

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

THE DECEIVED ONES / Las Enganadas (1954)

Juan Bustillo Oro (Mexico)

Genre : Drama

Link: <https://youtu.be/sMHBmrsrNAQ>

Contents (Overview – Synopsis -Story – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Juan Bustillo Oro uses the deceived or “fallen woman” motif in its usual normative way, to tell the story about how a woman can redeem herself, even if cast into the most stigmatized of social roles. What is even more powerful than the depiction of the self-sacrificing, noble, virtuous woman is the indictment of the young men of the social elite, who are uniformly depicted as conniving, cruel, mendacious, and lascivious, without any sense of vision, mission, or gainful employment. They seem to have family money at their disposal and they use it to drink, gamble, and prey upon women. Nevertheless, marriage with one of the young men in that class is still considered a social coup, despite their obvious lack of character.

In *Las Engañadas*, the role of women is complex and contradictory. In order to be universally accepted and valued in a nominally society, a woman should marry and have a child. However, in *Las Engañadas*, the matriarch of a powerful, elite family is able to dictate to her son who he can and cannot marry. She seems to be the power behind the scenes and to have more influence than the men. Doña Carlota wants to preserve the family’s power and prestige by forging an arranged marriage with a person whose birth matters more than their behavior. Bustillo Oro also points out the hypocrisy of men and society as the wife of Felipe scandalizes her mother-in-law by wearing short skirts, plunging necklines, and driving recklessly. Such behavior is “de rigueur” for the males, and even a part of the bonding rituals. This “male bonding” actually resulted in the death of Felipe’s wife, which almost seems a punishment for daring to keep up with “the boys.” The other woman who does so has been dubbed “Rosa la Loca” (Crazy Rosa) and who is actually complicit in the harmful plots, schemes, and games of the men of Mexico City’s elite. It is useful to keep in mind that at the time of this film’s release (1954), populist movements and sentiments were met with favor, given that the land reforms and nationalization of resources had opened pathways to social mobility, resulting in a burgeoning middle class. Thus, it would have been satisfying to see these cruel, immoral elites to get their comeuppance. The fact that they did not, and that it turned into a story about a rigid mother who comes to love the woman her son wronged, was perhaps even more emotionally satisfying. Further strengthening Bustillo Oro’s moral message was the fact that an upstanding, polite and respectful young man was involved as well. His mother, a wronged woman whose virtuous behavior in the light of years of abuse, marginalization, was finally rewarded, also mended a broken family, and restored it to the structure felt to be most valuable and positive to Mexican society: namely, a strong, virtuous, wise matriarch, an obedient and enterprising grandson, an obedient (albeit he was something of a worthless dog because he clung to old social paradigms of elitism and misogyny), and a beautiful, almost virginal, loyal and faithful mother who sacrifices all for her children.

The “fallen woman” genre dates back at least as far as Mary Magdalene of the New Testament who was famously accepted by Jesus as others around her judged and were repulsed. Depending on the translation / version of the Bible you read, she was either a prostitute (harlot) or simply a “fallen” woman, who meant that she was used sexually by men outside marriage. The “fallen woman” is a cautionary tale that is normative in its essence: it lets people know where the limits of correct behavior lie, and helps define both virtue and vice. In a world where women

relied on marriage to assure their survival, anything that would make them unmarried would be absolutely terrifying. Women who did not marry had to work as low-paid ladies' companions, governesses, domestic servants, or on the noblesse oblige of better-off family members. If there was any hint of impropriety or "fallen woman" status, even those threadbare options would disappear.

Knowing the consequences of being labeled an outsider, it is, from an outside perspective, utterly disgraceful that men would find it to be almost a game to prowl amongst the most vulnerable women and trick them into having intimate relations with them. Once lowered to that position, the men would treat them as commodities or playthings, as objects or even trophies, rather than sentient beings deserving of human dignity. In theory, there would be some financial support, particularly if a child resulted from the union, but not always.

