Spanish writer Ramón María del Valle-Inclán was born in Villanueva de Arosa, in the northeastern region of Galicia in 1868, the same year that a liberal military rebellion overthrew Queen Isabel II. In 1892, before finishing his studies in law, Valle-Inclán moved to Mexico. When he returned to Spain a year later, he lived a bohemian life in Madrid. He resided in old guest houses and practically never left the cafes, going out at night and sleeping during the day. His behavior at the time showed contempt for the rational world of the bourgeoisie. He changed his appearance substantially, letting his beard and hair grow. He wore large tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses and very loose clothing, like a cloak coat. People would stare and sometimes make fun of him. Occasionally he lost his temper but never his arrogant attitude. With his high-pitched voice and a lisp, he monopolized attention, making up stories about himself or others and reacting violently to interruptions. Yet he impressed those who knew him well as a kind, shy man. A dispute with a journalist in 1899 led to his left wrist being injured; gangrene set in, and his arm had to be amputated. He had by this time already published stories in magazines and his book, *Femeninas* (*Seis historias amorosas*; 1895; *Of Women: Six Amorous Stories*). In 1899 Valle-Inclán published *Autumn Sonata*, the first of a series of four novels relating the memories of the Marquis of Bradomín, a qualified type of Don Juan character, who unlike Don Juan is sentimental, and religious. Subsequent works are the publication of *Sonata de estilo* (1903; *Summer Sonata*), *Sonata de primavera* (1904; *Spring Sonata*) and *Sonata de invierno* (1905, *Winter Sonata*). The series exalts a decadent world tinged with an aura of legend and mystery, replete with adventure and courtships. The fiction joins disparate elements like religion and sex in prose that relates incidents with exquisite elegance and daring immorality. In World War I he worked as a correspondent on the French front. After the war, Valle-Inclán returned to Spain, which in 1919 experienced tremendous civil unrest in Barcelona and the imposition of martial law in Madrid. Both of these events profoundly changed his view of the world and his literary style. The following year Valle-Inclán produced *Bohemian Lights*, his first *Esperpento* (the term means “scarecrow,” or, in fiction, a grotesque deformation of reality).
Events in History at the Time of the Play

The Restoration of the monarchy and the "Turno Pacífico." Perhaps more than any other of Valle-Inclán's works, Bohemian Lights sets out to reconcile the grotesque in literature with the pathetic in historic reality. The last years of the reign of Isabel II (1833-68) were plagued by the inefficiency of the government, except when General Leopold O'Donnell and General Ramón María Narváez were in charge. Even they were unable to stop the advances of progressive liberalism against the queen. When the two generals died, other army officers rebelled. In 1868 General Juan Prim overthrew the government and forced the queen and Prince Alfonso to leave Spain. The ensuing period was characterized by intense revolutionary activity and by intransigence in both the liberal and conservative political parties.

The "glorious revolution" not only deposed Isabel; it also produced the most progressive constitution ever in the history of Spain, granting power exclusively to the parliament and recognizing freedom of religion as well as the legitimacy of civil marriage. From 1868 to 1870 General Francisco Serrano served as head of the provisional government; General Juan Prim became prime minister in 1869, after the constitution had been generated. Prim had the difficult decision of choosing a new king once Serrano's term ended. He convinced parliament to accept Amadeo of Savoy, son of the king of Italy. Most political parties were opposed to his decision. The supporters of Prince Alfonso, the Carlists; favored the brother of King Fernando VII, Carlos, and the Republicans were against any kind of monarchy. So fierce was the opposition that it became impossible for Prim to govern. The radicals committed murders and other excesses daily. The Carlists, offended by the change in government, began a new war. In 1873, after only three years, Amadeo renounced his rights to the throne.

After the royal family left, parliament convened in a national assembly and by a large majority proclaimed the First Spanish Republic. The main difficulty lay in the diverse conceptions of nationhood held by the different liberal parties. Citizens argued about the implementation of a federalist or centralist republic. How much power would be left to the provinces, and how much would rest in the capitol? The federalism of Francisco Pi y Margall, first president of the republic, degenerated into extreme localism. Cities like Granada, Málaga, and Valencia declared their independence from Madrid. The third Republican president in four months, Nicolás Salmerón, suppressed federalism because it was damaging national unity. He furthermore demanded dictatorial powers to control the workers' and Carlists' uprisings. In September 1873, Salmerón was replaced by Emilio Castelar; a moderate who governed without regard for parliament, he was accused of distancing himself from republicanism. Castelar's opponents forced him to resign, and General Manuel Pavia dissolved the National Assembly by force. Once again General Serrano assumed control; he became provisional prime minister. Serrano had at this point to contend with armed conflicts, which soured the people on the whole idea of the Republic. The population leaned toward the political party of Prince Alfonso, headed by Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, who favored the restoration of the monarchy.

