

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CANAIMA, THE GOD OF EVIL / Canaima - El Dios Del Mal (1945) Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Drama

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

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OVERVIEW

With *Canaima (El Dios del Mal / God of Evil)*, Juan Bustillo Oro takes a novel, *Canaima*, by an acclaimed Venezuelan author, Rómulo Gallegos, and infuses it with the issues that resonated with the 1940s Mexican public, namely those of masculinity, ambition, the fate of women in a hyper-masculinized world, and the power of nature. Marcos Vargas, the protagonist, returns to the town of Ciudad Bolívar, which lies on the border of the great swamps and jungles of the Yuruarí River. He is ambitious and obsessed with being a man among men. He wants to be known, respected, and even feared, as he goes on a quest to avenge the murders of his brothers. He also wants to become rich. His path forward will take him to a small outpost town, Upata, and later, deeper into the jungles in search of gold and rubber (caucho), and it will draw him to dangerous situations and temptations. He directly confronts the powerful “caciques” and “caudillos” (strongmen) – the individuals who control the large blocks of land and resources and the people in the wild outposts, and his quest places him in harm’s way. He is attracted to the seemingly impossible, and pays attention to the love interest of the most powerful and violent of the strongmen. As he confronts the powerful landowners (caudillos and caciques), he wins a few small battles, but in doing so, he loses his equilibrium and plunges into deeper into the jungle, where he encounters rubber and gold, but also violence and a disregard for the human dignity of the indigenous inhabitants and women. Marcos Vargas struggles to maintain a code of honor, but as in many honor societies, he pays a high price as his business endeavors fail and he seems to embrace violence. It is not always clear that he has been able to adhere to the high moral standards he declares to have upheld. The story of *Camaina* resonated with Mexico of the 30s and 40s as it implemented land reform, and large plantations (latifundios) were divided into communally-owned and farmed farms (ejidos). The powerful landowners lost control of the land in Mexico, and *Camaina* was a reminder of how harsh and inequitable the system could be.

SYNOPSIS

Marcos Vargas returns home to Venezuela after studying in an English university in Trinidad. He wants to spend time with his mother after the recent murder of his brothers and the death of his father. He sets off to avenge their deaths, much to the consternation of his mother, who does not want him to go into the “heart of darkness” of jungles and wild rivers. Once he has arrived in Upati, the remote jungle outpost, he is determined to show Col. José Francisco, whom he blames for the murders, that he is tough, reckless, and fearless. In doing so, he puts himself and others in danger: first, a child who puts an apple on his head for Marcos to shoot, and then, the wife of Col José Francisco, Maigualida, target of Marcos’s attentions. Further, he gets involved in a crooked business schemes and spends time in squalid cantinas to have access to Col Jose Francisco and murderous Cholo Parima, whom he ends up killing in self-defense. As he avenges the deaths of his brothers, he sees everyone around him sink into depravity. Marcos himself loses everything. Finally, with nothing left to lose, and true revenge an impossibility, he returns to Ciudad Bolívar, where his mother is dying. After she passes away, he goes to the home of Arceli, a lovely woman he spurned in favor of the dangerous Maigualida, and they leave town together.

THE STORY

Yuruarí River: The film opens with scenes of waterfalls and dramatic rapids of the Yuruarí River. This is the Canaima, famous for its impenetrable jungles and the gorgeous river and jungle systems, which include Angel Falls. . The powerful Orinoco sweeps away everything in its path, including the hearts and sanity of the men and women who enter into its reaches and its dark, swampy jungles. "That's the way Canaima is: It pulls us in with our dreams, and then enslaves us with those very dreams."



Marcos Vargas returns home. As he returns to Ciudad Bolivar, he surprises his mother, who is in failing health. She embraces him and tells him about the passing of her husband (his father). She mentions the murder of Marcos's brothers, and expresses her gratitude that he studied in Trinidad. Marco Vargas smiles wistfully as his mother holds his shoulders. He comments on the loss of his father, and also the murder of his siblings. He will never be dominated, he asserts to her. He will avenge the losses.



