

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

THE ADVENTURES OF PITO PEREZ / Las aventuras de Pito Pérez (1957)
Juan Bustillo Oro (Mexico)

Genre : Comedy

Link: <https://youtu.be/4gX4b2G41tw>

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

OVERVIEW

The Aventures of Pito Perez (Dir. Juan Bustillo Oro, 1957) is an adaptation of the novel, *The Useless Life of Pito Perez* (1938) by Juan Ruben Romero (1890 – 1952). The novel was considered the finest picaresque novel in all of Mexican literature, and was made into a film on three different occasions. Bustillo Oro's version, released in 1957, captures the way the picaresque novel subverts and satirizes the status quo and calls into question the foundational institutions of society, namely the church, the values of the elite, and social order. In addition and perhaps more importantly, Bustillo Oro taps into the lyricism of Romero's novel and the way in which it captures the customs, traditions, and behaviors of the times in the unique and picturesque state of Michoacan. Romero's novel is definitely a picaresque novel, with its raffish ne'er-do-well anti-hero, Pito Perez, but it is also an emotionally moving "costumbrista" novel, focused on the customs and culture of the region. It provides snapshots of a time now long past of treasured cultural heritage and tradition. So, although the story is about a self-sabotaging vagabond, it is also the story of a free spirit who opens his senses to experience the glories of nature. His misadventures in love, career, and with social institutions are at times comical but always revelatory. There is a wry honesty rather than a condemnatory spirit, which also differentiates the Pito Perez-based novel and film versions. Juan Bustillo Oro's is unique in the sense that he incorporates his use of the techniques from German Expressionism to infuse the shots with emotion. While other picaresque novels converted to film are often parodic and use great swathes of physical humor, Bustillo Oro follows the Naturalism in Romero's novel, and depiction of the people, the life, times, culture and customs are done with a unique attention to detail which gives this film much more emotional pull than others. While it can be argued that the film sentimentalizes a world with a rigid social order, it also serves to document and preserve its customs. The book was written in 1938 and set in the times immediately following the Civil War, and thus land reform was just beginning. The film is set in roughly the same time, but the message is that things have not changed significantly. The result is a charming time capsule.

SYNOPSIS

Pito Pérez, a ne'er-do-well tramp, was born in the beautiful Mexican town of Santa Clara del Cobre in the south-central state of Michoacán. His family was very poor, and Pito was often hungry. His mother gave milk to his brother, not to him, and Pito had to fight for the scraps of food he received. Although he was an altar boy, he was bullied at church. Padre Pureco gives him moral support. Pito is in love with Irene, his next door neighbor. Irene's father is a mule drover, and her mother sells chocolate. Pito gains employment at the local apothecary where he helps compound the medicines. He starts sneaking the alcohol used in preparations and drinking on the job. The chemist's wife, Jovita, sees him, and extorts him by promising to stay silent in exchange for sexual favors. After more disappointments in love, Pito becomes a street vendor in Morelia, then a novice in a monastery. Unfortunately, Pito can't stay away from the communion wine, and after getting drunk, he is accused of stealing gold reliquaries from the church. Pito is sentenced to jail, where he is bullied, then committed to a psychiatric hospital where the doctors are trying out new medications and processes on the patients. Pito and his friends rebel and throw away the drugs and devices. Pito escapes with a skeleton that was used for anatomy lessons, and he insists on traveling with it, referring to it as his wife. Pito quickly learns that he is welcome to stay with friends, but not his wife.

THE STORY

Childhood Pito starts with the story of his earliest years. He describes how his mother gave milk to his brother, thus depriving Pito from an important nutrition source. Pito is hungry, malnourished, stunted in growth. Thus the story establishes one of its main themes, hunger. After finding that he is unlikely to be properly nourished, and will have to fight for every last scrap of tortilla, Pito also realizes that there is not enough money in the household to send him to school. Education is not free and the family cannot afford to send Pito. So, true to the picaresque novel form, Pito learns to fend for himself. This point in time is told with compassion and also in a way that allows the viewer to see how Pito's 'living in the moment' way of viewing life evolved. There is a satisfying immediacy in it.