In 1874, impatient with the electoral process and lacking confidence in the government, General Arsenio Martínez Campos raised an army in Sagunto and proclaimed the restoration of the monarchy in the name of King Alfonso XII. Alfonso's reign proved highly unstable. He ended the Third Carlist War and introduced the Constitution of 1876, which recognized Catholicism as Spain's official religion but showed religious tolerance. Legal authority was vested in the par-
In a mass demonstration in Barcelona, workers hold a banner with the words *Solidaridad Obrera*, meaning “workers’ solidarity.”

Parliament and the king. The military stopped their coup d’états, or pronunciamientos. Of paramount importance to the new system was the idea of *turno pacífico*—the periodic rotation of power between the two accepted political parties, the conservatives and the liberals. The government was headed first by the conservative Cánovas. He spent his “turn” working on the creation of an opposition party, led by Práxedes Mateo Sagasta, who governed for two years. The *turno pacífico* operated on a corrupt electoral process; results were manipulated and the victory was granted automatically to each party every two years. Although the king died of tuberculosis, the peaceful alternation of government continued until Alfonso XIII reached adulthood. Meanwhile, in 1898, after years of disastrous administration and José Martí’s revolutionary uprising in Cuba, and its defeat in the Spanish-American War, Spain lost its last colonies.

The end of the nineteenth century did not mark any ideological shift for Spain. Its old institutions—the Church, the military, and the monarchy—maintained the status quo. However, as more and more Spanish peasants migrated to the cities for work, they came into contact with each other and with socialist ideas filtering into Spain from nearby France and other areas of Europe. These ideas led to realizations about past and present oppression that polarized the population into conservative and liberal wings. Tensions increased between the factions, finally exploding into the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39.
In terms of shifting ideologies, the Spanish Civil War can be regarded as the real start of the Spanish twentieth century. The genuine turn of the century had actually seen a landmark event, but it proved to be of little consequence. In 1902, 16-year-old Prince Alfonso XIII became king of Spain. The instability of the period, however, continued. In fact, so unstable was it that on his wedding day in 1906, there was an assassination attempt on his life. Spain was riddled with unrest: Catalan nationalism, Carlist activity, republicanism, the growth of anarchism and communism.

So radically did the liberal and conservative politicians differ that it became impossible for them to agree on mutually acceptable reforms. The conservative Antonio Maura governed from 1907 to 1909. His proposed reforms failed to satisfy the left, or the Catalan separatists. After an indigenous revolt in the Spanish colony of Morocco, he called up military reserve troops in Catalonia’s main city, Barcelona, which angered residents there. They staged a general strike, which was quelled by the army. Francisco Ferrer, an anarchist leader thought to be the responsible instigator, was captured and later executed by firing squad. Violence in Barcelona (the “Tragic Week” of July 26–31, 1909) had international repercussions that caused Maura’s fall from power as head of Spain. José Canalejas, an anticlerical liberal, governed from 1910 to 1912, showing a benevolence towards the workers that infuriated the conservatives without quite satisfying the radicals. He was assassinated by an anarchist. Calm prevailed for a time during World War I. Then prices started to rise, which led to social chaos and workers’ strikes. An uncontrollable revolutionary spirit emerged. Amidst this profound unrest, in 1923, General Primo de Rivera staged an army uprising on a new pronunciamiento. With the permission of the king, Rivera suspended the constitution and proclaimed himself dictator, ending the 50 years of sham parliamentary democracy of turno pacifico.

