

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Tracie Amend, Ph.D.

## ***Susana / The Devil and the Flesh / Carne y demonio (1951)*** Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. During his long exile in Mexico, Buñuel wrote and directed a handful of commercial films, including the featured melodrama of this essay, *Susana*. The middle period of Buñuel's career was also characterized by three satirical dramas loosely based on nineteenth-century Spanish novels: *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Tristana* (1970). In the 1970s, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style in such films as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

**Film** *Susana* (1951) is a black and white film set in rural, 1940s Mexico. Susana is a mentally troubled yet enchanting young woman who escapes a reform school and sabotages the family who takes her in. Although Buñuel managed to incorporate some of his signature shots in this film (such as close-ups of insects and shapely legs), the style is not particularly surrealist or satirical. Rather, the film could best be described as a post-war melodrama with touches of film noir suspense and horror.

**Background** Due to a long exile in Mexico, Buñuel's films in the 1940s and 1950s were often shot in and around Mexico City. *Susana* was no exception: it was filmed in the famed Churubusco Studio in Mexico City. Perhaps the most unique aspect of this particular film was Buñuel's collaboration with multiple writers on the screenplay. Manuel Reachí and Jaime Salvador were already established writers from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, and Salvador directed multiple westerns throughout his career. This western-ranchera influence can be felt in several of the more rustic scenes in the film. In addition, a young Rodolfo Usigli worked on the screenplay. This fourth author is significant in that Usigli would go on to become one of the most influential Latin American playwrights of the twentieth century. The film did not win any awards of note, but it is a good exemplar of Buñuel's more commercial style during his time in Mexico. Moreover, recent film criticism has reexamined *Susana* for its cinematography and prescient themes.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Susana</i>	Young woman who escapes a reformatory
<i>Don Guadalupe</i>	Patriarch of the family
Doña Carmen	Matriarch of the family
<i>Alberto</i>	Teenage son of Guadalupe and Carmen
<i>Jesús</i>	Ranch foreman who chases after Susana
<i>Felisa</i>	Family servant

### SYNOPSIS

Susana, a beautiful but troubled young woman, has been locked away in a reform school for over two years. One stormy night, she is thrown in a dungeon-like cellar but manages to escape through a window.

When she comes upon a prosperous ranch in the country, the kind owners (Don Guadalupe and Doña Carmen) take her in and allow her to live and work in the house. Susana flirts with all of the men on the ranch, from Alberto, the teenage son of the family, to Jesús, the ranch foreman. While she eventually

rejects Jesús's aggressive advances, Susana persists in pitting father against son. Doña Carmen tries to throw out Susana but Don Guadalupe overrules her.

It is not until the men from the reformatory show up that Susana's spell is broken. After they cart Susana away, the men realize their folly. Doña Carmen forgives everyone, and order is restored.

## SCENES

**Night in the Basement** The film opens with a foreboding hallway of a reform school and a matronly orderly unlocking a gate to the rooms down the hall. Two female attendants drag Susana, kicking and screaming, into a dark room. They throw her in the room and the third orderly locks the door. One of the attendants remarks that even though she has been there for two years, she has only gotten worse (as bad as her first day there) Susana spits in the face of one woman and they walk out the gate.

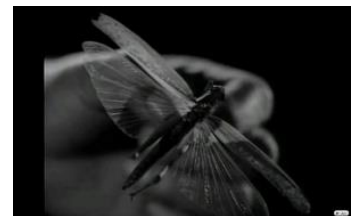


**Hysteria in the Room** When Susana is left alone, she cries hysterically and stares at the creatures in the room: a bat hanging from the ceiling, rats crawling in the hay, and a tarantula walking past. She remarks that she is as forsaken as a rat or a scorpion and that she could strike like a viper. She prays to the "god of prison" to let her escape these walls and bars.