If we move from 19th century Paris or London to mid-20th century Mexico, we find that such practices were common, to the point that men would make it a game to see who could trick the most beautiful woman into a sham marriage, and into living in an out-of-the way "love nest" with a convoluted explanation of why one never met the in-laws. If the woman discovered she had been duped in this way, many times she was already expecting a baby, and her chances of entering into a legitimate marriage were virtually nil. The women with strong family ties and protective friends tended to be shielded from such tragedy. Those who were orphaned, or who had come from a small town or the countryside to earn money to send back to their families tended to be preyed upon simply because they were the most vulnerable. In the case of *Las Engañadas*, It is the most degrading and dehumanizing trickery and it is hard to imagine how and why Elisa continues to love Felipe, particularly after he marries another woman and chooses that time to scoop up Felipito, their young son, so he no longer lives with his mother, Elisa. This is both a cautionary tale for young women, and an examination of the intense influence that strong mothers have on their sons. Further, it is an indictment of a society that lets the idle rich prey on young, vulnerable women with total impunity.

SYNOPSIS:

Based on the three-act play, *Mi Vida es Mia*, by Augusto Martinez Olmedilla, *Las Engañadas* tells the story of Elisa, a vulnerable young woman, orphaned as a child, with no protectors except Nachita, the servant who loves her as a daughter. Naïve, Elisa falls prey unscrupulous men. She never suspects that her "fiance" has arranged a sham marriage where the "priest" is a drunkard and the "best man" and "maid of honor" are part of a world where wealthy men of privilege like to keep a "love nest" with women they find attractive but could never marry. When Elisa discovers the truth, she sinks into a depression because she is pregnant. After Felipito is born, Felipe pays regular visits but never mentions righting the wrong. Eventually Felipe marries a woman from a wealthy family, and insists that Felipito live with him and his strict mother Doña Carlota. Elisa earns a living as a seamstress, with the help of Nachita, but longs to have Felipito at home with her. She also clings to her love for Felipe, her "only husband in the eyes of God." After Felipe's wife is killed in a car accident, Felipe's mother, who has always admired Elisa's dignity and high moral values, insists that Felipe marry her and they are a family at last.

STORY:

The Wedding The story begins in at an intimate wedding ceremony as a lovely bride, wearing a wedding gown and carrying a large bouquet of flowers, walks down a staircase as a man dressed in a priest's robe waits for her. As she makes her way down the stairs, she drops her bouquet. The best man picks it up and hands it back to her. As he does so, a shadow passes over his face. The bride does not notice it. She is clearly oblivious with bliss. It is a small wedding party because, as the groom has explained to his bride, his mother is opposed to a marriage to an orphan who has no wealth or social standing. As the ceremony progresses, the priest starts to babble quotes from Julius Caesar and intersperse nonsense words. Elisa does not notice, but Felipe does, and he looks in her eyes to distract her. Two friends of the groom, Rosa and Andres, look on. Andres smirks and Rosa sighs under her breath, "Poor thing!"



young men of the privileged idle rich: After the wedding, the friends of the bride and groom converge on the new home of Felipe and Elisa. "What an adorable place!" raves Andres, who quickly strides through all the rooms with an assessorial air. As he does so, he continues to exclaim, "How charming! What an adorable place! It's really perfect. When he gets tired of it (or of her), he should let me know and I'll take it off his hands." In the meantime, Rosa starts to express her sadness and horror for being part of such a cruel trick. "I went along with it as a joke but I had no idea how far you would take it," she said. She is roundly mocked by Andres and Florencio, who accuse her of being a repentant sinner.



