

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE ILL-LOVED / La Malquerida (1949)

Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/WRHa1c-yOwY>

OVERVIEW

One of director Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez's most lauded films, *La Malquerida* plays out like an ancient drama in the sweeping valleys and haunting mountains of Mexico. *La Malquerida* (1949), directed by Emilio Fernandez. It was a winner at the Venice Film Festival in the category of best cinematography. The script was based on the play by Spanish playwright Jacinto Benavente, first performed in 1913 in the theatre. The intensity of the tragedy is reinforced by cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa's dramatic use of chiaroscuro and shots that position the people in expansive backdrops or in tight closeups that express profound of emotion and existential conflict. Cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa won at Best Cinematography at the Venice Film Festival in 1949. It is not surprising. His high-contrast black and white film, the point of view shots, the unusual angles, and the chiaroscuro give the film an expressionistic feel, and incorporate elements of film noir. At the same time, there is a naturalistic feel; the film captures the weaknesses, passions, vices, the squalor of local cantinas, and the sublime symmetry of a revenge tragedy, especially one tinged with taboo and transgression.

SYNOPSIS

After her husband, the owner of a large hacienda, Hacienda El Soto, dies, his widow, Raimunda, marries Esteban, a tall, brooding charro of masterful horsemanship. Acacia, Raimunda's daughter, deeply resents the marriage and holds deep hostility toward her mother and Esteban. To escape both her mother and Esteban, Acacia accepts the proposal of marriage of Faustino, the heir of the adjacent ranch. Displeased, Esteban intercepts a midnight rendezvous and engages Faustino in a gunfight, killing Faustino. Esteban's actions are observed by a Juez de la Acordada, who is authorized to hunt down criminals and take them to justice. Faustino's father and relatives seek revenge. In the meantime, the passion between Acacia and Esteban explodes and Acacia informs her mother that Esteban loves her, and not Raimunda. Esteban leaves. Raimunda, wrestling with the shocking news, comes to the realization that she herself was responsible for the passions between Acacia and Esteban because she betrayed the memory of her husband and remarried. Despite the danger, Esteban returns to Hacienda El Soto to collect Acacia. Acacia struggles but finally resists and falls to the feet of her mother as she makes the fateful decision to stay rather than leave with the doomed Esteban. With spurs clanking on the tiles, Esteban walks out of the house to the front yard between the house and stables. The avenging members of Faustino's family stream in on horseback, encircle him and fill his body with bullets. Raimunda kneels at the body of Esteban, lying prone on the ground. She touches him, looks down, and weeps at the sight of blood on her hands.

THE STORY

NEW HUSBAND: Raimunda states that Esteban is the man of the house, and that he makes the decisions regarding permission for Acacia to marry. Acacia states that she views Esteban as a usurper and her mother a traitor to her father's memory for giving half of El Soto to him. Acacia states that she will marry Faustino, regardless of her mother's feelings. Esteban announces, with savage intensity, that he will never condone a marriage in which Acacia does not love her husband.



AT LA HACIENDA EL SOTO: Acacia states that she views Esteban as a usurper and her mother a traitor to her father's memory for giving half of El Soto to him. They are at the ranch, Hacienda del Soto, which Raimunda inherited upon her husband's death. Raimunda implores Acacia to be reasonable and to respect her husband.



ENGAGEMENT: ACACIA AND FAUSTINO Acacia has expressed an intense desire to get married as soon as possible so she can escape living under the same roof as Esteban. Acacia declares she will marry Faustino and that there is nothing that will stop her. In this over-the-shoulder shot, we see her defiant gaze that directly challenges her mother. .



ESTEBAN ATTACKS As Acacia runs toward Faustino, a figure appears in the distance. It is mounted on a dark horse, and the horseman is wearing traditional charro attire. And yet, it is clear he is not here to show how his horse can dance. He is dangerous. the half-mad Esteban charges Faustino to attack him for daring to marry Acacia, who does not love Faustino, but has flung herself into marriage to



FAUSTINO IS DEAD Don Eusebio, in full charro regalia, attends his son's funeral. His determination to avenge the murder of his "most beautiful" son is clearly etched in his face, and communicated through his wide open, staring, half-deranged eyes. Under the gate to the Hacienda del Soto, Acacia turns her back and retreats. Raimunda stares, transfixed, at Esteban. In the meantime, Don Eusebio and his sons have come to announce that Faustino has been murdered.



