

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE LAST MEXICAN / El Ultimo Maxicano (1960)**

Juan Bustillo Oro

Gender : *Drama*

TO VIEW: <https://ok.ru/video/325727291994>

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

### OVERVIEW

A tour de force that both embodies and subverts the Hollywood Western, Juan Bustillo Oro's *El Ultimo Mexicano* takes place in south Texas, where Mexico has had to cede territory to the United States following its defeat in the war ending in 1848. The "last Mexican" is a quintessential Mexican from Guanajuato whose ethics, idealism, loyalty, skill with horses, and expressiveness place him in a category apart from the often mendacious and greedy slave-owning planters from the American South. In this story, Mauricio del Valle, the "last" or "ultimate" Mexican, wins the heart of Luisa Poindexter, the daughter of the newly arrived wealthy family from Louisiana, much to the chagrin of dastardly Captain Calhoun, who wants her (and her future fortune) for himself.

### SYNOPSIS

The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) is over, and the Americans have won. The boundary between the U.S. and Texas has been moved from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande, and all the ranches and farms between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers are now in the U.S. The rich Louisiana planters, the Poindexters, have bought "Casa de Corvo," and are coming with their family and their slaves. The Mexican ranch owner, Mauricio del Valle, originally from Guanajuato, now lives in a part of the U.S., not Mexico. Luisa, the beautiful Poindexter daughter, meets Mauricio while she is on a ride with her horse and he is wrangling mustangs and showing off his stunning horsemanship. She invites him to a dance at Casa de Corvo, where their obvious attraction makes her scheming and callow fiance, Captain Calhoun, jealous. After serenades and singing in cantinas, Mauricio captures Luisa's heart. Calhoun challenges Mauricio to a duel, but loses. Humiliated, he plots revenge. He lures Luisa's brother, Enrique, and Mauricio to the river, where he shoots Enrique and stabs Mauricio. Calhoun then frames Mauricio for the death of Enrique. Half-dead, Mauricio makes it back to his ranch, where he is then arrested and charged for murder. Defended by his friend Stumpf, Mauricio looks as though he will be convicted of murder by the jury until Stumpf finds a witness who talks about Calhoun's vanity bullets that have his initials so he can claim credit for killing deer. They check the bullet that killed Enrique and it does have Calhoun's initials. Calhoun is then arrested for Enrique's murder. Luisa and Mauricio become engaged.

## STORY

**POINDEXTERS: A New Beginning** The movie begins with a scene that looks like it is Death Valley due to the aridity, but it is, in reality, south Texas. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) is over, and the Americans have won. The boundary between the U.S. and Texas has been moved from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande, and all the ranches and farms between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers are now in the U.S. That change has created a new demand for the territory. The film opens as a family of plantation owners from Louisiana, the Poindexters, arrive in a wagon train with their belongings and the entire family with its retinue of black slaves.



**MAURICIO: Mexican land owner** As the Poindexters make their way across the south Texas chaparral, a mysterious horseman greets them and introduces himself. He is Mauricio del Valle, a Mexican from the central state of Guanajuato, who has been living in the Nueces River area for many years. Mauricio is dressed in flashy “charro” style which is a very dressy Mexican cowboy (vaquero) outfit. Pancho (evocative of “Sancho” from Don Quixote de la Mancha) talks about the geopolitical changes and the fact that what was formerly a part of Mexico is now a part of the U.S. and becoming filled with emigrants.



## ROMANCE

**Meeting:** Luisa, who is an accomplished horsewoman, encounters Mauricio while she is on a ride. Mauricio, who makes a living by being a “mustanger,” and captures wild horses and sells them, has just spotted a herd of mustangs. As he works the herd, Luisa sees how skillful he is, and is enchanted. She flirts with him by trotting up close, then galloping off.

**Dance:** The Poindexters decide to have a dance at their home and to invite all the nearby gentlemen. As one of the few eligible women in that part of the state, Luisa attracts attention. Captain Calhoun continues to be interested in Luisa and wants to eliminate his potential rival, Mauricio.