The rise of anarchism. Scenes Two, Six, and Eleven of Bohemian Lights were inserted in the book format in 1924 as modifications of the original manuscript after the turbulent political events that occurred in Spain in the 1920s. Valle-Inclán adopted a committed or engage position and a much more revolutionary attitude than in 1920, when installments of the play first appeared in a magazine. He had at this point been mainly concerned with renovating literary style. Like other Spanish modernists, his interest at that time lay not in confronting conditions in the world; rather, he had evaded them by focusing exclusively on artistic matters. In the 1920s, however, Valle-Inclán virulently opposed Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, beginning to move dramatically to the left (in the 1930s he even joined the Communist Party and advocated for Spain a dictatorship like that of Vladimir Lenin in Russia). The addition of three scenes in the play dealing with anarchist activity and police repression are a direct result of Valle-Inclán’s new position.

At the end of the nineteenth century Spain was an underdeveloped, backward, agrarian society. While the rest of Europe was becoming increasingly urbanized, the peasantry still clearly comprised a large majority in Spanish society. Society in general was characterized by an absolute monarchy in power, a demanding liberal bourgeoisie, a stagnant nobility, a savagely exploited urban working class, and a land-hungry peasantry. Spain’s agrarian predominance in an age of continental industrialism was almost unique. Country dwellers still outnumbered the urban population by 10 percent. The only truly industrial cities in Spain were Barcelona and Bilbao. By 1922, the number of city dwellers nearly equaled that of country dwellers. Agriculture continued to account for 37 percent of the workforce, but industrial employment rose to 21 percent. Short of land, 20,000 peasants left Andalusia annually to make the trek north. They had no choice but to compete for jobs in industry.
Management-worker strife led to violence in the growing urban areas. Between 1918 and 1923, around 1,500 people perished as victims of labor unrest in Spain. In 1936, the year the Spanish Civil War began, the CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), at 1.5 million members, was the largest workers' union in the world. Roughly a million Spaniards were anarchosyndicalists, proponents of direct action to bring industry and government under the control of the labor unions.

Anarchy literally means without authority. Most people associate it with disorder and terrorism. However, these are not intrinsic features of anarchism, which has been attributed to the drive of the oppressed to assert the spirit of freedom and equality. Spanish anarchism placed a strong emphasis on a libertarian lifestyle, one that valued spontaneity, passion, and initiative from the common people. Spanish anarchism originated in 1868 with the arrival of Italian anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli, a supporter of Russia's Michael Bakunin. Fanelli's intentions were to gain adherents to the First International, a workers organization established a few years earlier. His proselytization produced the Alianza de la Democracia Social, a group that preached anarchism and published the newspaper La Federación. Thousands of Spanish anarchists abandoned smoking and drinking. Parents often gave their children names like Libertaria (Liberty) or Emancipacion (Emancipation) or exchanged their own names for those of anarchist heroes. They disclaimed the accumulation of money, and sought not power but its dissolution. If power were attained, intellectual anarchists warned, it would only lead the anarchists to become part of the establishment they sought to overthrow. Many anarchists became proficient in a common language called Esperanto, hoping that after the revolution there would be no language or cultural barriers among nations and people.

The origins of bohemian culture. "We must escape from this Bohemian life!" (Valle-Inclán, Bohemian Lights, p. 147). Bohemianism and anarchism are two aspects of counterculture society invoked by Valle-Inclán. Common to both movements is an antibourgeois sentiment. The name itself is taken from the French, who as early as the nineteenth century applied the term to the gypsies, thinking they came from or through Bohemia, a region of the Czech Republic. Over time the French began using the term more generally, attaching it to wanderers, adventurers, and people who lead unconventional lives (particularly artists). Literature played a fundamental part in the development of a bohemian mindset. The political tumult of early-nineteenth-century Europe demanded an artistic revolution. Art had to more closely resemble life, which led innovators to conclude that it needed to break with the narrow rules of classical art. Classical tragedy was artificial, impersonal, and aristocratic. After the French Revolution, artists considered classicism inappropriate to the existing social conditions. In any case, thought the innovators, individual liberty ought to be included into form as well as the content of art and literature. Some of the proposed innovations were truly radical. In 1827 France's Victor Hugo produced the play Cromwell, in which he demanded freedom from the restrictions of the traditional style.