ESTEBAN'S LOVE Acacia expresses her outrage to Esteban. He responds by stating that he has killed for her and that their fates are bound together. He has committed the ultimate act for her, and it shows his absolute abandon of all limits of rationality (and common sense). Acacia and Esteban kiss passionately. Esteban is drawn to her, like iron filings to a magnet. She burns with intensity: love-hate.



ESTEBAN ON THE RUN Esteban declares his love to Raimunda, and also that he must leave La Hacienda El Soto. He can no longer stay there because of what he has done. His eyes have a tormented look, and he knows his actions have doomed him. Raimunda, still wearing black mourning clothes, begs Esteban to leave and to hide himself. Going through the stable. Wearing his wide hat and charro regalia, Esteban leaves on horseback in self-imposed exile. He is silhouetted in the doorway.



ESTEBAN COMES BACK FOR ACACIA Instead of leaving the region, Esteban returns to the Hacienda El Soto. Esteban looks up to see Acacia descending the staircase. He has come back for Acacia. Raimunda implores Acacia not to go with Esteban and tells her to look within and to realize that she does not love Esteban, but harbors a deep passion out of anger about Raimunda's betrayal to the memory of Acacia's father. In the end, Acacia resists Esteban. Without his horse, Esteban walks toward "El Soto" (the grove of trees) next to the spring and pond. His horse looks on.



ESTEBAN DIES In a brilliantly filmed scene, the chapel cross anchors the view of the avenging horsemen who circle Esteban in the yard in front of the house and stables. They circle, looking like birds of prey circling, and they shoot down toward Esteban who collapses, struck by multiple bullets. Raimunda observes Esteban's bullet-riddled body lying prone in the dust and hard-packed dirt. She is still wearing mourning for Faustino, but now the dress is fit for another death. Raimunda lightly touches Esteban and has blood on her hands. So now she literally has blood on her hands for her decision to marry Esteban and give him half of El Soto rather than staying a devoted single mother of her daughter. By betraying the memory of her late husband, she triggered the tragic series of events. Raimunda sinks to her knees and employees of the ranch come up to see what has happened. The film ends with Raimunda's grief at the terrible unfolding of events.



THEMES

Justice: El Juez de la Acordada is a person who has been authorized to patrol the roadways of Mexico and to arrest and bring to justice any criminals he encounters. The Juez de la Acordada witnesses what happens with Faustino and in fact, he makes the decision to shoot Faustino and end Faustino's final agonies of dying. The Juez represents the administration of justice, which is to say that he restores equilibrium in the world. The Juez sees what others do not see, and it is a heavy burden. His role invokes images of the tragedies found in Shakespeare or in Ancient Greek tragedies.

Revenge: Not only does Don Eusebio seek revenge for the death of his son, Faustino, Acacia also seeks revenge. Her vengeance, however, focuses on Raimunda, her mother. Acacia states that her mother betrayed her father's memory.

Passion: Raimunda is passionately in love with Esteban and tells him that she cannot live without him. Esteban, likewise, expresses his passionate desire for her. At the same time, Raimunda's daughter, Acacia, is obsessed with her usurping stepfather. Esteban, despite his protestations of love for Raimunda, is passionately obsessed with Esteban, even going to the extreme of murdering a rival, which he expressed (rather curiously) as killing "for" her.

Love: While everyone seems to be professing love to each other, it becomes clear that the love that Raimunda had for Esteban was simply passion, and what Esteban possessed for Acacia was illicit lust, which he blamed on her, when he told Raimunda that Acacia was the "demonio" (demon). What Acacia

held for Esteban alternated between love and hatred. At the end of the day, the only true love was seen within the true family members: the love that Don Eusebio and Dona Mercedes had for their son, Faustino, and the love of Raimunda for her daughter, Acacia.