**Susana's Escape** Susana goes to a high window with bars and pulls on them forcefully. When the bars give way, she laughs maniacally and climbs out the window. She crawls on her hands and knees in the pouring rain and manages to slip under barbed wire. She runs out into the field and the camera cuts to a shot of Don Guadalupe's extensive hacienda mansion from afar.

**Felisa's Ominous Prediction** Inside, Doña Carmen and her servant Felisa are preparing dinner and remarking on the heavy rain. Felisa warns that a fierce storm brings the devil, but Dona Carmen tells her not to start with her superstitions. Felisa reminds her mistress that her superstitions are more like predictions, and she begins to pray to the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Carmen retorts that she shouldn't worry given that she has called on all the saints of heaven.

**Alberto Studies Dragonflies** Carmen wonders why Alberto hasn't shown up for dinner, then he enters suddenly. Carmen jokes that she thought he had gone back to the agricultural college, and Felisa remarks that the young scholar disappears as if he had a girlfriend. Alberto retorts that his current girlfriend is the dragonfly he is studying, and the camera cuts to a close-up of the pinned insect. Felisa murmurs "poor thing," and Carmen and Alberto tease her for being childlike.



**Don Guadalupe with the Mare** Alberto sits at the dinner table, and Carmen admonishes him for doing so before his father. Alberto apologizes and asks what happened to him. The camera cuts to an exterior scene where the patriarch petting and worrying over a mare in labor, who is lying on the ground in the rain. One of the ranch hands tells him to let nature take its course, and Guadalupe remarks that he is as worked up as when Alberto was born.

**Family Dinner** The family sits down for dinner as the storm continues. Alberto mentions that he would like to stay at the ranch while he studies for his exams. His father agrees as long as he stay conscientious. The camera cuts to the family playing cards together. Suddenly, Jesús, the ranch foreman, enters to report that the newborn colt of the pregnant mare has died; moreover, the mare might also die from complications.



**Face of the Devil** Just as the thunder sounds, there is a close-up of Susana's terrified face in the dining room window. Everyone jumps up, startled, and Felisa proclaims that it is the face of the devil. Jesús and another ranch hand run outside and carry the drenched Susana to the couch in the living room. Carmen looks her over while the men wonder whether she got in a car accident or whether she is a wandering gypsy. Carmen reports that she has fainted but seems only slightly injured. The camera closes in on Don Guadalupe's face, then Jesús, as both men look lustfully at Susana's exposed legs. The camera follows their gaze.



**Carmen** Carmen gives Susana smelling salts and she comes to, crying. A few moments later, Carmen asks Susana if she is feeling better and what her name is. Susana replies "only Susana" and proceeds to make up a story about a lecherous stepfather. She claims that he promised her a good job in Acapulco but "abused" her on route to her new life. Carmen comforts her and vows to become the mother whom she never had. Susana thanks her profusely while Felisa looks at Susana disapprovingly. Felisa brings Susana hot soup in bed. She hands her a blanket and murmurs that she wouldn't be as welcoming as her masters. Susana understands the implication and throws down the blanket in anger when Felisa leaves the room. She burrows into the bed, satisfied.



**What To Do with Susana** The next morning, the couple discuss what do with Susana, and Guadalupe worries about taking in a stranger. When Susana appears on the patio, Don Guadalupe suggests that she find work outside, but Susana begs to stay with the family at the ranch. Carmen convinces her husband that she can use Susana around the house. Don Guadalupe watches Susana as she walks away. He approaches Carmen, who praises his kind nature. Guadalupe calls her pretty and kisses her passionately. Carmen is startled and asks her husband what came over him. He merely replies: "It's hot today."



## JESUS, THE RANCH HAND

**Ranch Hand makes Advances** When Susana walks out into the ranch, a trio of workers grab her and make inappropriate comments. Jesús intervenes and tells them not to bother her. Jesús flirts with Susana and offers to accompany her to the barn to collect eggs. As she picks out the white ones for her basket, Jesús offers to take her on a date around the countryside.