His writings were taken seriously by all the young struggling writers in Paris, who felt a great desire for liberty after reading the play. Later on, Hugo produced the play Hernani. Censorship had prohibited one of his plays from being performed before. To make sure it wouldn't happen again, Hugo assembled a crowd of supporters on opening night, February 25, 1830, so that authorities could not prevent the performance. It was a historic moment, the date when the new drama would shake off old, restrictive norms of classicism. Friends and foes of the Romantics were going to be in attendance. Hugo invited the young bohemian artists of Paris to act as claqueurs, the salaried applauders. Wearing absurd, incongruous, unfashionable styles, the young audience was allowed into the auditorium three hours before the play started. They made themselves at home, discussing the work about to be performed and eating and singing. When the bourgeois audience arrived, they were distraught by the damage, and by the absurd-looking young people already there. The forces of absolutism and liberalism clashed for the first time at this performance. Every violation of the rules was hissed by the classicists and applauded by the Romantics. But as the play progressed and its beauty became manifest, the opposition weakened, and even converted. Romanticism had triumphed in France. Hernani had an initial run of 100 performances. The young men who helped foment the "scandalous" event later on became the bohemians, although that name would not be applied to them for a few more years. Victor Hugo's later masterpiece contributed to the development of the type. The 1862 novel Les Misérables was not primarily about bohemianism or student life, but Hugo, while trying to impart a
global view of French society in the 1820s and '30s, included the bohemian lifestyle. The novel dealt with the outcasts, the underdogs, rejects, and rebels against society, along with the poor and the wretched.

The bohemian was usually a young bourgeois man who had grown somewhat disillusioned. He generally felt guilty about the privileges of his increasingly powerful class, acquired at the expense of exploiting workers and nature. Some of these young men left their comfortable homes to become artists and writers and to protest the new bourgeois society; they functioned as a sort of intellectual proletariat.

Parisian writer Henri Murger was one of the pioneers of bohemia. When he was young, Murger lived with a group of friends who called themselves the Water-Drinkers because they couldn't afford much else. They shared an attic in the Latin Quarter, and though they experienced extreme poverty, they refused to undertake any commercially related activity. From his own life, Murger wrote *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* about the bohemian lifestyle in Paris. Most of the stories concern efforts to raise money to fight hunger while pursuing love and fame. In the long run, these efforts made a difference. The movement proved to be one of vital importance.

The contributions of bohemianism must not be underestimated. Before the French Revolution of 1789, art was simply considered a trade, and confined mostly to certain families of artists. An artist was a kind of civil servant. First, he depended on finding a patron, which meant that he could not choose the subject of his work. Romanticism changed that type of art, and converted it into the lifestyle that we today associate with it. The Romantic writers began to be associated with sculptors and painters, making the profession more respectable, although still a little outlandish. The Romantic movement was the springboard for the bohemians and their carefree, art-for-art's-sake attitude. Novels that dealt with bohemia such as *Les Misérables*, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, and *Trilby* were bestsellers; and for a long time everyone seemed to be fascinated with bohemianism and the freedom of student life.

In Spain too, the bohemian lifestyle began with the Romantic movement. Here too it constituted a protest against capitalism. Spanish writers like José de Espronceda and Mariano José de Larra had expressed their contempt about the mercantilism of the literary profession. The consolidation of a literary market in Spain, and the professionalization of the Spanish writer was tied to the rising of the post-Romantic realist novel, considered the bourgeois genre par excellence because it featured bourgeois characters and catered to bourgeois buyers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Spanish bohemia attained a more precise definition by becoming identified with the literary Hispanic movement called *modernismo*. Modernismo was an elitist, art-for-art's-sake movement, concerned with artistic independence, not with the materialist preoccupations of realism. Inevitably, this antibourgeois literary anarchism condemned the proud modernist writers to poverty.

At the turn of the twentieth century, amateur writers streamed into Madrid from the provinces, increasing the already flooded market and reducing the possibility of making a living as a professional writer. This circumstance, coupled with the extremely low percentage of readers and Spain's high rate of illiteracy (71.5 percent in 1887), placed a modernist writer at a great disadvantage. Not willing to play by the rules of the market made other modernist writers the only possible public for the modernist writer's literature. True bohemian writers, such as Valle-Inclán or Alejandro Sawa, endured a hard existence. Sawa died on March 3, 1909, and with him much of the ideal of the Spanish bohemia, which in Valle-Inclán's view would deteriorate into two equally unprincipled groups: 1) writers who sold out and accommodated to the mainstream market, or; 2) parasites and spongers. In *Bohemian Lights*, Valle-Inclán exposes these two groups and distances himself from them. By this time, Spanish modernism and the genuine group of bohemian writers had ceased to exist.

