

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE PRIEST'S NIECE / La Sobrina Del Señor Cura (1954)

Genre : Melodrama

Link to film: https://youtu.be/Hu_hJ7SX2bl

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OVERVIEW

La Sobrina del Señor Cura (The Priest's Niece) is one of several films based on a play by the prolific and highly popular Spanish playwright, **Carlos Arniches**, which was converted into a screenplay and directed by Juan Bustillo Oro by Tele Talia Films. It featured many of the same actors that Bustillo Oro and Tele Talia Films employed, and with so many shared experiences, they were a seasoned at ensemble acting. Because the films were adaptations of stage plays, and because Tele Talia Films was notoriously tight-fisted with budgets, they did not tend to have a great deal of experimental camera work that one would see in *Dos Monjes (Two Monks)*, although they did include shots of the village, of village life, and traditional homes, courtyards, and kitchens.

At first glance, *The Priest's Niece* seems to be about the plight of Rosita, a young woman who has been seduced by Bérnabe, the son of the political boss, Don Ramón, and that of 12-year-old Lucila, raised by Padre Sabino, since she was left as an infant in a basket on the rectory steps. Bérnabe won't marry Rosita, and local gossips are starting to say that it seems very odd that Lucila, of unknown origins and on the eve of her First Communion and adolescence, is living with a priest. While these are certainly elements of the plot, the overarching story arc has to do with exposing the tight grip the local "boss" had on all aspects of the community, and how he maintained an social and financial stranglehold on the community, and his own practice of getting anything he wanted had been passed down to his callow son, Bérnabe. As the story unfolds, the cruel and self-serving acts of Don Ramón and his wife, Doña Dolores, are exposed, and the chain of events unleashed by years of manipulations begin to manifest themselves. In this regard, the film is clearly a part of a series of plays, perhaps best exemplified by *Los Caciques (The Bosses)*, rails against the injustices and persistent social inequality perpetuated by a handful of individuals or families that "own" a town.

SYNOPSIS

Padre Sabino, the local parish priest of a small Mexican town initiates a direct conflict with the local "boss," Don Ramón, when he confronts Bérnabe, the irresponsible and womanizing son with the fact that he has made a young, naïve, young woman pregnant, and he needs to marry her to make things right. In retaliation, Don Ramón starts a campaign to remove Padre Sabino from the parish, and accuses him of immorality for living with two females: Monica, who cooks and cleans for the Padre, and Lucila, the little 12-year-old he took in as a foundling when she was left in a basket at his doorstep. Things get more complicated when "El Tomáon," a known criminal appears, and lurks in the shadows to watch Lucila. It turns out that he is her father, and that he was wrongly incarcerated after having been convicted of murdering his wife (Lucila's mother), when it was actually the fault of Don Ramón. Bérnabe seems to weaken and to agree to marry Rosita, until Don Ramón and his wife, Doña Dolores, absolutely refuse to condone such a marriage. Things go from bad to worse, and Padre Sabino is defrocked because he would rather lose his job than to make Lucila go to an orphanage, and Monica to be without work. In the meantime, certain details about the night when Lucila's mother was killed surface. Tomáon is absolved of guilt – and, Bérnabe, who gets into a fight, and is almost killed, comes to recognize the truth of his love for Rosita, and how much pain he has caused. Don Ramón and Doña Dolores come to the same point, and come to Don Sabino (formerly Padre), to acknowledge their mistakes and to pledge their commitment to a better path. They apologize and tell Padre Sabino that they want him to be reinstated as priest for the parish. Lucila and Monica remain with Padre Sabino, Bérnabe marries Rosita, Don Ramón and Doña

Dolores dote on the little baby, and commit to atone for their misdeeds, and to be generous and fair patrons of the needs of the community.

STORY

Lucila's first communion: First Communion Dress: The catechism classes are almost over, and the day of the first communion arrives. Lucila wears her white dress for her first communion. It looks like a wedding gown, a little girl's dream of a dress for a ceremony that represents her transition to being a young woman. Lucila kneels at the altar for her First Communion.



Lucila's father Tomáon: During all this time, the Tomáon hovers near, strangely emotional. He is clearly a gentle man, and it is hard to imagine that he is the ruthless criminal he is depicted to be. Tomá talks of his intentions to provide a home for Lucila. However, the fact that he is a fugitive from the law complicates things. He has been falsely accused and convicted of a crime he did not commit. Instead, it was Don Ramón that committed the crime.