Marcos Vargas in Upata: Marcos Vargas follows the river Yuruari to the interior town of Upati. It is a rustic, remote outpost, and there are few businesses. One of the enterprises is owned by the Vallorini family, whose patriarch is a kind, generous man who adores his daughters. Arecelis, a true beauty, is immediately intrigued by Marcos Vargas and flirts with him. Marcos Vargas participated in a fiesta in Upati, where people mock him for being a dandy. Marcos is extremely offended, and feels a deep determination to defend his honor and show he has all the skills of a

powerful man. He needs to prove that he is tougher, smarter, and more manly than everyone. That includes skills. Marcos Vargas pays a young boy a couple of coins to do a William Tell routine. It is a boastful and utterly unconscionable act, which could have had a tragic outcome. Marcos does not care. He needed to prove his masculine skills. Arcelis slaps him on the face.

Dangerous pursuit. Col. José Francisco, a violent owner of land and property, who is also a heavy drinker and gambler, holds a grudge against Manuel Ladera. Col. José Francisco has fallen in love with Manuel Ladera's daughter, Maigualida, but under no circumstances will Manuel let José Francisco marry her. Marcos Vargas, who has a beautiful voice, sings while Maigualida Ladera plays the piano. Col. José Francisco burns with jealousy and rage. "I've fallen in love with Maigualida," asserts Marcos Vargas. His friend and confidante, Gabriel Ureña replies: "No, don't fool yourself. You have fallen love with the danger of falling in love with her."

Revenge Cholo Parima and Col. José Francisco have a conversation. Cholo Parima plans to follow Marcos Vargas on a lonely, dangerous road to the rubber "caucho" operations. On the way to caucho operations, he encounters campesinos singing around a campfire. Marcos Vargas watches. The murderer of Marcos's brother, Cholo Parima, drinks heavily in a bar. "The mosquito keeps on bothering me" – getting drunk, he pulls his gun, but Marcos Vargas anticipates it and gets the shot off first, killing Cholo Parima.

A business proposition with Manuel. Manuel Ladera is willing to fund Marcos Vargas's ideas, as well as to sell him equipment, in order to achieve the goal of establishing gold or rubber operations in the jungle. Speaking to Conde Giaffaro, Marcos Vargas discusses the pros and cons of buying into businesses in the jungles of the Orinoco, and the fact that the caudillos controlled not only commerce, but lives. Marcos Vargas buys a business and his friends congratulate him as a waiter looks on, holding glasses of champagne to celebrate. Marcos Vargas is making progress toward his goal to be the strongest and best man, the most "macho" anyone has seen.



Jungle Jungle effects on the human psyche. The jungle possess the power to strip the humanity from all who enter and reduce them to creatures driven by survival. The forces are primeval and ineluctable. That's the way Canaima is: It pulls us in with our dreams, and then enslaves us with those very dreams. Some will die as a result of the violence that bursts out, and others will profit, similar to what happens in a cockfight: one gallo stays alive, the other dies, but the humans who organized and made the fight possible profit.



Return from Jungle Having lost his investment, and unable to pay his debts, Marcos Vargas returns to his mom, holds her in his arms, and begs for forgiveness for having left her. She passes away, and he realizes that he is absolutely alone in the world.

Marriage with Aracelis although she has suffered from nervous breakdowns after several attacks on the home. She is living with a relative on a ranch, and Marcos Vargas is able to find it. She is standing near a well outside when he approaches her. She embraces him, they speak words, not so much of love as of pain, regret, and longing. At the end, he invites her to go with him, and they leave together.



THEMES

Revenge: *Canaima* starts out as a revenge story, where Marcos Vargas returns to his home town of Ciudad Bolívar in the southern part of Venezuela, on the edge of the vast tropical rain forest and thick, snaking rivers. However, revenge seems hollow after he kills the murderer of one of his brothers in self-defense. Instead of giving him closure, it ignites a desire to go into a state of nature in the dangerous, untrackable rain forest.