**Broken Eggs** Susana climbs the ladder to reach the higher nests. Jesús watches her from below as she places the eggs in her skirt. He grabs her waist to help her down, and Susana resists slightly. Jesús ignores her resistance and holds her tightly to his chest as he lifts her off the ladder. Susana is irritated that he has crushed the eggs, and the camera offers a close up of her bare legs with the yolk running down her left leg. Susana worries that she will be blamed for the lost eggs, but Jesús only laughs and asks her out again.



**Jesús Learns the Truth** When he is riding out in the field, Jesús comes upon a police car and stops to chat with him. The policeman reports that a young woman escaped the reformatory, and he makes the hourglass gesture to indicate that she is attractive and has a nice body. Jesús jokes that there are a few sexy and crazy rancheras on the hacienda, but no strangers.



**Jesús and Susana in the Barn** Alberto watches from the library as Jesús follows Susana into the barn. Once inside, Jesús professes his love and grabs Susana, insisting that she likes him, too. Susana resists and says that she hasn't made up her mind, and Jesús threatens her by saying that his strong arms can be used to dominate her. He kisses her forcefully, and Susana runs to the other side of the barn. Jesús notices that she is afraid of him.



**Eyes on Alberto** Susana carries the eggs out of the barn and is immediately accosted by two ranch hands again. She slaps them and continues walking, and Jesús, following behind, threatens to fire the ranch hands if they don't leave Susana alone. When Susana walks through the patio, she notices Alberto studying. She pulls down her blouse to expose her shoulders and walks over to him. Alberto flirts with her by saying she is as pretty as newly grown grass.

**Flirting with Alberto** Susana puts down the tray and lowers her dress to expose her shoulders. When she enters the library, Alberto is organizing his agronomy texts. Susana offers to help him with the books and praises his intellectual prowess.

**The Symbolism of Names** When she sees a picture of a naked man in one of the textbooks, Susana feigns bashfulness. Alberto explains the purpose of the pictures and the symbolism of names. He explains to Susana that her name means chastity. The two are on a ladder when they lose their balance and fall to the floor. Susana falls on top of Jesús, and the two kiss. When Carmen calls out for Alberto, Susana runs out of the room.



**Alberto's Jealousy** When Guadalupe asks for Jesús, Alberto uses the excuse to enter the barn and knock down one of the interior doors. He walks around looking for Jesús but finds Susana at the well instead. She flirts with him again, and he throws rocks down the well resentfully. He confronts her about Jesús's advances, and she laughs it off. He walks away proclaiming that he doesn't believe her.

**In the Well** Susana fakes a fall down the well in order to prevent Alberto from leaving. He climbs down to check on her. They sit at the bottom of the well and kiss until Jesús approaches. He looks down and sees them together. Susana and Alberto climb out with Alberto looking up at Susana from below. She emerges and looks down at Alberto, laughing.



**Sexy Cinderella** Susana climbs yet another ladder in order to wash the interior windows of the ranch house. She pulls back her skirt as she reaches for the tallest window. She climbs down when she hears Don Guadalupe approaching with a rifle. Susana tells him that she is cleaning the windows, and Guadalupe tells her to keep at it while he is arranging his rifles. Susana climbs up again and starts wiping the glass doors of the cabinet where the rifles are stored. Guadalupe picks up and disassembles his weapons, all the while staring at Susana's body.



**Wear More Appropriate Clothes** Guadalupe mentions to Susana that she should pay more attention to her clothes, and Susana replies that the skirt and blouse were given to her. Guadalupe suggests that she find looser clothing given that there are so many men on the ranch. He warns her that ranch hands are as wild as untamed colts. She agrees and walks away. Don Guadalupe watches her leave and continues polishing his rifle.

**Orders to Jesus** Jesús enters the house to discuss the seeding and accounting with Don Guadalupe. Susana lurks nearby and pretends to clean the windows as the men talk. When Jesús turns to leave, Guadalupe mandates that the foremen protect Susana from the advances of the ranch hands. The

patriarch says he worries about her innocence and naivete, and he charges Jesús with maintaining decorum. The foreman agrees.