**Serenade:** Mauricio pays a visit to Casa del Corvo, where he sings a serenade to Luisa on the azotea, the rooftop patio. It is a lovely scene, with starlight and potted plants around them. A skilled guitarist and singer, Mauricio sings a gentle ballad and accompanies himself on the guitar.



## JEALOUSY:

Captain Calhoun is Jealous. Luisa is enchanted by Mauricio’s serenade, which puts Captain Calhoun in a foul mood. He speaks to Luisa’s brother, Henry, to try to cast aspersions on Mauricio’s character, and to make insinuations about the fact that he is Mexican and that the Mexicans ceded the territory. Captain Calhoun is offended, however, and insults Mexico and Mexicans. He challenges Mauricio to an Indoor Duel and in defending the honor of Mexico /Mexicans, Mauricio disarms Captain Calhoun, and then discharges the gun into the ceiling.

## REVENGE

His honor offended, Captain Calhoun plots revenge. He continues his campaign of insults and insinuations about Mauricio to the Poindexters and the Texas Rangers. It is evident he wants to destroy Mauricio and also wants Luisa to himself.

## FALSE ACCUSATION

The next day, the Rangers are meeting at Casa Corvo, when Enrique Poindexter's riderless horse comes up to the ranch house. Captain Calhoun rides up and breathlessly informs Mr. Poindexter, Luisa, and those in attendance that Mauricio shot Enrique in the back. There is a grand funeral, and Luisa wears deep black mourning garb, including veils. Much later, Mauricio is found, half-dead, in a creekbed. Stumpf and Pancho tend to him, and Luisa visits. Calhoun seems to have "evidence" of guilt and he urges justice. Captain Calhoun instigates a general uprising against Mauricio and a small mob forms to come and hang / lynch Mauricio. Luisa, who cannot believe that Mauricio would kill her brother, urges justice.



## TRIAL

Instead of a lynching, a trial is held on under the cottonwood trees that line the Leona River. In the several days of the trial, Captain Calhoun begins to convince the jury that Mauricio was determined to kill Enrique because he was standing in the way of marrying Luisa (and having access to the family assets). However, the autopsy changes the story. The doctor announces he has found the bullet that killed Enrique and it has the initials of Calhoun on it. Calhoun only uses his "vanity bullets" so he can claim the animals he hunts. He confesses that it was a case of mistaken identity Mauricio is absolved, and his character as a quintessential Mexican caballero and charro exemplar is reinforced.



## THEMES

**Clash of Civilizations:** After 1848, Mexico had to cede the lands north of the Rio Grande to the United States. It was a bitter pill because at one time, Spain (and then, Mexico) controlled a great deal of the American West and Southwest. The arrival of the Poindexters, who were from Louisiana and supposedly Creole, represent a clash of colonial influence (French vs Mexican). The Mexican identity is threatened by erasure by the influx of outsiders (the people from Louisiana), just as the Comanches battle extinction as they continue to try to regain land that was in their control before the arrival of the Spaniards / Mexicans. The African-American slaves who are brought by the Louisiana planter family also represent a clash of civilizations, and one which was particularly harsh to those of African origin.

**Identity:** Mauricio del Valle is resolutely Mexican. He dresses in the most typical of Mexican vaquero outfits, the “charro,” and sings songs from his home state of Guanajuato. When encouraged to sing a “Texan” song, he politely demurs, and sings his “Soy Mexicano” (“I am a Mexican”), to which Luisa responds with fascination and admiration. In Mauricio’s eyes, the Mexican core principles of honor, valor, good horsemanship, romantic love, loyalty to family and one’s tradition are to be preserved above all.

**Conflict:** The Western genre, which Bustillo Oro is self-reflexively referencing in *El Ultimo Mexicano*, almost always embodies a clash between good and evil. In the genre, the “good guys” wear white hats and sing melodious tunes about nature, the open range life, friendship, and love. The “bad guys” are truly villainous: they do not sing. Instead, they plot and scheme to swindle innocent landowners from their property, seduce young ladies of verified fortune, and destroy anyone who happens to try to impede them in any way. While it is sometimes drawn in caricaturesque ways, the drama is a very clear and defined dialectic which is satisfying in the sense that it helps make order out of chaos.