Rosa confesses to Elisa: Elisa returns to the apartment with Felipe. As she excuses herself to change clothes to go out for the evening with the group, Florencio jokes to Elisa - "Remember, I'm Felipe's best friend, and we have the same taste in women" - to which Elisa looks a bit shocked. While she is in the bedroom changing clothes, Andres and Florencio ask Felipe if he loves her. He responds that he does: "She's so docile, plus I like variety." Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Rosa has an attack of conscience and confesses to Elisa that the entire marriage was a sham and that she's not really married. Rosa explains her nickname "Rosa la Loca" (Crazy Rosa) that was earned by being a wanton party girl, and now her reputation is irreparably damaged. Elisa is, understandably, shocked, horrified and feels betrayed, not only by the men, but by Rosa who could have at least protected her.



Elisa is pregnant. Elisa tells the group that she is tired and does not want to go out with them. Felipe agrees to stay home with her. Elisa embraces him and thanks him. "We're going to have a baby," she tells him as she weeps. "Are you happy?" she asks him. He replies and a dull, flat voice. "Yes. Happy. Very happy." It is, of course, a lie. His expression of aloof indifference is characteristic of him.



The happy home of Elisa, Felipito, and Nacha: The film fast-forwards across the years. They are now living in an older home with a courtyard inside. Even though Felipe has not married her, he does provide support. In the meantime, Elisa helps Felipito learn to read and guides him in his schoolwork. Nacha lives with them as a companion, housekeeper, and cook. Felipe is not around as much as Elisa would like, but she understands he must travel for business. In the courtyard, Elisa teaches Felipito to read in their happy home together. They have a warm and loving relationship. Felipe, the father, is rarely in the picture, due to his travel obligations.



Felipe is getting married. Felipe's friend breaks some ugly news: Andres, who was the more cynical friend at the wedding party, drops by to pay Elisa a visit. He is visibly intoxicated. Elisa asks why he is visiting and he explains that his purpose is to let Elisa know that she is being foolish in being so loyal to Felipe. He had just attended a grand engagement party for Felipe and his fiancée, a young woman from a prominent family. Elisa is, not surprisingly, stunned. Andres takes off, while Elisa processes the bad news. After a few moments, Elisa announces to Felipe that she forgives him again. After all, she owes him some of the best years of her life, she said, and also the light of her life, her son. At that, Felipe stops her. "What do you mean, your son? He's my son, and he's coming to live with me. He will have my name and will make sure he has the best education. I have to think about the future." Elisa is crushed.



Felipito goes to live with his father and his father's new wife: True to his word, Felipe comes for his son, Felipito (little Felipe). It is a dark night when Felipe drives away with Felipito in his large sedan. Felipito is quite sad. His new life will consist of being sent away to private school and visiting his grandmother, Dona Carlota, every Saturday and Sunday. He will not see much of his father and new wife, given that they spend most of their time in Paris. Dona Carlota visits Felipito at school. Dona Carlota visits Felipito in school, and Felipe talks to her with a surprising level of honesty and frankness. He explains that he is profoundly lonely and that he misses his mother. He also does not understand why his father has a new wife and why he does not see him. It is clear that Dona Carlota is troubled by this development.



Elisa earns a living as a seamstress: Felipito has gone to live with his grandmother and to attend school. Elisa may visit him but he does not come to stay with her. Felipe does not send any support, so she starts making a living as a designer and seamstress, with the able assistance of the loyal Nachita. Their living arrangements are very humble. In the room with the sewing machine are various stands for hanging clothing and a table for cutting cloth. However, it is relatively unadorned. The doorway has a curtain for a door. Nachita speaks to Elisa who toils away at her sewing machine, trying to make a living for herself and Nachita. Far from the elegant surroundings of the past, Elisa wears a plain dress and lives on the edge of poverty.



Elisa visits Felipito at school: Coincidentally, Elisa is waiting outside the classroom as Dona Carlota leaves. There is a moment when their eyes meet, and Dona Carlota even approaches Elisa as if to speak to her about something. However, nothing happens except a moment of rather awkward silence. "You may go in now," announces one of the teachers. Elisa, who is shaken by the encounter, seems not to understand at first, but then she enters.