**Felisa Warns Carmen** Don Guadalupe repeats his concerns about Susana's innocence to Carmen, and his wife assures him that she will fix the problem. The camera cuts to Susana trying on a white floor-length dress that Felisa has made. Carmen says that the dress is more appropriate and asks Susana to deliver Alberto's dinner tray. When Susana leaves, Felisa warns Carmen that the girls who act the most innocently (those who do not "break dishes") are the worst ones.

**Another Damsel in Distress Performance** Susana runs away from the well and out into the field where Don Guadalupe is hunting pheasants. Susana sits below the cliffs and pulls down her blouse to expose her shoulders. She yells "¡Ay!" in fake pain and "Socorro!" (Help!) several times. Guadalupe stops shooting and runs around looking for Susana. He spots her down below and descends. Susana moans in fake pain and claims she hurt her ankle. Don Guadalupe touches her ankle and helps her fake hobble back to the house. Susana asks about her dropped handkerchief, and Guadalupe picks it up for her. Carmen comes out and suggests that Susana get off her feet for the day.



**Lust in the Rain** The camera cuts to a heavy rain storm in front of the ranch house. Members of the staff pray to an altar. Don Guadalupe enters his room and sniffs Susana's handkerchief. He emerges on his balcony and looks at Susana's silhouette through her bedroom window. She is seated and brushing her hair. The camera swivels abruptly to Alberto, also on the balcony of his bedroom, also watching Susana lustfully.



**Jesús's Threats** Jesús emerges from the shadows and knocks on Susana's door. When she opens, he insists that they be together despite Susana's protests and rejections. She laughs at him, and he grabs her and kisses her forcibly. Susana bites and slams the door on Jesús's hand. She slams the door in his face, but Jesús vows that she will be his and no one else's.

**What to Do About Alberto** Carmen checks on Alberto and notices that he has a fever and is irritable. Alberto apologizes for his outbursts, and Carmen tells him to rest. Carmen enters the master bedroom and reports on Alberto's agitated state. Guadalupe suggests that she leave him alone. Carmen notices Susana's handkerchief on the table, and Guadalupe lashes out, defensive. He exhorts her not to ask him stupid questions with "double meaning."

**Jesús Confronts Alberto** Alberto is studying the chicken and sheep on the ranch when Jesús approaches. At first, they discuss business, but Alberto starts implying that he is not doing his job and doesn't know his place. Jesús tells him to speak plainly, and Alberto reminds him that his father is the boss who pays him. Jesús storms off.

**Jesús Propositions Susana** Jesús finds Susana by the well and suggests that they run away together. Susana tries to reject him explicitly but Jesús persists. Susana reminds him that the ranch is her sanctuary and that she won't put up with his desire "by force." She also says that she won't be intimidated by his threats of exposing her, either. Jesús kisses her and wrestles with her violently.



**Don Guadalupe Fires Jesús** Guadalupe enters the scene as Jesús is man handling Susana and she is yelling “Suéltame” (Let me go). Guadalupe reads Jesús the riot act and fires him on the spot. When Jesús leaves, Susana feigns remorse and cries. She suggests that she should leave, but Guadalupe assures her that he will protect her. Also, he promises to find her a job on the ranch.



**Doña Carmen Worries** Felisa arranges flowers and recites her sayings / proverbs to Carmen. The maid accidentally lets it slip that Jesús is on the patio and getting ready to leave. Perturbed, Carmen goes to the door and calls Jesús over. When she asks him what happened, he explains that he has been fired. She suggests that perhaps Guadalupe overreacted and she could smooth things over. Jesús replies that he appreciates her kindness but she should talk to her husband.



**Guadalupe and Carmen Have a Fight** Guadalupe goes into bed and asks after Alberto. Carmen reports that he went to bed with a headache. She asks Guadalupe why he fired Jesús. Guadalupe gets irritated and complains that he shouldn't have to justify himself to his wife. After probing further, Carmen gets Guadalupe to admit that he fired Jesús for being “indecent” with Susana. Carmen asks why he is so worked up, and Guadalupe blusters about maintaining obedience and decency on his ranch.