In the church. Much of Pito's early life was involved with the Catholic Church. Pito was an altar boy and he participated in the rites and rituals of the church. The point is made that mass was still held in Latin, rather than the vernacular (Spanish), and so there was little or no comprehension of what was actually being said. Padre Pureco is the priest, and he delivers mass from a unique platform that looks remarkably like a hatched egg. The visual symbolism is quite potent here; this is the place where hatchlings come to be socialized into the norms of the community. Since the main lessons are being imparted in an unintelligible tongue, it gives the priest (and the parishioners) carte blanche to superimpose whatever meaning they desire. Thus Pito learns he has the freedom to choose the meaning / interpretation of words or messages. Pito is an altar boy, and not surprisingly, at least one of the older altar boys is a bully. Pito has the unfortunate early life experience of being a target of the bullies.



Pito takes solace with friends: One of the most unique aspects of life in Santa Clara del Cobre is the camaraderie of men who meet each evening in the cantina to chat, drink a bit, and discuss the philosophy of life. It may seem superficial or even stultifying to the outside observer, but in the case of Pito (and Romero's lyrical descriptions), the meetings in the cantina are a way to plumb the depths of human consciousness and explore what it means to be alive, and how / why people need each other. Bustillo Oro's long shots that return to close-ups visually demonstrate the process of building and knitting together community.

Early disappointment in Love: Pito has a crush on Irene, the pretty neighbor girl. He spends time with her and thinks that she likes him, but unfortunately Irene prefers Pito's older brother. The scenes are shot with two-shot close-ups and also with medium-close-ups. They capture the architecture and living quarters of a small Mexican village, with adobe walls and small fountains in the courtyards.

Pito's bad luck in love continues: Pito has an absolutely enchanting and adorable distant cousin, Chucha, who seems to tolerate Pito's company. That is enough for Pito. He is head over heels in love. But, he's shy, so he enlists the help of wealthy Don Santiago to plead his case. Don Santiago takes one look at Chucha and decides to plead his own case. Chucha is impressed with the quality of Don Santiago's argument (and his standing in town). Chucha is engaged. Pito is out in the cold (again).



Job with the Druggist: Pito lands an excellent job with the local druggist. Pito is responsible for measuring out the prescriptions and transferring them to smaller jars. Unfortunately, Pito develops a taste for the medicine and tipples it whenever he has the chance. The owner of the apothecary, Jose is 50 years old and obese. He spends much of his time tipped back in a chair, snoring loudly. His gluttony and narcolepsy give Pito the opportunity to tipple at will. Jovita is the druggist's wife. She finds relief in Pito, who gives her massages and well more. Pito is not enthusiastic, but Jovita has caught him tipling, and so, she has a little extortion racket. Jovita is satisfied. Pito stays drunk.





Inside the Slammer: Pito's eyes are opened when he finds that life in the jail is filled with bullying and corruption. There are rats and informants everywhere, and the goal of the inmates seems to be to establish a pecking order. Pito, true to form, promptly falls to the very bottom of the pecking order. He is not much bothered by this, still using his rather wide-eyed mental innocence to mull over the human condition and what it means to be free. These ruminations are not as extraordinary as they might seem at first blush, but are in a long line of jailbirds-turned-philosophers (Boethius, Dante, etc.). The main difference between Pito and Boethius is that Pito is largely unschooled and is jailed for moral turpitude rather than political peskiness. Pito is in jail. He has been incarcerated for vagrancy and public intoxication. Bustillo Oro uses chiaroscuro here in an Expressionistic scene that captures the despair of the jail.



In the hospital. Pito gets out of jail, but unfortunately, his life of inebriate excess has taken a toll. He is chronically ill. He is also considered mentally defective, so instead of a quick stay at a free hospital run by nuns, he is placed in a sanatorium. While this may seem like a godsend, and he will have a warm bed and “three squares” along with medical attention, he finds that, despite the courtyard and patio with flowering bushes, palm trees, and shady nooks, and the orderly barrack-style sleeping quarters, life is harsh. He and his fellow patients have been turned into lab rats for medical products and procedures. In a move surprising for the lackadaisical and often phlegmatic Pito, he rebels against being fed experimental drugs (he wants to pick his own poison, it seems). He and his fellow patients rise up in rebellion and they burn the drugs and the medical apparatus in a big barrel in the courtyard.



