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## **THE STORY OF A GREAT LOVE / La Historia de un gran amor / (1942)**

Julio Bracho

Mexico (Spanish)

Link to film: <https://youtu.be/nwKk7BGAI-M?si=nmFRbeuEjA9qNVZU>

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur:* In 1942, Julio Bracho completed his second film, and by all accounts, it was a great one. A melodrama set in colonial Mexico, where power, riches, and influence were concentrated in the hands of a few, and there was little one could do to counter them if they decided they wanted something of yours, be it property, land, or a potential spouse.

*Film:* La Historia de un gran amor was based on the novel, El Niño de la Bola by Alarcón, and it embraced themes of doomed love, fighting against injustice, outrage against unethical moneylenders, and Mexican culture. It is a melodrama imbued with both romance and nostalgia, heightened by the dramatic point of view shots, jump cuts, and chiaroscuro of the cinematographer, which at times verges on Expressionism, but stays out of that realm by means of the grounding presence of a sympathetic priest, and the malleability of the love interest who has little or no agency of her own.

*Background:* Bracho's long (two and one-half hours) paeon / homage to Romantic novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that featured the hero's return to town, from rags to riches (having been reduced to rags by the chicanery of the local moneylender), where he planned, after a brief sojourn, to restore the world (well, his microcosm), to its proper order: regain his father's property and the young woman he was forced to leave behind. The themes resonated with Mexican audiences who saw the drama through the lens of the Revolution they had just emerged from, along with the War of the Cristeros, both of which were fought ostensibly to provide dignity and economic access to the Mexican people. While not quite a propagandistic film, it celebrated Mexican heritage and culture, assisted by rancheras performed by the popular singer Jorge Negrete in his debut film. In terms of Bracho's entire oeuvre, this film can be seen as containing the same messages, but as nascent kernels, as his films exposing corruption and the abuse of power.

### SYNOPSIS

History of a Great Love is an epic of doomed romance that extends over the lifetime of its central characters Manuel (the soulful Jorge Negrete), the son of a wealthy landowner left poor by the machinations of a money-lender, Don Elias, and his beautiful daughter, Soledad. Manuel and Soledad, who have known each other since they were children, are deeply in love with each other. Manuel's father leaves to fight in the War of Independence, and when he returns, he finds that his land has fallen into disrepair and his cattle lost. So, he borrows 1,000 reales from a usurious money-lender, who also happens to be Soledad's father. The interest that Soledad's father charges is predatorily high. One day, the usurer's house catches on fire and the money-lender blames Manuel's father whom he says would benefit by having all the debt contracts go up in flames.

Upon hearing this, Manuel's father acknowledges the whole of his debt in front of the townspeople who have gathered in front of his house. To further prove that he acknowledges the debt, Manuel's father dashes into the burning house to rescue from the flames a trunk containing papers. He is successful, but he later collapses, mortally injured by the fire.

Thus Manuel is left an orphan in the care of Father Trinidad, a parish priest and the only one who took pity on the little boy. Soledad's father seizes all of Manuel's father's assets and moves with his family to live in a house right in front of the town plaza, exactly where the celebration of the Infant Jesus takes place each year. The Celebration of the Infant Jesus was known for its unique tradition: offerings of money were made in order to dance in the fiesta with the woman a man planned to propose to. After the fire and the death of his father, Manuel spends his days near a tree in front of his old house where Soledad now lives. Manuel's persistent presence is interpreted by the people who now live in the house as an indication that something was left behind in the house – something that the little boy desperately wants, perhaps left behind by his father. And, they were right, although they did not know it. One day, he was able to enter the house and try to recover his old music box. However, he ran into Soledad, and weirdly enough, it was right when the priest came to visit the money-lender. Father Trinidad asked the moneylender if he would help financially support Manuel. He said, "no" but in doing so, Manuel noticed for the first time, the little daughter, Soledad, who, in spite of opposition by her mother, was going to be sent by her father to a boarding school.

After she left, Manuel went away from the parish for several years and during that time, he landed sporadic work as he waited for Soledad to return. Upon her return, and in the Celebration of the Infant Jesus, he gave an offering of 100 reales so he could dance with her. But, the usurious moneylender upped the ante and put down money so she would not dance with him. Determined that she would know how much he loved her, Manuel plunged a knife into the tree in front of her house (which used to be Manuel's), taking a vow to Soledad that if she waited for him, he promised to return for her, and he would be incredibly wealthy. In the interim, Soledad turned down several marriage proposals, among them, one from Vitriolo, the prosperous owner of the local apothecary, who was a man who tended to hold strong grudges and who would have an impact on the lives of Soledad and Manuel. Time passed by and Soledad's father pressured her to marry the owner of a factory. After time passed without hearing anything at all from Manuel, she accepted, but only because she thought that perhaps Manuel was dead, given that she had not heard anything from him.