**The Novel in Focus**

**Plot summary.** The action in *Bohemian Lights* consists of a series of comic and absurd incidents that happen in one night, the last in the life of bohemian journalist and poet Max Estrella, who, realizing that he is unable to support his family, leaves for the street. He encounters all sort of low-life individuals, gets drunk, is arrested and mistreated, and ends up in jail. His personal odyssey unfolds against a background of Spanish reality. Max witnesses a child's shooting and an anarchist prisoner's death before a firing squad, victim of the infamous "Ley de fugas." After his release from jail, Max proposes to interpret Spanish reality from a different perspective: as if one were looking into a concave mirror. The
The resulting image would be comic, deformed, and ridiculous. In Max's view, the dismal reality of his life and of Spanish society demands a new kind of artistic approach: "The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be rendered through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed" because "Spain is a grotesque deformation of European civilization" (Bohemian Lights, pp. 160-61). Valle-Inclán transforms the work into a tragic and grotesque parable of the impossibility of living in an unjust, oppressive and absurd country. Spain, according to the play, has no place for purity, honesty and noble art. Max Estrella dies at dawn, overwhelmed by cold and alcohol, but also by the pathetic state of surrounding society.

Scene 1 is a portrait of Spanish bohemia. After losing his job in journalism, Max suggests they all (he and his family) commit suicide. He is blind and a true bohemian: poor, sick, sporting a long beard, living in an attic, and worried about how to obtain money. He shows comradeship for Don Latino even though Don Latino, who is a drunkard and an insensitive sponger, has cheated him of some money in the sale of some books. Max goes out to try to demand some more money for the books, advised by Don Latino, whom he animalizes as his dog. Scene 2 begins with the description of the bookseller's shop, where a literary gathering is taking place, including a cat, a parrot, a dog, and the bookseller (a parody of Spanish culture). Max is refused more money and heads to a tavern. The first reference to anarchist activity occurs on his way to the tavern: "A group of armed policemen pass by with a man in handcuffs" (Bohemian Lights, p. 102). At the end of the scene a boy asks the bookseller for melodramatic literature, a subgenre that many bohemians, including an early Valle-Inclán, had reluctantly to undertake sometimes to survive. Scene 3 begins in the tavern, where we discover that "Her Ladyship the Tango Tart" has been looking for Max. He spends some of his scant money on a lottery ticket and on prostitutes (the origin of his blindness is venereal). He owes the prostitute some money and pays her with the ticket. She leaves. Max pawns his cape to get back the ticket, but he is already gone to join in the tumult of a worker's strike. Scene 4 starts with comic reference to the police, who walk in manner described as "epic trotting," and the altercations on the street (Bohemian Lights, p. 103). Max and Don Latino find the girl who has the ticket, and they all end up talking about politics, arguing for a revolution. Modernist writers appear. The play describes them disparagingly: they are "the key figures of the Modernista Parnassus, a group of second-rate writers" (Bohemian Lights, p. 115). The police shows up and Max is taken to jail for causing a public disturbance and shouting anarchist slogans. In perhaps the play's best example of esperpentism, Scene 5 features Max being hauled to jail:

MAX: I took the liberty of detaining these officers of the law! They were out getting sloshed in some disreputable joint so I asked them to accompany me here.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: Watch what you say, sir.
MAX: I'm not at fault, Mr. Policeman.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: Inspector.
MAX: It's all the same.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: Your name, please?
MAX: My name is Maximo Estrella, my pseudonym Manque Max. I have the honour of not being a member of the Academy.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: You're going too far. Constables, why was this man arrested?
A POLICEMAN: For causing a public disturbance and shouting communist slogans. He's had a bit too much to drink!
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: Your profession?
MAX: Temporarily unemployed.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: Where have you worked?
MAX: Nowhere.
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: But you have worked?
MAX: Free men and singing birds do not work. Yet am I not humiliated, abused, imprisoned, searched, and interrogated?
SLICK-BACK SERAFÍN: What's your address?
MAX: This needs to be written in italics. A palace, on the corner of Calle San Cosme.
A SHORT CONSTABLE: You mean a tenement block. Before we were married my wife rented a poky room in that same building.
MAX: Wherever I choose to live is a palace.
A SHORT CONSTABLE: I wouldn't know.
MAX: Because you bureaucratic arseholes don't know a thing, not even how to dream!
(Bohemian Lights, pp. 122-23)