Rosita confesses: Back in the rectory: Rosita confesses that she has fallen in love with Bérnabe. As she starts to go into detail. However, Rosita is not repentant. Rosita, with her hair in youthful loops, and a traditional dress, with soft rebozo shawl, tells Padre Sabino of her situation. She is in love, but also worried. Rosita begs el Padre to forgive her and to help her. She has been seduced by Bérnabe, and is now expecting their baby. El Padre Sabino contemplates the potential impact on lives and the community if Rosita must go away and have her baby elsewhere, pretending to be a widow, without any support whatsoever for the child, while Bérnabe, the son of the wealthiest man in town, continues to sow wild oats with impunity.



The father of the baby, Bérnabe: Padre Sabino wants to do everything he can to make sure that the parents are married because being illegitimate would give the child a terrible stigma, and would also doom the mother to the status of a “fallen woman.” Padre Sabino secures a commitment from Bérnabe.



Parents object to the wedding: The wealthy town “cacique” or “boss” is Bérnabe’s father. When he learns of the situation, he puts his foot down and refuses to let Bérnabe marry Rosita. Not only are they adamantly against the marriage, they meet with Padre Sabino and tell him in no uncertain terms to retreat or regret it.



False accusations against Padre Sabino: Padre Sabino uncovers terrible secrets about Don Ramón and Doña Dolores, as well as about their spoiled son, Bérnabe. As he starts to approach the truth, Don Ramón mounts a campaign to have Padre Sabino defrocked from the Catholic church and to lose his position. He also mounts a campaign to discredit Rosita and suggest that her child’s father was only one of many, many potential fathers, suggesting that she was of such loose morals, she was tantamount to a prostitute. Fired up by the false accusations, the Archbishop meets with Padre Sabino and informs him of the conditions to which he must conform in order to continue to wear the cassock.

Bishop: Having been informed by Don Ramón that Padre Sabino is living under the same roof as a young woman (Mónica, his housekeeper) and a foundling of unknown origin (Lucila), the Bishop informs Padre Sabino that they must leave, or he will be defrocked and lose his church.



Secrets: Tomá and Lucila's Mother: We learn of the star-crossed marriage of Marisela, the daughter of Don Ramón and Doña Dolores. Against the wishes of her parents, Marisela married a poor but honest small rancher, Toma, later known as Tomasón. Tomá and Don Ramón: Don Ramón confronted Tomá. There was a struggle, and Don Ramón gravely injured Toma. The shock was too much for Marisela, and she went into premature labor, giving birth to Lucila, but not living to hold her own little daughter. Wounded and unable to take care of himself, let alone a baby, Tomá wrote a note and pinned it to the little baby's blanket. He then placed the baby in her blanket into a basket, and left it on the steps of the Rectory, to be discovered by Padre Sabino.

Atonement: Bérnabe is almost mortally wounded and permanently handicapped. His condition humbles him, and he sees the error of his ways, and also is willing to commit to Rosita, whom he also loves. In his small little cottage, Don Sabino welcomes Rosita with her tiny baby. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door, and a limping, leaning on his cane Bérnabe enters the humble cottage where the defrocked Father Sabino, now Don Sabino, lives. He explains that he was wrong and that he wants to make things right and marry Rosita. In addition, he professes his love for her. Don Ramón and Doña Dolores recognize how devastating their acts have been to the people of the community, and they repent, truly desiring to follow a path that will rebuild the community, rather than tear it apart for their own enrichment. When Don Ramón enters to make amends for his errors and cruelties, Rosita relents and admits that she has never stopped loving Bérnabe. Don Ramón also announces that he bears good news: Don Sabino will be restored to the priesthood and can return to his church. Don Sabino is moved to tears.



Don Sabino, a priest again: The end of the story is an uplifting one, as it shows Don Sabino returning to his role as Padre Sabino, el Señor Cura, and donning his vestments --- the cassock he wears for everyday use and in the community. Donning his priestly cassock (robes) and kneeling at a personal altar with a picture of the Virgen of Guadalupe, Padre Sabino gives thanks for the blessed outcome of all the conflicts, confusion, and mistakes.