**I've Got Your Number, Susana** Felisa enters Susana's room and scolds her for staying in bed too long. Susana insults and taunts her from the bed. Felisa repeats that she wouldn't be as forgiving as her masters. Felisa paces the floor, murmuring “I have to put up with it.” When Susana finally leaves her room, Carmen demands that she wash the floors in the house. Susana complains, but Carmen mandates that Susana learn her place.



**Susana Plays the Victim Again** Guadalupe comes in from outside, where he was fretting over the failing mare. When he enters the living room, he notices Susana washing the floors and suggests that she should have a “less heavy” job. Susana plays innocent and says she will do what she is told. Guadalupe tells Rosario, another servant, to take over. Susana visits Felisa and rubs it in that she escaped her chores.

**Felisa Tells on Susana** Felisa calls in Carmen to rat out Susana. Carmen repeats her mandate, but Susana says that she is getting contradictory orders. Carmen proclaims that she is the mistress of the domestic space, and when Susana resists, the matriarch tells her to get out.

**Guadalupe Overrules His Wife** Guadalupe enters when Carmen is firing Susana and asks what happened. Carmen asserts her dominance over domestic issues and insists that Susana leave. Guadalupe asserts that it is unjust to fire someone without cause, and he proclaims that Susana will stay. Guadalupe leaves as Carmen and Felisa become increasingly enraged.

**Jesús Returns** Susana serves Guadalupe and Alberto soup. Both men look at her longingly as she bends over the table. Jesús calls out to her from the shadows as she walks back to the kitchen. Jesús presses her against a column and professes his love again. She rejects him again, and he calls her a viper. He grabs her violently, but she escapes his grip.



**Susana Kisses Guadalupe** Susana walks over to Guadalupe's office and fake cries in order to get his attention. He calls her over to comfort her, and she laments that she will have to leave. Susana flatters him and closes in; then, Guadalupe kisses her passionately. Carmen descends the main staircase and sees them kissing from the threshold of the office.



**Alberto Professes His Love** Alberto visits Susana's room and offers to take care of her. When he tries to kiss her, Susana pushes him away and says she needs time to think.

**Father-Son Confrontation** Guadalupe watches his son leave the room and asks him what he was doing. Alberto reveals that he is in love with Susana and will marry her no matter what. Guadalupe demands that Alberto leave and go back to school. The two men have a standoff until Carmen intervenes and leads Alberto away. Susana watches the confrontation from her own room.

**Alberto Tells His Mother** Carmen asks Alberto how he could dare raise his hand to his father. With coaxing, Alberto reveals that he is in love, "for life," with Susana. Carmen is horrified and runs away. When Felisa sees her crying mistress, the maid advises Carmen to throw out Susana. Carmen worries that her son and husband are too obsessed for her to do anything, but Felisa retorts that she should "break it first, and figure it out later."

**Carmen kicks Susana out** Carmen prays for advice, then steels herself to confront Susana. She walks across the patio, and Felisa follows with a whip. Carmen enters Susana's room and tells her to get out immediately. Susana resists, and Felisa shows Carmen the whip. At first, Carmen refuses, but when Susana taunts her about her tryst with Guadalupe, Carmen loses control. Carmen whips Susana multiple times, and the camera zooms in on the matriarch's excited face.



**The Big Showdown** Alberto sees the whipping from his window and runs over. Guadalupe enters the room and marvels at his wife's violence. Susana professes her love to Guadalupe in front of Alberto, and the patriarch says that Susana isn't the one who should leave. Jesús appears with orderlies from the reformatory, who tell the family that Susana escaped. Jesús confesses that he knew about Susana's past in the institution. Susana screams that it is a lie, and she tries to attack the others with a scythe. Susana continues screaming and kicking as the orderlies drag her out of the house.