Misogyny: When Raimunda asks Esteban how he could betray her, Esteban replies that he was the victim. Acacia targeted him. It was Acacia the “demon” (his words! “el demonio”) who targeted and seduced him. This scene underscores a persistent theme in this film and others of Emilio Fernandez: a fear, even a horror, of the seductive power of women. Acacia is a siren, and Esteban crashes on the rocks. He kills to have Acacia for his own; then, the family of his victim avenge the death, and Esteban dies in a rain of gunfire. In the end, Acacia chooses to stay with her mother and renounce Esteban. The order of the world is restored; it was thrown out of balance, not when Acacia articulated her obsession with Esteban, but when Raimunda chose to remarry. The film suggests that she should have stayed true to her late husband and not have introduced a substitute father for Acacia. In fact, Raimunda admits as much when she tells Acacia that she should never have married Esteban.

Lurking in a chthonic realm is the ghost of Acacia’s father, the true paterfamilias, who avenges the fact that his armoires and closets are filled with the interloper’s shirts and boots, and that he ride horses from his stables. The ghose of Acacia’s father also takes revenge on the fact that Raimunda has cast his memory aside to succumb to the suit of a usurper. Raimunda suffers, and she will continue to suffer for her treason.

The daughter, who claimed to hate her mother for having handed over her father’s share of El Soto to a usurper, was, as it turned out, determined to seduce him and she succeeded, with him drawn helplessly on a tsunami of desire to her love / hate passion for him. She insisted on marrying Faustino so she could get away, but in the end, it seemed designed to punish both her mother and Esteban, whom her mother had the nerve to announce was the “man of the house” and who was the one who would approve or disapprove of a marriage proposal. Far from being a quintessential powerful male, Esteban was like iron filings to Acacia’s magnet. But, Acacia herself did not actually possess the source of the power. That was still held in a male presence – that of the memory of her father, the “patron” of Hacienda El Soto.

CHARACTERS

Raimunda:	Widowed wife of hacienda owner, marries Esteban
Esteban:	Marries Raimunda, named head of the household, given one half of the ranch
Acacia:	Daughter of Raimunda and Raimunda’s first husband
Faustino:	Heir of the large adjoining ranch
Don Eusebio:	Faustino’s father, and eager to join his ranch with Hacienda El Soto
Juez de la Acordada:	Authorized by the government to hunt down and bring to justice criminals who travel the byways of Mexico

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ESTEBAN: Esteban is Raimunda’s husband and the stepfather of her teenage daughter, Acacia. With his marriage to the widow of a wealthy owner of a vast hacienda, he became the head of the household and virtual paterfamilias, with all the power and authority that implies. He also was giving one-half interest in El Soto. These actions enraged Acacia, who considered Raimunda’s acts to be a betrayal of the memory of her father.

The social order is rigid. The religious beliefs bulwark any possible chinks in the structure. But, with all its predictability – the villages with their colonial style churches, the plazas and the elaborate buildings for the elite, and the extensive networks of haciendas, with the ranching and farming privileging skilled horsemanship and bravado – the culture expresses its fundamental impossibility – a chaos always lurking on the edge of an idyllic life, touched with edges of magic and grandeur with the pageantry of the Catholic Church and the period festivals with the community music and dance.

Stoic: The Mexican ranchera – sung by a mariachi singer, who knows just how to belt out what sounds first like a full throated laugh, but which quickly devolves into a half yelp-half sobbing, perfectly

expresses the notion of fate laughing at the poor, innocent schmuck who was foolish enough to think that perfect love could be possible in this world, and that a man could uphold his honor and keep it pristine and unblemished, no matter what the travails. One can only approach this tragicomic reality with stoicism.