In Scene 6, one of the 1924 additions to the play, Max talks to a fellow prisoner. The prisoner, a Catalan worker and anarchist, says, "They are going to kill me" (Bohemian Lights, p. 129). He wonders what the press will print about it tomorrow, and Max observes that it will print whatever the authorities tell it to. "Are you crying?" his fellow prisoner asks (Bohemian Lights, p. 129). Max responds, "yes," he is filled with helplessness and fury. The comic tone of the play resumes in Scenes 7-10. The dialog dips into caustic criticism to describe different sectors of Spanish society: journalists, politicians, writers,
Bohemian Lights

and the marginal, ignorant classes. In Scene 11, the last of those inserted in 1924, the play sounds a humorless, sour note again, protesting social repression. The scene starts out relating the effects of the latest street riot. There is broken glass everywhere, and a poor woman is crying over the death of her child, shot in the head. A later revelation discloses that the anarchist prisoner with whom Max was jailed has been shot for supposedly trying to escape. Max is infuriated:

Latino, I can't even scream any more. . . . The rage inside here is killing me! My mouth is filled with poison. That dead man knew what was coming. . . . And yet he did not fear death. Torture was his only fear. . . . During these wretched times the legacy of the Inquisition still clouds the history of Spain. Our life is a Dantean Inferno of shame and anger. I am dying of hunger and yet I am content, content at not having played a part in this tragic masquerade.

(Bohemian Lights, p. 159)

In Scene 12, Max describes the aesthetic theory of Valle-Inclán's esperpento and ends with the esperpentic death of Max. Don Latino chides the dying Max for twitching, who supposedly dead, in a comic-tragic moment, comes back at Don Latino with the rejoinder that dead people cannot talk. The next scene describes Max's wake. It is a shocking moment characterized by an inappropriate mix of the occasion's pain (centered in Max's wife and daughter), and the comical attitude of the rest of the characters. The drunk Don Latino recites a parody of a prayer, but also makes some very serious comments. The height of impertinence occurs when the pompous writer Basilio Soutilnake tries to convince the gathered that Max is not dead. Methods of checking his vital signs, such as putting a mirror to his mouth or matches under his fingernails, are discussed. Scene 14 includes the Marquis of Bradomin, the protagonist from Valle-Inclán's Sonatas. After attending Max's funeral, he philosophizes with the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío about death, making biographical references to Valle-Inclán himself and discrediting Hamlet as an esperpento. From the last scene, we learn that by the cruel irony of destiny the lottery ticket is a winner, but because it was taken by Don Latino, it has not reached the heirs, who commit suicide. The scene ends with Don Latino's showing up in the tavern with the money from the ticket. All the characters fight for the winnings, an incident that demonstrates why both anarchists and bohemians were revered groups by Valle-Inclán: they pursued pure ideals and despised money.

Esperpento: Aesthetic deformation of reality as criticism of Spanish society. According to Valle-Inclán, there are three ways for an author to see life and the characters in a work of art: from below, as heroes of Greek tragedies; at the same level, like brothers, as in the characters in Shakespeare's plays; or from above, as puppets, like Quevedo. From this last perspective springs forth esperpento, an extravagant mix of tragedy and farce that emerges because of its impecuniarity of conceiving a true tragedy out of the Spanish historical circumstances.

Valle-Inclán is concerned with the backwardness, the oppression, the inequality, and most especially the apathy of Spanish society. His play, for example, features a scene in which characters are annoyed about wasting time in their workday because the protagonist is lying dead at their door; to Valle-Inclán, such a reaction is patently absurd. In keeping with this perception, he attempts to portray a deformed reality (esperpento) in this groundbreaking drama. By portraying such a reality, he stages an aesthetic protest against conditions in Spain, one that reflects both his own radicalization and the growing force of anarchosyndicalists in politics.

... Mixing tragedy and farce, Valle-Inclán's theoretical instructions are sometimes impossible to represent: "A mouse sticks his prying snout through a hole" (Bohemian Lights, p. 100). Esperpento is a deformation or distortion of the Spanish reality that shows how absurd it is for an artist to live in Spain. The play itself explains the theory:

MAX: The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be rendered through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed.
DON LATINO: Rubbish! Don't be so pompous!
MAX: Spain is a grotesque deformation of European civilization. . . . Distortion ceases to be distortion when subjected to a perfect mathematic. My present aesthetic approach consists in the transformation of all classical norms with the mathematics of a concave mirror.