THEMES

Power: Although the title of the film (and play) refers to the niece of the priest, the actual play has more to do with combating the local “big fish” families in small towns who not only dominate the economy and the social pecking order, they are willing to kill, falsely imprison, and endanger children to maintain their stranglehold on the town. Don Ramón has controlled the town and wants to maintain control to the point that he frames Toma for a crime he did not commit, and also indirectly causes the death of Lucila’s mother, who died when she gave birth prematurely due to the shock Don Ramón’s abuse.

Corruption: Don Sabino (while as priest and then after being defrocked), goes to battle against the corruption in the town which is the result of the “cacique” (political and economic “boss”) mindset and structure. While the town is a specific case, the reality is that most Mexican towns operated the same way. A powerful family controls the resources and social access, which obliges the populace to bow and scrape to please them, and even to overlook or actively deny cruel, unethical, and even criminal behavior. The most flagrant example is that of that was the cruelty to Tomá, who had done nothing wrong but marry Don Ramón’s daughter against his will. Don Ramón and Doña Dolores did not realize that Lucila was their granddaughter, and just as well. Lucila had a stable and loving environment at the rectory.

Social Class: The rigid class structure in small town Mexico is sharply critiqued in Juan Bustillo Oro’s interpretation of Carlos Arniches’s play. The rungs of the social ladder are clearly marked, and almost impossible to ascend. Once one falls off, there is almost no chance of getting back on the ladder. One such example was the daughter of Don Ramón and Doña Dolores. As the daughter of the town’s ruling family, she was expected to marry someone of her same position and rank in society. For her to marry the very improbable match, Tomá, who could barely read and write, was considered anathema. When she died in childbirth, she essentially disappeared from the consciousness of the community.

Women's Roles in Society: Women's options in the Mexican village where Padre Sabino lived with his housekeeper and adopted daughter, were limited not only by social expectations of women, but also by social class. Women of higher classes were expected to marry and then keep a lovely home for her husband. Women of the lower classes were expected to work outside the family and yet to provide for their children (often many). Obedience to the paterfamilias (head of household) and chastity were absolutes. Women and girls who disobeyed paid with their lives (as illustrated by Lucila's mother's death in childbirth). There was a tremendous double standard, as evinced in the fact that Bérnabe had to tolerate a bit of the parish priest's scolding, but found it quite easy to simply ignore Rosita. He did not pay any social consequences for seducing and impregnating a naïve country girl. Rosita, however, paid dearly. She became a "fallen woman" and had to leave town where she had to invent some sort of story about being a widow.

Morality: A characteristic of the plays of Carlos Arniches is the presents of small lessons or "moralejas" throughout the dialogue. The Priest's Niece has many opportunities to intersperse them in the dialogue and reflect on the right thing to do, and to affirm human dignity, common decency, and compassion for others. The interesting thing about "The Priest's Niece" is that there are reversals and paradoxes. The seemingly immoral escaped prisoner, Tomasón, is actually a man of high ideals and morals, while the wealthy Don Ramón, of high rank, wealth, and status, is highly immoral, as is his son, Bérnabe, who refuses to marry Rosita. Padre Sabino instructs young children in moral behavior, and he also takes in a foundling (Lucila), without concern for her "origin" (that she might be "illegitimate")

The Role of the Priesthood: The priest in the Catholic Church, and especially in a small Mexican village is the arbiter of practical morality among parishioners, and expressed when behavior was out of bounds. His law was not a natural law, but an ecclesiastical one. For example, when Rosita gushed about how Bérnabe seduced her in an orchard, on peach flower petals, Don Sabino gesticulates jerkily, and he crumples his face into an angry moue.

Injustice: When Don Ramón attacked Tomas for marrying his daughter without his consent, he does not care what a worthy person Tomas might be. He wants his daughter to marry a wealthy person of the upper ranks of society. He knows that Tomas is innocent, but he prefers to see him rot in jail rather than admit the he was the guilty one. At the same time, they know their daughter died, but simply assume her baby died, too. As the plot unfolds, we see that Don Ramón and Doña Dolores are supported by a tissue of lies, prevarications, and specious claims. The film depicts them as being corrupt, but in the end, they are brought low, and they repent. The film is deeply satisfying to a populist audience.