Dona Carlota looked at Elisa with kindness in her eyes?": As Sr. Lopez is leaving, Elisa arrives. It is clear that her head is in the clouds. After Sr. Lopez leaves, she explains to Nachita what happened. "She looked at me with kindness in her eyes," she tells Nachita. "I think she wanted to for us to speak to each other." Working under the illumination of a single bar bulb, Elisa contemplates her life and her painful fate. The shadows and the relative disorder of the scene point to a restless spirit. She is contemplating her encounter with Doña Carlota at the school, and wondering if her understanding was correct.



Sr. Lopez pays a visit; speaks with Nacha: In the meantime, Sr. Lopez, the rather comical business assistant for Dona Carlota, pays a visit to bring what appears to be a monthly remittance (possibly for seamstress work). He uses the opportunity to gossip about Felipe, the new wife, and what they're doing in Paris. Apparently, his wife (along with her sisters), are heavy drinking skimpily dressers who get into frequent car crashes. Felipe is so miserable he has tried to commit suicide two times. Nachita is astonished by this news, particularly since Dona Carlota had been so determined to have a well-bred daughter-in-law. "Dona Carlota often compares Elisa to the new wife, and Elisa comes out ahead, every time," he comments.

Florencio offers marriage: Time passes. One day, as Elisa is scrambling to put the final stitches into a dress, Florencio appears at her door. She is quite surprised. She is even more surprised when Florencio asks her to marry him. "I can't," she protests. "I still love Felipe." Florencio comments upon the misguidedness and futility of that misplaced loyalty. Felipe's a free man, he points out. His wife died 6 months ago in Paris in yet another car accident. "He had plenty of time to come around and take you back, and he has not," states Florencio, rather dishearteningly. Elisa is not swayed. She tells Florencio that she's married to Felipe in the eyes of the Lord (or at least the debauched faux-priest), and she will stay faithful forever. Florencio looks at her in admiring disbelief and takes his leave of her.



Dona Carlota visits Elisa: A bit later, there is another surprise visit from an unexpected visitor. Nachita answers the door to a woman she does not recognize. The woman introduces herself as Dona Carlota, to which Nacha almost faints in astonishment. Elisa is equally astonished and visibly trembles with anxiety. "Please do not call me Dona Carlota," she says in a kind tone. "Please call me "Grandmother," or better yet, "Mother."" Dona Carlota goes on to explain that she is visiting on behalf of Felipe, who would like to marry her. Elisa, not surprisingly, is thrilled and explains it is the answer to her prayers.



A family, united at last: After Elisa recovers her poise, she accepts the marriage proposal. Felipe and Felipito enter and they embrace. There is a beautiful scene as they are reunited as a family. "Your positive qualities made this possible," states Dona Carlota. Elisa demurs. "The only positive quality I have is that I know how to wait."



THEMES

Intact extended families are best: Elisa was orphaned when she was young, and thus did not live in a home with a father and a mother, nor did she have the benefit of an extended family. The closest was Nacha, who worked in the orphan's home where Elisa grew up. Nacha loved Elisa like a mother, and did her best to nurture her, show her love, and to protect her. However, as a servant in the household, there was not very much that she could do. However, she could at least keep her eyes and ears open and communicate what she learned. The film shows in many ways how fragmenting the family results in vulnerability. For example, little Felipito can have only his unmarried mother and Nacha to protect him from being taken from the only home he has known and then deposited in his grandmother's house.

If you want honesty, look to the working class: The men who are members of the elite (Felipe, Florencio, and Andrés) go to elaborate lengths to create a sham marriage, replete with a faux priest, and a reception. They consider the apartment that Elisa and Felipe will live to be a "love nest" and are as shameless as to wonder aloud if they might be able to use it once Felipe tires of it. There is deliberate ambiguity in this commentary, and one could interpret the conversation as meaning when Felipe tires of the apartment or of Elisa. Either interpretation is reprehensible and absolutely dehumanizing. In contrast, Nachita, the servant who devotedly looks out for Elisa's interests, is perspicacious, clear-headed, and crisply honest in all her dealings. She is a solid rock and trustworthy friend. Also, Sr. López, although not working class, but an employee, is equally honest (albeit humorous for his propensity to speak in the diminutive).