Years pass. Now rich, Manuel returns. He wants to attend the fiesta and to dance with Soledad with the intention of asking for her hand in marriage. But, once he learns that she is actually already married, he wants to exact revenge. Father Trinidad begs him to maintain his sanity and to leave town. Soledad, desperately wanting to communicate with Manuel because she had continued to love him, sends a letter begging forgiveness before he must go and she must suffer in his absence. Thus instigated by her, Manuel goes back to the fiesta and offers the absurd and enormous amount of 100,000 reales in order to dance with Soledad. Her husband puts up his factory in order for her not to dance. However, the father-in-law – Soledad's father, convinces Soledad's husband not to dance. After all, to win that opportunity would cost him his factory, which is his and many others' livelihood and would leave him in ruin.

Soledad and Manuel dance, but Vitriolo, spurred on by hatred and resentment that he has harbored toward the couple, has other things in mind. He throws his knife at Manuel to block her from taking her with him, and losing her for good. But, the knife hits Soledad, mortally wounding her. He then begs in an agonizing outpouring of emotion to the parish, that she absolve him and that the parish pardon him.

## CHARACTERS

*Manuel Venegas* – Young boy and then man in love Soledad

*Soledad* – Young girl who is a friend and falls in love with Manuel

*Father Trinidad* – Priest who takes in Manuel

*Don Elias* – Soledad's father

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### MANUEL VENEGAS:

In many ways, Manuel's life follows the trajectory of the archetypal hero's journey, as described in Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

*Determined:* Manuel is compelled into his journey from forces outside himself, namely the greedy Don Elías, who has seized all of Manuel's property after Manuel's parents die and they cannot

*Courageous:* Once his father has died, and Soledad goes to boarding school, young Manuel commits to the adventure and crosses the threshold into the unknown or unfamiliar world. This signifies their willingness to leave behind their old life and embrace transformation.

*Loyal:* Manuel faces various trials, meets allies who aid them, and confronts adversaries who obstruct his progress. These challenges test his skills, courage, and resolve. During the entire time, he is driven on by his desire to be united for life with Soledad. Further, he is shaped by Father Trinidad's sense of commitment to a single purpose, despite personal hardship.

## **SOLEDAD:**

The daughter of Don Elías, Soledad is pampered by her mother and servants, and yet she is a bird in a cage; she rarely leaves the confines of her house or boarding school, and her future is mapped out for her by her father.

*Idealistic:* Soledad as a young girl is quite idealistic, and she spends time with her young friend, Manuel, and an innocent way. They are best of friends and over time, develop a deep love. When Manuel's father leaves for war, things change because of his financial situation. On the other hand, Soledad's father has profited from conflict; this reality creates a cognitive dissonance for Soledad.

*Obedient:* Soledad is both obedient and disobedient. She dutifully goes to boarding school, and she obeys her parents in terms of her manner, dress, and demeanor. However, she cannot rein in her unruly heart which will not stop beating for Manuel. The reason for it is not completely clear, except that the bond they had as children forged them into soulmates, and that set out a destiny, tempered by fire in her own home, which ultimately killed the father of her beloved.

## **THEMES**

**Love (Doomed Love):** This love is characterized by a sense of tragedy, longing, and emotional depth: a doomed love saga can resonate deeply with audiences, exploring themes of love, loss, and the complexities of human relationships in a compelling and memorable way.

**Passion:** The love between the central characters is portrayed as deep, consuming, and intense, creating a strong emotional connection between them and the audience. Manuel's love for Soledad started at a young age, and when Soledad goes to boarding school, Manuel is driven to earn money to return to the town and buy back the ranch and restore his stature so he can ask Soledad's hand in marriage.

**Obstacles and Challenges:** The romance is hindered by external forces or internal conflicts that prevent the lovers from being together. These obstacles range from societal norms and expectations to personal differences or circumstances. First, Soledad is expected to obey her father and to marry the man of his choosing. When it comes to Manuel, he himself creates his own obstacle and barrier by not writing to her.