Generic Themes with Tele Talia Films

In the 1950s and 60s, the Mexican director, Juan Bustillo Oro, worked with Tele Talia films to direct a number of films that were almost guaranteed to be box office successes. They tended to be melodramas that appealed to the working classes, although there were a number of film noir crime dramas as well. A few themes seemed to appear in each of the films, and they often revolved around the social injustices caused by the wealthy political bosses that controlled small towns. Specifically, they often dealt with irresponsible paternity by the local boss or boss's son, who wantonly seduced vulnerable young women, then refused to accept the fact that they were the father of the child. Other themes had to do with false accusations of theft or malfeasance by a resentful or jealous scion, resulting in the false imprisonment of a love rival or pesky business competitor. Other themes included sacrifice and duty, particularly on the part of mothers left to raise their child alone, and who had to pretend to have been married and widowed, thus avoiding the shame and certain social shunning that they would experience in their communities. Other subthemes involved examining the pernicious effects of gossip and idle talk, which often mobilized women to shun or behave in a hateful manner.

One of the most reliable sources of plays that could be easily converted into screenplays was the prolific Spanish playwright, Carlos Arniches (1866 – 1943). Many of his plays were set in rural Spain, but that easily translated to rural Mexico, particularly since the same values were in place, namely a deeply Catholic populace, who relied on the church for moral and material support. They tended to be comedies or family melodramas, but often were combinations. One of the most characteristic was *Padre contra hijo*

(*Father Against Son*), which comically depicts how a young law student who has recently come to realize that the father he thought died when he was a baby, was in fact, alive and well, dominating the politics and economic life of a small town a few hundred miles away.

CHARACTERS

Padre Sabino	Priest in a small village
Mónica	Don Sabino's housekeeper
Rosita	Beautiful young woman, seduced by son of the wealthy town "boss"
Bérbabe	Son of the wealthy town "boss"
Don Ramón	Wealthy town "cacique" or "boss" – has a secret
Doña Dolores	Don Ramón's wife
Tomá (Tomáon)	Escaped convict, once lived in the pueblo, and has a secret

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Padre Sabino, el Sr. Cura: Don Sabino is the parish priest until he chooses to give up the cloth before he would give up the responsibility of raising Lucila, the foundling daughter he has taken under his wing since finding her in a basket on his doorstep, a crudely written note pinned to her tiny swaddling blanket. He takes raising her very seriously. He is equally serious about taking care of the people who care for him, namely Monica, who cooks, cleans, does laundry, and helps with the different classes and courses he offers.

Moral Rectitude. Don Sabino, the priest (El Señor Cura), is a man who defines himself by his strict adherence to moral and canonical laws. He is a member of the ecclesiastical order, but is also a kind-hearted man who hates to see the suffering of the vulnerable and oppressed. He takes his job to provide spiritual instruction seriously and is concerned with training young children well so that they have a moral code, and a way of living life that will allow them to have a happy future.

Honest. Padre Sabino tells the truth, which often results in problems with the powerful family headed by Don Ramón. He tells Bérbabe that he must marry Rosita because she is pregnant, and Bérbabe initially agrees. However, Don Ramón and Doña Dolores are adamantly against the marriage. They do not comment publicly, but they see that history is repeating – 12 years ago, they lost their daughter, largely because they did not approve of her marriage to Toma, a kind-hearted, generous, hard-working but almost illiterate craftsman and horse worker.

Self-Sacrificing: Padre Sabino lives in the church Rectory, and his entire life revolves around his commitment to being a priest. He will not compromise his core values, and when he sees that in order to keep his position and not be de-frocked as a priest, he must send his housekeeper, Monica away, and send little Lucila to an orphanage, he decides to sacrifice his priesthood. He lives in a tiny, half-collapsed cottage within eyeshot of the church. He is sad to have left the only profession and avocation he knows, but considers his change worth the price.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW:

1. *The Priest's Niece* can be considered an exploration into the contradictions and hypocrisies in a small town. Please describe the types of hypocritical behavior that is demonstrated in the film, and explain the individual's social status.
2. Describe Bérbabe's behavior and his character. How does he treat Rosita at the beginning of the film, and how does it change. What happens to inspire him to acknowledge his child and marry Rosita?
3. Padre Sabino passionately defends the institution of marriage, and insists that Bérbabe marry Rosita in order that the child be recognized in the church and in society as legitimate. Why is he so passionate? What are the consequences of an out of wedlock marriage in Mexico at the time of the story?

4. Describe the way that the character of El Tomasón gradually shifts during the story. In many ways, it is a story that brings a person out of the shadows and the “outside” (of criminality and secrets) to one in the light, and that of being inside society, of openness and enfranchisement. Describe how the Tomasón’s appearance changes, and how lighting and camera angles also help suggest the transformation.