Masculinity: Marcos Vargas is determined to be feared throughout the land as a violent, death-dealing spirit of vengeance, a hypermasculine male in a land of macho. However, the film is an indictment of hypermasculinity because it shows it to bring bad fortune and tragedy to all who are in contact with it, or who attempt to become hypermasculine. For example, both Aracelis and Maigualida suffer due to the attentions of men. First, Aracelis is disappointed by Marcos Vargas, who will not give her his full attention. Maigualida is pursued by the villainous José Francisco, who will kill all men who get in the way. Aracelis and Maigualida only find happiness after the men they ultimately stay with demonstrate that they have renounced violence, competition to the death, and obsession.

Madness: As represented by the jungle and the powerful Yuruarí River, madness is more powerful the further one goes into the deep rain forest and jungle. The society of the individuals in the swamps and jungles of the Yuruarí River is intemperate and self-destructive, as evidenced by José Francisco Aravín, who drinks himself into a violent rage, and vows to kill anyone who want Maigualida. Cholo Parima has become a murderer in the heart of the jungle, and he is willing to murder again. The deeper one plunges into the jungle, the deeper one plunges into self-destructive behaviors, as men talk about getting “meat” (young women), and men work under brutal conditions.

Corruption: The rubber trade is one that generates great wealth, but none of it actually makes its way to the people who live in Upata, Ciudad Bolívar, or in the encampments in the jungle, due to the tight grip that the “bosses” (caciques) have on the land the resources. Such corruption resulted in the death of his brothers, and indirectly in the deaths of his mother and father. For that reason, Marcos Vargas becomes determined to fight corruption and advocate land reform. Because land reform had happened in Mexico in conjunction with the Mexican Revolution the film resonated with the audience in the early 1940s, just then experiencing the benefits (or lack of benefits) from breaking up the latifundios (large farms) to small, communally run farms (ejidos).

Nihilism: In many ways, *Canaima* is a subversive, nihilistic story, at least from the perspective of a man, Marcos Vargas, who wants to be a paragon of masculinity, and through sheer force of will, to achieve wealth, influence, power, and to captivate women. All the while, he wants to take on, single-handedly, the ruthless and corrupt landowners who have gained riches for themselves while keeping the people around them in virtual enslavement. He lives by a code of honor, which would, in theory, guide him well. However, Bustillo Oro also subverts the notion of honor and shows how it can exercise an evil, bewitching influence and draw one into violence and death. When the protagonist, Marcos Vargas returns to his home of Ciudad Bolívar after studying at an English university in Trinidad, he comforts his recently widowed mother. He wants to avenge the deaths of his brothers who were murdered by people working for the local “bosses” who are the landowners who own the majority of resources. He gains assistance from Manuel Ladera, who has a beautiful daughter, Maigualida. Unfortunately, the most vicious and powerful of the “caciques” (warlords or territory bosses), Col Jose Francisco, falls in love with her. She rejects his proposals, and in a fit of rage, Col Jose Francisco decides that if he can't have her, no one can, and he will kill all his rivals. Thus, to compound the issues of honor, is also a cat and mouse game in a familiar hyper-masculine narrative as two men fight to the death over the love of a woman. This narrative, too, is subverted, as it is clear that not only does it show masculine values as destructive and self-destructive, it shows the object of their violence – a woman – as being completely captive to either the controlling, protective forces of the paterfamilias, the father acting as head of the entire extended family, or captive to the man who “wins” her hand. All of the

action takes place with a backdrop of the river Yuruarí, the jungles, and the power of the jungle to strip away all veneers of civilization.