**Fate or Destiny:** There's often a sense of inevitability or fate surrounding the doomed romance, as if the characters are destined to be kept apart despite their efforts to overcome the obstacles. One of the aspects of this is the tragic outcome of Manuel's father's heroism. He went to war for independence, while the money-lender stayed at home. Instead of acknowledging his service to the country, Don Elías takes advantage of a weakness and takes all of Don Venegas's possessions as collateral. The implicit innocence of Don Elías is contrasted with that of the moneylender.

**Tragic Flaws:** The characters possess flaws or make choices that contribute to the downfall of their relationship. Manuel's tragic flaw is that he does not stay in touch with Soledad while they are away.

Soledad's tragic flaw is that she cannot stand up to her father or her mother and insist on her own agency, to the extent that she can in a very constrained environment.

**Sacrifice and Suffering:** The characters are required to sacrifice their own happiness or endure significant suffering in the pursuit of love, to the point that Manuel is willing to sacrifice all his earthly possessions (as well as years of his life), and ultimately, Soledad sacrifices her life.

**Unresolved Tension:** After Soledad dies, there is a lingering sense of unresolved tension or unfulfilled potential in the relationship, leaving both the characters and the audience haunted by what could have been.

**Symbolism and Imagery:** Symbolic imagery is used to enhance the emotional impact of the story, reflecting the characters' inner turmoil and the doomed nature of their love. In this case, there are two main elements: first, the music box, which evokes the powerful feelings of love and regard, and second, the knife plunged into the tree which represents the depth of Manuel's passionate regard for Soledad, and which foreshadows the knife that will ultimately be plunged into her body.

## CINEMATIC NARRATION

**Expressionism:** Julio Bracho's use of shadows, chiaroscuro, and point of view shots contribute the sense of tragedy. In conjunction with Gabriel Figueroa, Bracho created a film that shared some characteristics with the German expressionist movement while incorporating unique cultural and historical elements. Here are some key characteristics:

**Subjectivity and Emotion:** *The Story of a Great Love* delves into the psychological and emotional states of characters, portraying their inner turmoil, fears, and anxieties. This emphasis on subjective experiences adds depth to characters and narratives.

**Visual Distortion and Symbolism:** Similar to German expressionism, Mexican expressionist films employ distorted sets, exaggerated angles, and stark lighting to create a sense of unease and disorientation. Symbolism is frequently used to convey deeper meanings or themes. These scenes occur in the dark interiority of Soledad's rooms, in the shadows on the eve of the Celebration of the Infant Jesus, and during the fire that broke out that robbed Don Venegas of his life.

**Cultural Identity:** Mexican expressionist films frequently incorporate elements of Mexican folklore, mythology, and cultural symbols, grounding the narratives in a distinct cultural context. This inclusion of indigenous or mestizo cultural elements adds richness and authenticity to the storytelling. In the case of *The History of a Great Love*, there are two main traditions. First is the annual Celebration of the Infant Jesus, with the pageantry, dance tradition, and music. Second is the presence of music, with the jarabe, rancheras, and other musical forms, with traditional instrumentation. Third is the presence of traditional outfits or costumes; Manuel in his elaborate charro jacket, embroidered pants, and ornamented sombrero, and Soledad with her Spanish mantillas in her hair, elaborate gowns.

**Use of Space:** Spatial elements are manipulated to evoke feelings of confinement, claustrophobia, or isolation, reflecting the psychological states of the characters or the societal constraints they face. Soledad's rooms are dark and claustrophobic; they are elegant spaces of confinement and constraint.

**Expressionistic Performances:** Actors in Mexican expressionist films often deliver heightened, theatrical performances, emphasizing emotions and internal conflicts. These performances contribute to the overall stylized and atmospheric quality of the films. The dance at the Celebration of the Infant Jesus perfectly expresses deep emotions – not only of love, but also of potential humiliation, jealousy, and betrayal – all depending on the expectations of the people who see who has paid a price to dance with the woman he intends to ask to marry him.

**Exploration of Darkness and Death:** Death, both literal and metaphorical, is a recurring theme in Mexican expressionist cinema. The exploration of mortality, existential dread, and the macabre adds depth and complexity to the narratives. There are several deaths in this film, beginning with the death of Manuel's father, not on war of independence, but in the fire of the moneylender. There is also the death of the dream; of the Don Elias's seizure of Manuel's ranch, cattle, and property. Finally, there is the death of Soledad, which comes as no surprise because in her letter, she expressed "dying of love" and that she could never love anyone but Manuel, despite being engaged to Vitriolo.