**Order is Restored** The next morning the servants are shooing the chickens on the patio. Carmen invites Alberto to breakfast as if nothing happened, and he kisses her hand affectionately. Guadalupe approaches and tells Carmen that he is leaving and that he wrote her a letter of apology. Carmen ignores the declaration and scolds Alberto for sitting at the table before his father. Guadalupe sits at the head, and they all have a pleasant breakfast together.

**Happy Ending** Jesús enters to tell Guadalupe that the ailing mare has made a full recovery, and the patriarch runs out to watch the ranch hands riding her in the corral. Jesús bids them farewell, but Guadalupe tells him that he should stay as there is much work to do. They all go out on the balcony and watch the recovered mare. Then, Alberto and Jesús smile at each other and close the French doors.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### SUSANA

Susana is the escaped patient from the reformatory school and the saboteur of the family unit. As crazy antagonist of the melodrama, her actions drive the plot forward.

*Manipulative* Along with her flirtation and seductive tone, Susana uses lies and false modesty to drive wedges between the members of the family. She plays the victim for Guadalupe on multiple occasions to gain his sympathy and affection, and she claims that she loves or is at least interested in each man at some point or another. She initiates kisses with Alberto in the study and Guadalupe in the foyer.

*Psychopathic* Neither the viewer nor the family at the ranch learn why Susana was in a reform school or from what psychological condition she suffered. However, her behavior at the ranch goes beyond

flirtation or a power trip. She performs her role as the poor victim and goes out of her way to lie to the family. There is no particular reason for her to seduce all three men or proclaim her love for Guadalupe. She seems to do it for fun and out of spite. When her true past is revealed, Susana screams continually and is literally dragged out of frame.

*Seductive* Although the men project their fantasies and desires onto Susana, she also actively participates in an ongoing seduction. Whenever a man approaches, she strokes her hair and pulls down her blouse to reveal her shoulders. She also flatters the men, initiates touching and kissing, and regularly acts out her damsel in distress routine.

## **GUADALUPE**

As the patriarch of the family and owner of the ranch, Don Guadalupe seems kind, reasonable, and a good provider. His empathy for Susana (combined with barely suppressed lust) blinds him to her dangerous nature.

*Responsible* Until he fires Jesús, Don Guadalupe seems to be good at handling the ranch and supporting his family financially and emotionally. He provides steady leadership without dominating his family or the ranch hands. He gives Jesús and Carmen autonomy to run their part of the ranch as they see fit.

*Conflicted* Guadalupe wants to help Susana but also realizes that he is on the brink of adultery. He sides with Susana over his wife and Jesús, but later feels remorse. He gives in to Susana's advances, but after a prolonged kiss, he separates himself from her.

## **CARMEN**

As the kind and traditional matriarch of the family, Carmen does not appear to be that developed as a character. In the second half of the film, however, she acquires some agency as the one person who can get rid of Susana.

*Kind* Carmen is a caring wife and mother who appears to live a sheltered life. She cares for others outside the family, including Felisa, Jesús, and Susana (at least, initially). She supports both Alberto and Guadalupe in their endeavors, and she forgives them both for their transgressions in the last scene of the film.

*Fierce* Although Carmen has a mild disposition, Susana's continual sabotage leads her to defend her family with words and even violence. She asserts her position as the boss of the household various times, and she whips Susana in what is arguably the climax of the film.

## **FELISA**

Felisa is the long-time family maid who appears to be in her sixties. She is the character who sees through Susana's act and repeatedly tries to get Carmen to throw her out.

*Wise* Felisa is the character who sees through Susana's victim performances from the very beginning. She also counsels and comforts Doña Carmen throughout the film. Her position as the perspicacious servant is also underscored by her frequent recitation of proverbs, aphorisms, and clever sayings in general. When describing Susana's deception, Felisa remarks that the girls "who don't break dishes" are the most dangerous ones.