Freedom at Last? Romero closes his narrative by wondering what might have happened to Pito Perez. Pito was filled with shallow vice and was completely useless in society, but was he? His view of the world emphasized living in the moment and taking time to experience life and to cut through corruption and cruel exploitation. Pito Perez tells his friend that he will always seek freedom. Although his clothes are ragged, he thinks himself the dandy. In his hand is a bottle of something, probably *aguardiente*. Pito is not repentant.



THEMES

Hunger: Hunger and a chronic state of malnourishment are persistent echoes in the book. At first, the hunger is physical. Pito's mother gives his bottle of milk to his brother, and there is never enough food in the house. Later, however, the hunger is spiritual and existential. Pito has a spiritual hunger for enlightenment, albeit in a popular, "everyman" kind of way, and not in the lofty mysticism that is portrayed as intellectual and out of touch. The hunger for spiritual connection manifests through his camaraderie with his friends. Later, his existential hunger manifests itself in the need to feel alive through experiences. He wants to open his senses and truly feel alive and he does so through tipling but even more by dropping out of the polite world and taking on a vagabond life.

Cultural Time Capsule / Costumbrismo: Bustillo Oro's cinematography captures the Mexico of the early 20th century, with its beautiful mountains, lush vegetation, plowed fields, and picturesque villages with churches constructed in the 16th century. In addition to providing inside views of church services, where the priest gives Mass in Latin while standing on a platform that looks like an egg shell. The stained glass, religious icons and statues have been made by local artisans, giving the sense that one is watching a documentary. Later, scenes in the market contain many shots of how people are selling, the women who have stands, and the way that the market itself is organized. Other cultural customs that are featured include the central plaza in the towns, with their gazebos and benches where women and men walk, visit, and chat with each other. The architecture and the design of the streets is also featured, and one had a clear sense of life in a Mexican village. Combined with a lyrical description by the narrator, the scenes evoke deep emotion.

Freedom: The concept of freedom is explored in *The Adventures of Pito Perez*. This film focuses on the "adventures" while the book really looks at the "useless life." Both address the question of what it means to be free, and how freedom manifests itself in today's world. Pito Perez desires psychological and physical freedom, and he pursues them by stopping and reflecting on the meaning of life, and through closely observing nature, people, and structures. His close observations suggest that true intellectual freedom consists in liberating your mind and your time to live in the moment and

experience the sensory perceptions of “now.” Ironically, the book itself is a paeon to the past, and so brings people into their own memories and experiences to evoke nostalgia.

Usefulness vs. Uselessness: The “vida inutil” (useless or futile life) of Pito Perez asks the reader or viewer to evaluate one’s own ideas about usefulness or uselessness. In the final analysis, what is “useful”? Pito discovers that the pillars of society are corrupt, hollow, or worse – spiritually dead. Jose de Jesus Jimenez, the druggist and owner of an apothecary shop spends his time eating and sleeping, and gives responsibility for prescriptions to his assistant, Pito. Pito is utterly irresponsible and thus undermines all of the owners “usefulness” as a business owner. Jovita, his wife, is supposedly a moral pillar and filled with procreative energy, but spends her time harassing Pito and blackmailing him for massages. The priests in the church are spiritually empty, and their sermons are equally devoid of meaning to the listeners since they are given in Latin and not Spanish. With meaningless sermons (or if they have meaning, they are assigned meaning by the listener), there is not a pathway to enlightenment. Conversely, the spiritual teachings reinforce a profoundly nihilistic view of life, completely at odds with the stated mission of the Church.