Honor: In *La Malquerida*, Esteban looks like the perfect specimen of Mexican honor and masculinity. He is tall, wears a large sombrero, charro-style pants and jacket, and he is a consummate horseman. When he walks, his boots make sonorous heart beats on the floor, which his showy spurs make a clank and drag – almost like chains pulling across the tile. There is, however, a sense of the “carcajada” – the loud, half-taunting, half- rueful weeping laughter in his presence. He is not the natural heir of the grand Hacienda, the Hacienda El Soto. He has married Raimunda, a widow whose husband was the owner of Hacienda El Soto, and whose first child, her adolescent daughter, Acacia, will inherit. Acacia’s name even ties her to the Hacienda El Soto (the Grove); acacias grow in the Mexican grove near an artesian spring, which lies at the heart of the Hacienda El Soto.

Honor cultures are tricky places, though. There is a delicate balance, despite what the alternately stoic and passionate men might try to embody. An honor culture insists on respect and being respected. It lives and dies by maintaining the order of things, and that ineluctable force of “order” emanates out from the family, with the father the paterfamilias, and the oldest son the rightful heir, who must spend his youth grooming himself to preserve and build the patrimony, not only by good stewardship of the property, but also through a prudent and fruitful marriage. This system is the foundational platform upon which all the different aspects of Mexican society rest, with all the complexity of “raza” or “casta” (lineage) to adhere to.

Passionate: Esteban has married Raimunda, but the horrific cosmic joke played on all at Hacienda El Soto, is that although he claims to love Raimunda, in reality, Acacia has bewitched him and he is utterly and completely held in her thrall. Acacia refuses to eat at the same table with her mother and stepfather, and she claims to abhor him. We learn later that it is her mother she rages against because she is jealous and wants Esteban to herself.

When the handsome young man, Faustino, comes to ask her hand in marriage, Raimunda storms that she will marry Faustino, despite the fact that her mother is against it, due to the fact it would in essence destroy the integrity of Hacienda El Soto by merging it with the neighboring ranch. What is Acacia’s motivation? Why is she so adamant? Fate also laughs at her and at Faustino.

Jealous: When Faustino comes at night to visit Acacia, Esteban will have nothing of it. His jealousy takes possession of him. He mounts his black horse and encounters Faustino, who is on a white horse. He shoots Faustino, who falls from his horse and lies on the ground, mortally wounded. Acacia returns to El Soto, Esteban following close behind. Things will never be the same: “I have killed for you, Acacia,” he declares. He has unleashed the whirlwind.

Self-Destructive: Emilio Fernandez explores the impossibility of perfection; the essential self-destructive nihilism that seems to underpin Mexican culture and masculinity. Esteban has it all, and yet his marriage to the widow, Raimunda, with her gorgeous daughter, the sole heir to El Soto, casts it all into a fiery pit of passions and self-destruction.

Despite the fact that Esteban looks the part of the quintessential Mexican macho male, his resolve and his strength shatter when in the presence of Acacia. Raimunda weeps when she asks him how he could betray her and seduce his own daughter (well, technically a step-daughter). He responds that he was not the instigator. It was Acacia the “demon” (his words! “el demonio”) who targeted and seduced him.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. When we meet Raimunda, we see her as a mother frustrated and mystified by the rebelliousness of her adolescent daughter, Acacia. The heart of the problem is Raimunda’s marriage to Esteban. Please explain how and why Raimunda’s marriage reveals deep character flaws that result in a tragedy of far-reaching consequence.

2. In the film, how does the director suggest that Esteban might be a victim as well as a murderer and a perpetrator of de facto incest? How might his situation illustrate the unexpected outcomes of masculinity, especially toxic masculinity?

3. Is Acacia a temptress and a siren, or the victim of her mother's decision to marry a man who appears to be much younger than Raimunda? Please describe Acacia's inner conflicts and the way she manipulates men, inspiring the song, "La Malquerida," that describes how loving her will lead to a disastrous end.

4. What is the role of the Juez de la Acordada? What are some of the existential issues that he brings to the surface when he sees what others do not see? Describe how his role is to observe the realities that people want to keep hidden, and then to deal with them in a way that restores order in the complex social relations in rural Mexico.