## SCENES

Historia de un Gran Amor was one of Julio Bracho's first films and immediately popular because it embraced a vision of the newly independent Mexico of the mid-nineteenth century that resonated with populist tastes and a general audience.



The film opens with the arrival of a mysterious guest in the "Meson del Alba" (Light of Dawn Inn), the entrance illuminated by gaslight with shadows evocative of film noir or expressionism. The photographer, the acclaimed Gabriel Figueroa, was known for being able to instantly establish a mood or an emotion with his lighting, point of view shots, and creative perspectives.





The guests and owners of the inn, look at the mysterious stranger with curiosity. It is late at night and no one was expecting a guest. The scene demonstrates the solidarity of the group and introduces an “outsider vs insider” dynamic and potential narrative. The mysterious stranger is the adult Manuel Venegas, now a wealthy man.



The narrative flashes back in time to when Manuel was a young boy, and his father, dressed in his Mexican Army uniform, has returned from the battles of independence from Spain.



Don Venegas (Manuelito's father) discusses his situation with the local money-lender, Don Elias. Although Don Elias's interest rates are so high, it could be considered usury, Don Venegas feels he has no choice, and he borrows money and puts his cattle and all his properties up as collateral.



There is a fire in Don Elias's house. Don Venegas runs inside to help save the people in the home, and also to pull a casket / locked wooden chest containing legal documents, including those having to do with debts.



Don Venegas dies of smoke inhalation and burns received in the fire. As the priest, Father Trinidad, administers last rites, Don Venegas indicates that the documents in the wooden chest will absolve him.



Father Trinidad stands next to little Manuelito, who has lost his father, the war hero who was cheated of his lands and possessions, in a fire in the home of the man who impoverished his family.





Father Trinidad has pity on the orphan (there is no mention of Manuel's mother) and agrees to raise him in the parish. The photography, with the light shining through the window, and the placid face of Manuel (to the left of Father Trinidad) denotes a hopeful future.



Troubled by his father's death, and the wrongs done to him by the usurious money-lender, Don Elias, Manuel observes him as he locks his fortress-like entrance to his home. Note that the colonial entrances were tall and wide enough to admit horses as well as a small carriage.



In an ironic twist of fate, little Manuel is in love with Don Elias's daughter, the pretty Soledad. Soledad reciprocates his feelings, and they spend as much time together as possible.



Soledad's mother explains that she has been unable to persuade Don Elias to continue to have Soledad educated at home, but is determined to send her to boarding school. The mother explains that she is deeply opposed to it, but the father will not budge.



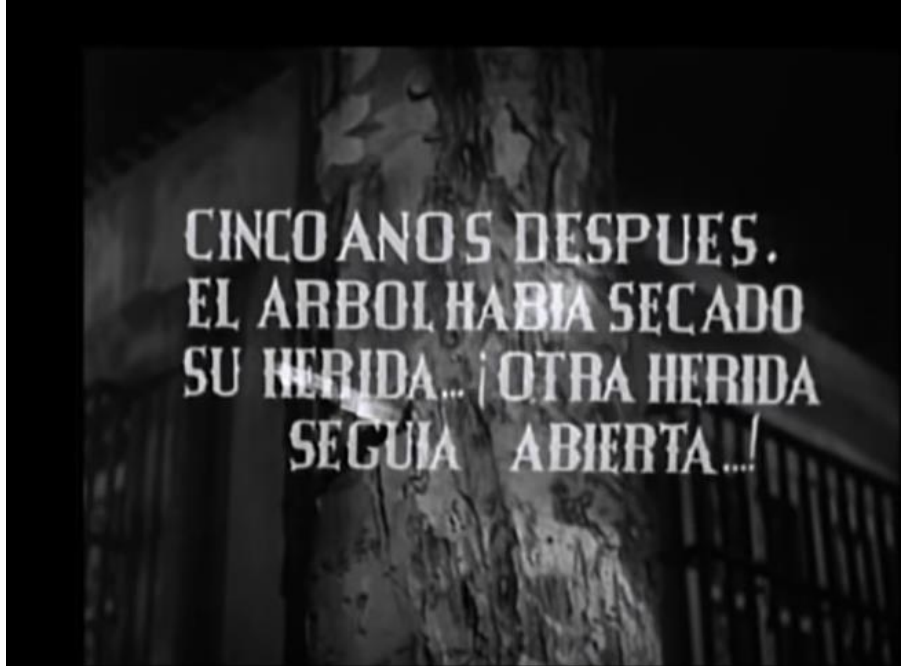
Little Manuel is heartbroken at the news that Soledad will be sent away to boarding school. He is determined to see Soledad after she returns, and he is determined to have the financial wherewithal to have choices / options in his life. This two-shot illustrates their feelings – and Soledad looks intently at Manuel, while he looks ahead, envisioning the future.



