denying life
- society and culture define people, forcing them into unrealizable/unhealthy roles

#### **Women**

- women seek happiness outside of themselves
- culture dictates women can be spinsters, wives, or loose women
- women are treated like property and possessions
- such cultural roles oppress women, denying life and freedom to them

#### **Desire**

- marriage without love is barren
- people should be free to pursue their heart
- religion and culture help suppress authentic, healthy relationships

#### **Honor, Personal Dignity, Social Honor (Reputation)**

- the three concepts are not synonymous
- of these, personal dignity is most important, but it is the least valued (by society)
- when honor and reputation infringe on dignity, they should give way