(Bohemian Lights, pp. 160-61)

This distorted vision of reality is accentuated in the play by making the main character get drunk or by degrading characters into animals, things, or puppets: "Don Latino de Hispails: my dog" (Bohemian Lights, p. 144). In his esperpento style, Valle-Inclán includes some special ingredients that add up to a criticism of society. For example, he invokes caustic, ironic humor when he makes one of his characters in the already
religious-dominated country of Spain remark that "If Spain were capable of such religious standards, she'd be saved" (Bohemian Lights, p. 103). Irony becomes parody through the use of pompous, affected language, sometimes peppered with literary sentences from famous authors such as Rubén Darío, Espronceda, Victor Hugo, and Dante. A type of burlesque taunting is achieved through the exaggerated use of Madrid's slang, or of customary and administrative expressions used by public servants and police officers.

The play achieves its absurd sense of the grotesque by evoking anxious, distressing feelings as much as comical ones. Perhaps the most pathetic and sadder moments of a drama are achieved when comical anecdotes are interpolated in very depressing situations, in the presence of death, for example. Precisely, Valle-Inclán uses repeated references to death to increase the aura of sadness, as when Max says: "We could commit collective suicide" (Bohemian Lights, p. 95). This feeling of helplessness accompanies him throughout the play: "I've come here to shake your hand for the last time" (Bohemian Lights, p. 146). However, the play is not a tragedy. The author, to distance the spectator or reader from this conception, inserts a gradient of contrasts between the painful and the comical. During Max's wake, as the funeral service coachman arrives to take Max's coffin, Basilio Soulimate intervenes with impertinent pedantry trying to convince the widow that the deceased was not really dead, and she could prove it by burning the dead man's fingers. The macabre scene accentuates the family's pain. His family does not want to believe that Max is dead; for a while the family doubts and ignores the stench coming from the body. In Bohemian Lights, Valle-Inclán selects the most painful and at the same time ridiculous elements of his contemporary society and integrates them into his profile of the life of a bohemian poet. The strategy achieves two objectives, one local, the other universal: it allows his play to criticize Spanish society and to offer commentary on the human condition.

Sources and literary context. Valle-Inclán is sometimes included in the Generation of 1898, a group of writers who primarily centered their works on the topic of Spain. The writers belonging to this generation felt its history, its decay, and the problems of its time with deep intensity, agony, and pessimism. Each of them created quite differently, adopting a very personal style, and diagnosing the illnesses of their country. Valle-Inclán's style has been split into two periods. The first one, characterized as modernist, deals mainly with stylistic renovation. His work in this period excludes him from the Generation of 1898, which was explicitly concerned above all with the problems of Spain. Contrarily the writing of his second period fits the Generation's focus as it critiques contemporary Spain, going so far as to hopelessly condemn Spanish reality. Some of the characters are reportedly inspired by actual people. The real Alejandro Sawa becomes Max. Valle-Inclán himself inspires the character the Marqués of Bradomín, but also aspects of Max. The real-life journalist Julio Burell inspires the Home Secretary in the play, the writer Ciro Bayo becomes the fictional Don Gay, the real-life journalist Gregorio Pueyo inspires Zarathustra, and the writers Dorio Gádex and Rubén Darío play themselves. The play's anarchist prisoner is most certainly based on the genuine anarchist Mateo Morral, while the play's anarchist journalist Basilio Soulimate is modeled on the Russian anarchist and writer Ernest Bark.

Reviews. The Madrid magazine España published Luces de bohemia: Esperpento in successive issues from July 31 to October 23 of 1920. This was the first time that Valle-Inclán used the word esperpento to refer to one of his works. In 1924, just a year after General Primo de Rivera had overthrown the constitutional government, Luces de bohemia was published in book format by Cervantina Editorial, including four new Scenes that explicitly addressed the contemporary political situation. Bohemian Lights was never staged while the author was alive, partly because of the difficulties in portraying such scenes as the bookseller's literary discussion with a parrot, a cat, and a dog. Another reason lay in Valle-Inclán's objection to the control on authors by theater owners. Much later, the play gained international success when it was staged by prestigious director Jean Vilar in 1963, at the "Théâtre National Populaire" in Paris. It first appeared on stage in Spain in 1969 under the direction of José Tamayo.

—Benito Gómez-Madrid

For More Information
Bohemian
Lights