Soledad's mother speaks to Manuel, who stand stoically in front of their house. He is determined to find a way to let Soledad know just how much he loves her and how unchangeable that love will be. He plunges a knife into the tree in front of her house as a symbol.



Five years later, the tree had healed from the knife, but a different sort of wound remained unhealed. Manuel Venegas continues to love Soledad, and the emotional wounds are still wide open.



The adult Manuel Venegas has returned, not only to defend his honor by showing that he is no longer penniless, but has been financially successful in his endeavors, but also to claim his love, Soledad Elias, daughter of the man who ruined his father by seizing all his assets after being late to pay back a usurious loan.



In a flashback, the now marriageable Soledad is pressured by her father to marry. She has received several offers of marriage, but she does not want to marry any of the suitors. However, in the absence of any news, she despairs. This shot illustrates the almost suffocating interiority of Soledad's life.



Soledad grimly listens to her father who insists that she marry a wealthy factory owner, the richest of the suitors who have asked for her hand in marriage. The ornately decorated fireplace and mantle convey the wealth of the family, and also reflect the privilege of the elites, which was unchanged by independence from Spain.





Manuel learns from Father Trinidad that Soledad is engaged to be married. This news is not welcome. He does not explain why he did not send news to Soledad, but one senses that even if he had, the letters would not have been delivered to her.



It is the first day of the Celebration of the Infant Jesus, the saint day / celebration for the village. The ornate religious ceremony will be followed by days of fiesta, along with a tradition that men bid on the opportunity to dance with the woman they intend to offer their hand in marriage, and that the funds will be given to the parish to pay for helping the poor, elderly, and infirm.





Traditional music is performed at the Celebration of the Infant Jesus. This is an opportunity to play traditional music, and more importantly, for Manuel (Pedro Negrete) to showcase his singing and musicianship.



In accordance with tradition, men dance with the women they have successfully bid on. They dance traditional Mexican dances, which introduce more of the Mexican culture than has been heretofore been exhibited in the rarefied chambers of the elites and those who control commerce.



Wearing a mantilla in the Spanish tradition (hearkening back to colonial times and values), Soledad becomes aware Manuel has returned. Unfortunately, she is engaged to Vitriolo after not hearing anything from Manuel and assuming him dead.



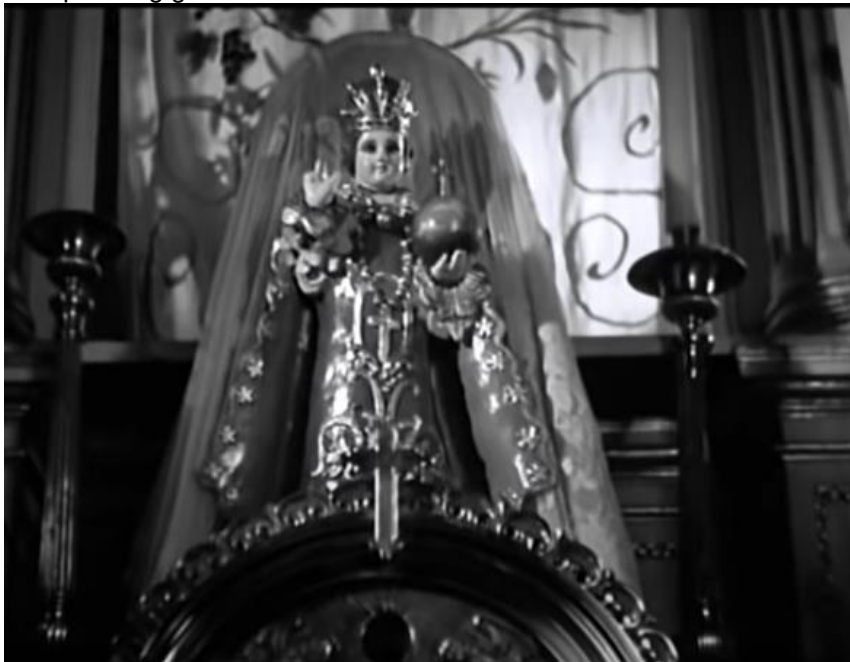
Manuel confesses to Father Trinidad that he is still in love with Soledad, and that she should never have become engaged to Vitriolo.