*Loyal* Along with doing her job, Felisa shows care and concern for the family she serves. She comforts and advises both Alberto and Carmen. For example, she suggests that Alberto take more study breaks. She also alerts her mistress to Susana's lies and behavior and incites her to throw out the demon.

## **THEMES**

### **SOCIETY**

**Gender: *Mother Versus Witch*** In many of Buñuel's films, the female protagonist or main character wrestles with her own desire, even when she attempts to remain virginal or chaste. There is often an



internal conflict. In *Susana*, the title character's lack of a conscience prevents her from experiencing any conflicted emotions. As a result, she incarnates a seductive demon that is then juxtaposed with the kindness and purity of Doña Carmen. For most of the film, Carmen's behavior parallels that of the Virgin Mary, even to the extent that she blushes when Guadalupe kisses her passionately. Although Carmen temporarily gives in to her anger and a lust for vengeance, her forgiveness in the last scene restores her position as the paragon of virtue.

**Religion: *Biblical Allusions*** Susana is a rarity among Buñuel's films in the sense that the Catholic Church and religious practices are not a featured part of the plot and dialogue. However, there are subtle references to Biblical stories and Mexican Catholic culture. Three of the names of the main characters hold religious significance: Guadalupe, Susana, and Jesús. The patriarch's first name refers to the patron saint of the Mexican state, the Virgin of Guadalupe, who also acts as an incarnation of the Virgin Mary. This name is ironic given Don Guadalupe's lust and his foray into adulterous behavior. On the other hand, Don Guadalupe does act as a foundational figure for the prosperous Mexican family of the post-revolutionary (mid-twentieth century) period. Susana is a character from the Old Testament (Book of Daniel) who resists the advances of lecherous old men despite their slander, hence the Hebrew meaning of Susana--"chaste." With her demonic tendencies, the character Susana provides an inverted version of the Biblical story: she pursues the men and is protected from the accurate accusations of Carmen and Felisa. Finally, the ranch foreman Jesús hardly behaves like the Son of God. Nonetheless, Buñuel and the screenwriters make subtle references to the Trinity by the repeated use of threes throughout the film, as the film critic María Pilar Rodríguez notes. There are three orderlies in the reformatory, three suitors, three ranch hands accosting Susana, etc.

## RELATIONSHIPS

### **Sexuality (*Desire – The Male Gaze - Erotic Triangles*)**

**Desire** All of the men in the film are driven crazy by their desire for Susana. No one can resist her—even the ranch hands molest her without Susana actively flirting with them. While Don Guadalupe initially treats Susana like a spoiled daughter, he quickly succumbs to his lust and attraction for her. The obsessive nature of the men's attraction lends itself to the interpretation of Susana as a demon, witch, vampiress, and wild animal. The subtitle of the film, after all, is *Carne y demonio* (or flesh and demon), which evokes not only Susana's seductive beauty but also her sociopathic or even evil motivations. This concept of Susana casting a spell on the ranch is supported by the implication that she herself does not feel desire towards any of the men.

**The Male Gaze** This theme relates to the desire of the male characters, the overall portrayal of Susana as an object of that desire, Lacanian psychology, and classic film technique with regard to the framing of the female body. Because Susana has entranced the men, they are always looking at her. Like many other directors of the post-war period, Buñuel uses the camera as the eyes of the male voyeur; that is to say, the spectator watching the movie also looks at Susana in an erotic fashion. A perfect example of the emphasis on the gaze occurs during the storm sequence. We only see Susana's silhouette through the window, but we also see all three men gazing at her lustfully from several angles. Along with seeing Susana from the lustful male perspective, Buñuel enhances her seductiveness through the use of high and low angle camera shots. The men either look up or look down at her, with the focus being on her legs from below or her shoulders and breast from above. As film critic María Pilar Rodríguez astutely observes, Buñuel uses windows to literally frame Susana for the male gaze; in addition, she is placed on the ladder and staircase in an overtly presentational manner.