CHARACTERS

Pito Pérez	A hapless, yet poetic, vagabond whose life is a series of misadventures
Chucha	Pito’s distant relative with whom he is in love. It is not reciprocated.
Doña Jovita	The druggist’s wife who pursues Pito
Padre Pureco	The priest of the Catholic church in Santa Clara del Cobre
Don Jesús.de J. Jiménez	The obese owner of the local apothecary shop
Don Santiago Bolaños	The winner of Chucha’s hand in marriage and former friend of Pito
Dr. Gayosso	The head of the sanitarium that uses its patients to try out new medicines

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

PITO PEREZ Pito Perez is the protagonist of Juan Ruben Romero’s picaresque novel, *The Useless Life of Pito Perez*. Far from being a simple Oliver Twist-type of petty criminal and outsider anti-hero, Pito is a poet in rags, a philosopher of the act of living in the moment. In many ways, he brings to mind the Chinese poet Li Po’s “Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon,” in which the poet steps away from the life of competition for scarce resources, social standing, and power, and looks inward for spiritual insight gained through the careful observation of humanity and nature.

Observant: Pito Perez closely observes the idiosyncratic traits and behaviors of his neighbors. For example, he observes that his neighbor, Concha, has taught the stray dogs to sit upon command, and also her cats to eat like little gentlemen. He observes without judgment, but in a sense of wonder and appreciation.

Idealistic: Pito Perez survives by his wits, and has the idealistic notion that everyone should be able to live in harmony, and that all things are owned communally. This idealism does not align with notions of individual property ownership, and so Pito runs afoul of institutions such as the church when he decides to avail himself of the church’s charitable mission by pocketing money given in the offering basket, as well as food, drink, and the stray relict or two.

Romantic: Pito Perez aims has lofty targets when it comes to love. He is head over heels in love with the adorable Chucha. She, however, aims high and is not the least interested in an uneducated and slightly embarrassing Pito. His romantic ideas are dashed over and over as Irene (his first love), Chucha, and others reject him. The woman who craves his affection is Jovita, his obese and impotent boss’s wife. That is not love, though, but is tantamount to harassment.

Undisciplined: Part of Pito’s charm is his effusive spontaneity. He looks at the hills and dormant volcanoes of Michoacan and waxes eloquent. He also details the market and the women selling their wares, and describes his own efforts as a street vendor in Morelia. He does expend effort, but in an undisciplined manner which does not align with society’s expectations and desire for order. The lack of discipline is also a desire for freedom and as such, is a deconstructing force.

Self-Sabotaging: Pito ends up in jail and later in a sanatorium, largely because those are the natural end results of a life of self-defeating behaviors and choices. He does not have any goals except to live

in the moment, and the fact that he prefers those moments to be self-medicated is ultimately very self-sabotaging as well. Over and over, his decisions to do something that makes sense in the nano-second his decision was made, rather than thinking ahead to a logical outcome, lead to problems.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. The narrator of Pito Perez (the author) describes Michoacan in rhapsodic, lyrical terms. Please find a few episodes where there are descriptions of the fields, farms, volcanoes, vegetation, and weather phenomena. How might these fit within a Romantic view of the world, such as one might find in Wordsworth or Keats?

2. The various stages of Pito's life are introduced and framed by the narrator who gives context and also an interpretation of Pito's life that celebrates his non-conformity to society's constraints. How does the narrator's own framing give him an outside perspective, and in doing so give his voice the authority of wisdom and enlightened observation? Please find two passages.

3. Much of the film concerns itself with presenting a warm, intimate view of village customs, rituals, and artisan items. Please look closely at the bakery scenes, the apothecary scenes, and the village market. What are some of the specific details that connect to personal experience and illustrate how each person who lived in the village was, in essence, an artist because he / she had an opportunity to express creativity in the hand-made products or the personalized services rendered? How might the costumbrista novel (novel of customs) be a celebration of human creativity and life?

4. Pito Perez is depicted as a completely disreputable derelict. His clothes are ragged, his shoes are falling apart, his hat is a battered mess. In this sense, the film follows the naturalism that one found in novels such as Zola's *L'Assommier*. However, instead of focusing on the essential degradation of society, the film is an affirmation of human independence and creativity. Please find three scenes in which Pito Perez, for all his vice and vile habits, expresses the human condition in a way that suggests that people are intellectually shackled by convention and need to shake it off in order to really think, breathe, and achieve true happiness.