In an interior scene which echoes paintings by Velazques, and shows the way that Soledad is trapped by wealth and status in a rigid, hierarchical, patriarchal society, Soledad stands in a room devoid of emotional or psychological support.



The statue of the Infant Jesus catches the light and its gold adornments glitter a reminder of tradition and the upcoming grand fiesta and dance.



Dressed in an elaborate dress, Soledad assumes a tragic stance. She is not in a position to break her engagement with Vitriolo, but she does not love him.



Soledad's mother walks quickly through the streets of the village to try to protect her daughter and to persuade Manuel to stop the madness and to leave town. She is worried that no good can come of his pursuit of her daughter.



Father Trinidad urges Manuel to stop the madness and to leave town, and spare Soledad the horror of a broken engagement, a scandal, and rumors that she has been unfaithful.



Manuel cannot leave, and he makes the commitment to continue his quest to break her engagement and to have Soledad for himself alone, regardless of the promises she has made, and her father's pledges.





Father Trinidad makes a final attempt to dissuade Manuel from publicly displaying his love for Soledad. It could endanger not only Soledad, but also the well-being of people of the community.



Soledad sends Manuel a scandalous letter: Manuel, I can't bear it any longer. I don't want you to leave for good cursing my name. Have mercy on me as I have on you. You are the only man I have ever loved and that I could ever love. Desperate knowing you'll leave me forever, I'm writing you this, dead with love, with no pride, no reservations – like man and wife for our entire lives. Forgive me. Let me know you love me back. Give me the strength I need to go on living.

*Manuel:*  
*No puedo más... No quiero que te ausentes para siempre maldiciendo mi nombre. Tenme lástima como yo te la tengo. Eres el único hombre que he amado y que podré amar... Desesperada al saber que me abandonas para siempre te escribo delirando, muerta de amor, sin orgullo, sin reservas, como la esposa al esposo de toda su vida. Perdóname. Que yo sepa que me devuelves tu amor. Dame así fuerzas para vivir*



This letter gives Manuel the courage he needs to go to the edge and pledge all he has for one dance with Soledad. He pledges 100,000 reales, an astronomical sum. He is dressed in an elaborate charro outfit, which symbolizes that he is a gentleman and part of the elite.



The amount is astronomical, and Don Elias tells his future son-in-law to not match it. It is not worth losing his factory and putting so many people out of work, just for a dance. At his side, the music is starting.



The musicians begin playing a jarabe, which is characterized by lively rhythms and intricate footwork, enacting the complexities of courtship and love. The harp is a key instrument, as is the bass guitar.



Wearing a dark mantilla with elaborate adornment, Soledad's expression is that of intensity, doomed love, and desire. She listens to the music, and she realizes that to accept the dance for such an outrageous bid is to publicly humiliate her fiancé by signaling her preference for Manuel.



They dance together and it is patently apparent that Manuel will sacrifice everything in order to be with her, and also that she is moved by such sacrifice. This medium close-up two-shot includes people in the background, but they are out of focus. Only Manuel's face is clearly in focus, and his expression is rapt, obsessed, unchanging.



To further cross the line and completely scandalize the community and all onlookers, Manuel kisses Soledad with intensity and passion, and she does not resist; in fact, she reciprocates.



Incapable of controlling his outraged sense of manhood, and spurred on by hatred and resentment, Vitriolo throws a knife between Manuel and Soledad. Instead of harming Manuel, it plunges itself deep into Soledad's body, instantly killing her. It is a visual echo of the knife that Manuel plunged into the tree in front of Soledad's house. This knife inflicts another wound, while similarly reflecting the presence of an unrequited love, and above all, doomed, fatal love.



#### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW:

Describe the scenes where Soledad is inside a home, bedroom, or room, and point out the way that they reflect the psychological and existential states of Soledad.

What is the role of the music box and what does it symbolize? Explain how the music box functions as a metaphor for youth, youthful love, loss, and longing.

Describe the consequences of patriarchy and macho culture on the following characters in *The Story of a Great Love*: Manuel Venegas, Don Venegas, Father Trinidad, Vitriolo, Soledad

How are women's roles in society depicted in the film? What is the difference between their roles and responsibilities before and after engagement and marriage?

How is the deepest love depicted as one that inevitably results in loss, separation, and death?