**Erotic Triangles** Because all of the male characters are attracted to and obsessed with Susana, she forms the tip of multiple erotic triangles, with each pair of men as the other sides of the triangle: Jesús and Guadalupe, Alberto and Guadalupe, and to a lesser extent, Jesús and Alberto. Near the end of the film, Alberto and his father have an overt confrontation over Susana. In addition, a rivalry between Susana and Carmen develops as the matriarch identifies the young seductress as her competition. Susana does try to drive a wedge between Carmen and both her husband and Alberto. In this particular triangle, Guadalupe and Alberto become the tip of the triangle or the prize over which to be fought. We see this particular eroticism when Don Guadalupe transfers his lust for Susana over to Carmen during the passionate kiss. Because Susana drives the erotic obsession, her banishment from the ranch resolves

the rivalries and leaves the integral family unit triangle. Once again, this complex triangulation underscores the emphasis on the number three that persists throughout the film.

## FLAWS

**Jealousy** A large part of Susana's power is that she is able to set the men against each other. Jesús and Alberto are very possessive and combative. Conversely, Don Guadalupe is more contemplative in his assessments, yet he still fires Jesús in large part because of his jealousy. Ironically, it is Jesús's firing that awakens Doña Carmen's own jealousy. She begins to sense her husband's infatuation with Susana, which is confirmed when she catches them kissing. Carmen likely feels jealousy with Alberto, as well, as Susana threatens to take her son away from her. The jealousy and desire between children and their parents suggests latent Oedipal and Electra complexes. The viewer senses this dynamic more overtly in the interactions between Guadalupe and Susana, where the energy is both erotic and also has a father-daughter quality.

**Vengeance** Despite her pure and virtuous nature, Doña Carmen loses her composure by the end of the film. When she finally decides to throw out Susana, her anger overwhelms her. Carmen gets vengeance by whipping Susana mercilessly, and the viewer sees her anger through the low-angle shot of Carmen's enraged face during the beating. The implication is that even the kind matriarch is contaminated by Susana's spell. Among the men, Jesús shows the most inclination towards vengeance. Although he accepts his firing, he does not relinquish his obsession with Susana. He keeps coming back to dominate the object of his desire, often forcibly kissing and groping her. His body language and verbal threats suggest that he might rape her as a form of punishment for rejection.

## APPEARANCE

**Deception** Susana's game is one of manipulation and deception: along with flirting with all the men, she presents herself as the innocent virgin or damsel in distress. This act is particularly effective regarding her seduction of Guadalupe, as his feelings towards Susana become a dangerous cocktail of paternal affection, lust, and a lover's jealousy. Susana is able to cast her spell on all the men, which is why some critics interpret her character as a witch, vampiress, or the "demon and flesh" of the film's subtitle. She manages to destroy the idyllic character of the ranch and its supposedly wholesome family dynamic. Felisa predicts that the storm will bring the devil, and her proclamation turns out to be true. The concept of the devil shapeshifting and taking on the persona of a beautiful and voluptuous young woman is not limited to this film, but is a trope throughout literature—and is also repeated more overtly in Buñuel's later film *Simón of the Desert* (1965). Although Susana acts convincingly, Carmen and Felisa see through Susana's performance and report on her lies. Still, the men remained transfixed for the majority of the film.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is Susana a monster or merely mentally ill? What are her motivations?
2. Some critics claim that Buñuel is subverting the notion of a stable or wholesome family unit, given that Susana was able to destroy their relationships so easily. Do you agree with this interpretation?
3. What is the effect of multiple erotic triangles all driven by Susana? Would the film have been more effective if the rivalry were centered on a father-son competition?
4. Discuss the genre of this film. Is it a melodrama, film noir, soap opera, horror, or a combination of multiple influences?
5. How does the happy ending (everything back to normal) affect the interpretation of the film as a whole?
6. Notice the multiple times when the characters are compared to animals. Susana is likened to a viper, a mare, and crow. Why are these specific animals referenced in the film?