**Good vs. Evil:** *El Ultimo Mexicano* (The Last Mexican) is, above all, the story of a part of the world (south Texas) with a unique natural beauty that has been at the crossroads as different groups, nations, or cultural interests enter it, and then try to control it. The story is set in 1850, at an inflection point of change, as the defeat of the Mexicans by the U.S. in 1848 put an official end to Mexico’s ownership of the territory, and unleashed a flood of immigrants looking for wealth and new beginnings, and gave new hope to the Native American tribes (Comanches, in particular), who renewed their efforts to regain control of their tribal lands. The ensuing chaos was tackled by members of the military in forts scattered in the area who tried to assure that trade routes and new settlers could flourish unmolested, but at the time of the story, there was no meaningful order or rule of law. In Bustillo Oro’s hands, it is a nostalgic look at Mexico’s once vast holdings into what is now Texas and the sense of loss and victimization by duplicitous scoundrels. In this sense, it is a story of a small victory as a lone, surviving Mexican defeats a scheming scoundrel, and demonstrates Mexican values are more noble than the elitist, slave-owning families of the American Deep South. It is also a story of conquest, as the honorable Mexican, Mauricio del Valle, wins the heart of the cherished daughter of the planter family, and thus stakes a claim in history and establishes his name into the “new order.” The story is also a classic “good vs evil” dialectic, with the villain fitting perfectly within the American cowboy genre. This is, ultimately, Juan Bustillo Oro’s invasion and conquest of the American Western genre, with his singing vaquero / charro going toe-to-toe with Roy Rogers (singing cowboy) in winning the hearts and minds of the love interest, the soldiers, and the other cowboys, trappers, and lawmen of the West.

**Family:** Mauricio makes frequent reference to his family ties in Guanajuato and he clearly respects the views and attitudes of his family. His father, who moved north to the Nueces River near Uvalde, Texas, was from Guanajuato. Mauricio refers to his father and his Mexican family with fondness and loyalty. The Poindexter family comes to Texas with a full retinue of family, servants, and friends (who turn out not to be so friendly). They cohere as a family, and thus they thrive. Their downfall was accepting a cynical and duplicitous schemer who coveted their riches.

## CHARACTERS

Mauricio del Valle: Mexican from Guanajuato, living in Texas who loves Luisa Poindexter

Luisa Poindexter: Henry Poindexter's sister, who loves Mauricio

Enrique Poindexter: Louise Poindexter's brother, who goes missing

Captain Cassius Calhoun: Luisa and Henry Poindexter's cousin

Zebulon "Zeb" Stumpf: a hunter and Mauricio's friend

Phelim O'Neill: Mauricio's servant and foster brother

Woodley Poindexter: the father of Henry and Luisa Poindexter

Isidora: a Mexican who loved Mauricio

Miguel Diaz: a Mexican who hates Mauricio and loved Isidora

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Mauricio Del Valle:** Mauricio is a "mustanger" whose family moved from Guanajuato, Mexico, to establish a horse ranch in what was then a part of the country of Mexico. His heritage and his origins inform this film, and his conversations with his friend and employee, Pancho, reinforce the connections to not only a place, but also a tradition with all its attendant values of honor, dignity, self-expression, and land-based sense of identity. Because the Spanish colonial identity was so shaped by vast holdings of land (the "latifundios"), to lose land by being supplanted by plantation owners from the American South was particularly painful.

*Dreams:* Mauricio dreams of a world of vast ranches where skills with horses are absolutely vital because the main occupation is to run a cattle operation in land that is only marginally hospitable. In the land south of the Nueces River, however, Mauricio's father found an ideal territory for horses and cattle. The ranch house is filled with cow hides and the accoutrements of the Mexican cowboy (vaquero), particularly the "charro" from central Mexico with the elaborately decorated close-fitting pants, adorned jacket, sombrero, and serape. Much of the film is about assuring the persistence of the culture and keeping it alive no matter who else may invade.