The elegantly groomed men of the elite should be exposed for what they are: They seem respectable, but they are far from it. Felipe, Florencio and Andrés could be called "playboys" if

one were in a generous mood. They were regularly referred to as “canallas,” which means “scoundrels” in English, although the word “scoundrel” is probably too kind or light. They are cruel snobs who think that anyone in a class they perceive as beneath them as food laid out on a smorgasbord for their consumption. In a way, they are throwbacks to the European elites – the “peninsulares” who came from the Iberian Peninsula to Mexico where they occupied the highest rung of society, which usually came with automatic income from the “quinta” system, and an attitude of complete and total entitlement. The obvious game that they were engaged with when it came to Elisa was a game to see if one could trap a decent, conservative, traditional young woman into living “in sin” in a “love nest.” It was not considered to be very challenging to entice a poor young woman from the country or from a slum area because she would do it just to have money to send to her family (even though ruining her reputation and prospects for the future). However, a young woman from an upper middle class background would be a true trophy. The men were truly sickening in their conversations, and it was surprising to see such frank talk of passing Elisa around between them, and smirking when they gloated about the triumph of their trickery. At the end of the day, perhaps what was the most disturbing is that marriage with one of them still would have been considered a social coup – even given their monstrous characters. The men were so villainous and cruel they could have stepped from the pages of a book by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Womanly virtue has several component elements: Elisa is a virtuous woman, despite the fact that she is tricked into a sham marriage by a shameless playboy and his friends. She is not promiscuous; in fact she is absolutely faithful and loyal to the man she considers that she married. She sacrifices everything to be a good and loving mother to her son, and she is a loyal friend to Nachita, the faithful employee. Elisa is also hard-working and willing to do work hard in dignified areas of enterprise such as being a seamstress. Even though poorly paying and taxing to the eyes, fingers, shoulders, and general health, the activity is respectable. Delayed gratification is a cornerstone of all womanly virtues. Being willing to endure frustration, marginalization, humiliation, abandonment, and outright rejection is a “must” for the virtuous woman. Eventually it will pay off, and the patience will have been worth it. Finally, a virtuous woman acknowledges hierarchy, especially that of a matriarchy. She defers to Doña Carlota, even though she was told that Felipe could never marry her due to class and social rank differences. The situation illustrates that matriarchy is the hidden force behind a patriarchal society, even though it cannot do much to rectify the situation that men from prominent families can trade on their family’s position, even though they are reprobates and scoundrels.

CHARACTERS

Elisa	Naive young woman who believed that the wealthy Felipe Torres had married her
Felipe Torres	Wealthy playboy who wanted to have a love nest with Elisa
Andrés	Unscrupulous friend of Felipe
Doña Carlota	Felipe’s mother
Nachita	Devoted employee of Elisa
Don Florencio	Friend of Felipe who shows remorse and dignity; wants to marry Elisa

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Elisa Elisa, an orphan but raised in a situation to be a decent, loving, yet dreamy and innocent young woman is cruelly tricked by a playboy and his coterie of privileged wastrels to participating in a sham marriage officiated by a faux priest and witnessed by a smirking best man and a complicit maid of honor. She knows she is pregnant on the night of her “wedding” and despite the fact the father of her child does not marry her, is constantly traveling, and then even legitimately marries the daughter of a nouveau-riche industrialist, she remains true to her values and raises her son with love and joy.

Idealistic: Elisa’s idealistic spirit shows itself in many scenes, the first of which is the wedding itself. Elisa wears a lovely wedding gown and is prone to see things through rose-colored lenses.

She fumbles and drops her bouquet of bright white roses, which later, Florencio observes were emblematic of her innocence and purity, dropped or cast down to the floor.