CHARACTERS

Marcos Vargas	Protagonist, a young man who has returned from Trinidad
Aracelis Vellorini	Protected daughter of a distinguished business owner
Manuel Ladera	Business owner who will help Marcos Vargas get started
Maigualida Ladera	Oldest daughter of Manuel Ladera
Cholo Parima	“Lieutenant” for Ardavin, murdered Marcos’s his brother
Col José Francisco Ardavin	Powerful landowner, controls the Yuruari territory
Gabriel Ureña	Telegraph operator and good friend of Marcos Vargas

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Marcos Vargas: As a hero in what could be viewed as an epic set in a backdrop of violence, corruption and obsession in the Venezuelan rain forest, Marcos Vargas does not appear, at first, to have qualities that are universally relatable. However, his is a journey not only of personal revenge for the murder of his brothers, but also a mission to expose the corruption of the “caciques” (bosses) who control blocks of land, and in doing so, enslave the people in back-breaking and dangerous subsistence rubber production and gold mining. His mission is laudable, but he has a number of flaws which make him more of a tragic figure than a hero.

Macho: Marcos’s desire to compete and win against any and all men in order to show himself to be superior to them is so extreme as to almost a sickness. He wants to be the “manliest of all the men” which would translate to being bolder, quicker, and more deadly. His goal is to intimidate the corrupt caciques and to gain far and wide that would make people fear him. In reality, it only seems to magnetically attract violence and a nihilistic plunge into “tit for tat” vengeance. He wants to intimidate the murderer of his brother, Cholo Parima. Cholo is not intimidated, but he is drunk and slower on the draw than Marcos when Marcos hunts him down in a bar. After killing Cholo, Marcos feels no closure. Instead, he is driven to travel even further into the “heart of darkness.”

Ambitious: Marcos wants to rescue his mother from the dreadful state of poverty she has found herself in since the death of her sons and her husband. When in school in Trinidad, Marcos had no idea of the collapse of her finances. However, upon returning, he is determined to gain riches and influence with rubber and gold. He also wants to marry into a prestigious family and to break the back of the wealthy cacique “bosses” who control the huge expanses of land and resources.

Obsessive: In avenging his brothers’ deaths, Marcos displays an obsession that is understandable. However, it is far from the only obsession that he holds close to his heart. His other obsessions can be both dangerous and self-destructive. For example, he professes his love to Aracelis, but it does not last, principally because he pays attention to Maigualida, who has been claimed by the very dangerous and unpredictable Col José Francisco Ardavin (although she does not like him). The obsession puts him in direct conflict with José Francisco, who has declared that if he can’t have her, no one can, and so he will kill anyone who gets in the way.

Risk-taking: Marcos takes tremendous risks as he pursues his goals of avenging his brothers’ deaths, helping his mother get out of financial ruin, and taking down the caciques so that he can have a thriving business. His risks seem to pay off, at least at first. However, his investments in what seems to be a “can’t miss” rubber operation is plagued by attacks from competitors. Further, after he kills Cholo Parima and then starts being hunted as well as hunting, he goes deeper into the jungle.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. The film is a critique of masculinity, particularly the “macho” kind of hyper-masculinity. Please describe three passages that illustrate the ways in which masculinity is toxic and deeply damages a community as well as families and interpersonal relations.
2. Describe the scenes that contains shots of the river and the jungle. How does the river become a visual metaphor for blood, passion, and violence. How does the jungle become a metaphor for madness, obsession, and secrets? Describe the specific elements in the scenes, and the appearance of people, when they do appear, in the scenes of the river and the jungle.
3. Describe the women in *Canaína*. Describe the role of each, and her means of survival. How does the woman who works in a brothel / bar share characteristics with Aracelis or Maigualida? Describe the fate of a woman without a male support system. You may wish to use the example of Marcos Vargas’s mother as an
4. How might *Canaína* be interpreted as a cry for political destabilization? Describe the function of “caciques” (powerful owners) and the caudillos (strongmen) in the control of blocks of land and resources (rubber, gold). Describe the behavior of Juan Ladera vs. the brutal Col José Francisco Ardavín.