*Honor:* When Mauricio is in the cantina and a challenge arises between "Texas" and "Mexican" music, Mauricio is eager to promote the Mexican music, not only for its intrinsic attractiveness, but also for the values that are expressed in it. The willingness to face death and to demonstrate valor when faced with impossible odds is a key characteristic. For example, Mauricio upholds his honor in the indoor duel, and he shoots into the air instead of killing Captain Calhoun, even though he knows Calhoun holds a murderous jealousy toward him.

*Identity:* Mauricio is, above all, Mexican. In addition to wearing the traditional Mexican "charro" outfit, in direct contrast with the others around him, who wear traditional Texan cowboy hats, vests, long-sleeve shirts, and pants. His attitude toward Luisa is in stark contrast with his rival, Captain Calhoun. Whereas Calhoun would seek to capture Luisa by convincing her father to commit her to marriage, Mauricio expresses romantic love (with echoes of the Iberian "peninsular" tradition of courtly love and the troubadour poets) directly to Luisa through his songs and expressive exhortations.

*Captain Cassius Calhoun:* A dastardly and quintessential villain, Captain Calhoun once fought in the military (hence the honorific), but no longer wears a military uniform. Instead, his "uniform" is an open collar black shirt, a bandanna, black pants, and a black hat. His appearance makes one think of the villains in the Hollywood cowboy Western genre, and reminds the viewer that Juan Bustillo Oro is both echoing and subverting the genre by demonstrating that the most honorable rancher / horseman in Texas is not an American Texan, but a Mexican.

*Jealousy:* Captain Calhoun is a guest of the Poindexter family, and he lives under the same roof with Mr Poindexter, son Henry, and daughter Luisa. Henry is his good friend. And yet, he is jealous of Henry's position as heir who will eventually inherit the ranch that he covets. Through his friendship with Henry, Calhoun insinuates himself into the family, where he convinces Mr,

Poindexter that he would be the perfect husband for Luisa. He sets out to woo Luisa, but she is cold to his advances. When Mauricio comes on the scene immediately entrances Luisa, Calhoun is filled with rage.

*Deception:* Calhoun deceives the Poindexters on many levels. First, he pretends to be a loyal friend to Henry, when in reality, he is simply using him to ingratiate himself to Mr. Poindexter and to persuade Luisa to marry him. Second, Calhoun pretends to be a great warrior, but it is not at all clear that his record in the U.S. Army is what he claims. Finally, he pretends to be a man of resources, but in reality, he is a gambler and desperately needs money. Perhaps the most intense deception took place when he claimed that Mauricio murdered Henry Poindexter. The reality is that Calhoun planned to murder Mauricio, but shot Henry in error due to the fact that Henry had borrowed Mauricio's jacket due to the cold.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Not only does Mauricio discuss his Mexican heritage, he expresses it through his dress. For example, when he first encounters the Poindexters, he is wearing the typical Mexican horseman outfit. Later, when he sings at the cantina, he is wearing a different kind of outfit. Please select three scenes and describe his clothing and how it might differ from that of the Texan lawmen, cowboys, or trappers.
2. The part of Texas between the banks of the Leona River, where the Poindexters settle, and the Nueces River that creates a boundary, is very fluid at the time in history when this film takes place. Describe the groups living in this part of Texas, their history, and how they might clash with other groups. For example, take a look at the Native Americans, their history, and how they responded to the incursions of different groups.
3. In his courtship of Luisa, Mauricio's songs harken back to the Spanish tradition of courtly love, which then evolved into serenades and amatory poetry. How does his approach to courtship and love differ from that of Captain Calhoun?
4. *El Ultimo Mexicano* takes place in a Texas that has been, despite the lack of water and often harsh conditions, a highly coveted region, and a destination for diasporas, displaced groups, and lone adventurers to come and conquer. Mauricio represents one of those groups, on the verge of being supplanted by incoming groups. The Comanches represent another. Identify the groups and describe their history in Texas. Your groups can include Native American, Spanish, Mexican, German, Anglo-Americans, African Americans, and more.