A “tabula rasa” for identity-building: Elisa is a blank slate upon which the values and betrayals of the world inform what she is to be as a woman. What is interesting is that despite all the terrible things that happened to her which would ordinarily put her on a fast-track for oblivion, Elisa manages to take the high road. Her identity is resolutely not all about being a victim, but also about becoming a paragon of virtue. Her clothes set her apart – always of the best quality and of the most elegant design. So, she has the chance to shape her identity by her behavior and her appearance. She is elegant, yet modest in her outfits, and always tidy. That said, the lovely Elisa of the wedding is, after several years of converting her apartment into a sewing studio, and working many hours a day, seems prematurely gray-haired and effete/ worn out. If she is around 34 years of age, she looks as though she is at least 50.

Enterprising: Elisa is hard-working and enterprising. She is enterprising in a socio-psychological sense in that she accepts her situation with surprising facility. This is not to say that Elisa is happy about having been betrayed, particularly when her son is taken from her when Felipe marries and the grandmother insists that the child have a future (in other words, that he lives with her and goes to private schools).

Phlegmatic: Somewhere in all of this, Elisa is calm and non-reactive because she truly believes in the power of love. Nachita’s mother-love toward Elisa is the bedrock that allows Elisa to maintain a calm, vision-driven mindset, despite the humiliating and psyche-nullifying things that occur. Elisa’s unwavering devotion to her son sustains her until he is taken from her. Then, she is sustained by the idea that everything that is being done is for the best. At the private school where Felipito is able to visit family members, a sustaining moment occurs when Doña Carlota looks at her, and then approaches her with kindness in her eyes. Elisa never despairs but steadfastly looks toward the future.

Forgiving: Ordinary mortals would never forgive the shockingly reprobate and cruel Felipe. At the same time, ordinary mortals may have read sensation novels and other novels from the 19th century, particularly those of the Naturalism school, which include Zola, Flaubert, and Gissing. Particularly in the works of George Gissing, society’s vulnerable are preyed upon by the privileged. What all the novels and later, movies, have in common is a depiction of super-reality, or hyper-reality – if not literal, at least psychologically realist. In the meantime, Elisa displays the almost Candide-level displays of optimism and good cheer. When she learns that Felipe will marry a woman from a prominent family, Elisa tells him that she forgives him for the second time, primarily because he gave her wonderful times together, and the love of her life, her son. Although this sentiment sounds positive on the face of it, given what was to transpire, it is a fatalistic, even nihilistic stance, and very disturbing.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. By starting with a sham marriage, the film immediately addresses questions of the differences between reality and fiction, truth and lies. Describe the nature of the sham marriage and discuss how Florencio’s comment that when the pure, white roses fell to the floor as Elisa was walking down the stairs, they functioned as a symbol for what was happening.
2. Elisa is an idealistic, romantic young woman, virtually without protection because she has no extended family to rally around her. Describe the “protectors” in the film. Who are the protectors who shelter the good and the virtuous? Who are the ones who protect the rich and the privileged?
3. Describe the elements that make up a woman’s good character as described in *Las Engañadas* and those who illustrate them. Are the attributes of a virtuous woman different in a higher social class versus the working class? What does it mean to feel the need to protect the

family name and/or legacy? How does or can a virtuous woman unwittingly enable the bad behavior of sons who happen to be scoundrels?

4. What made Doña Carlota change her mind about Elisa? What were the steps that were made that created the conditions for the change? Consider the following questions: Where did Elisa live, even after Felipito was taken away from her? How did Elisa earn money to pay for her rent and food?

5. How is *Las Engañadas* a critique of the upper class of Mexico and the privileged elites? List some of the ways in which the rich men depicted in the film engage in immoral behavior, lie, cheat, steal, demonstrate moral turpitude. Given the serious character defects demonstrated by Felipe, why would Elisa still be in love with him and want to marry him? Why should any woman? Describe some of the ways in which Felipe demonstrates himself to be weak, incapable of standing up for what is right, and being completely dependent on the largesse of his mother (rather than earning his own way).