

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

FATHER AGAINST SON / Padre Contra Hijo (1955)

Genre: Comedy

Link: <https://youtu.be/rbh2ByJvoZg>

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

OVERVIEW

Padre contra hijo (Father Against Son) is a comedy, but delivers very powerful messages about family, paternal responsibility and the vulnerability of women in society. In this film, Juan Bustillo Oro repeats some of his motifs about gender and gender roles as well, with self-sacrificing mothers, moralizing and critical bourgeois women, honest and truth-telling servants, and obedient and virtuous women of marriageable age. It is a cautionary tale about the consequences of believing the seductive lies of privileged Lotharios in a patriarchal society. At the same time, there is a subversive energy as Bustillo Oro exposes the corrupt nature of power in small towns in Mexico, and the attitude of impunity that has a ripple effect and touches all parts, potentially corroding the moral fiber of a town. The young, disowned illegitimate son of the town boss comes to town to make things right for his mother, and in doing so, he shakes loose a few tail feathers. The film is based on the play, *Yo Quiero* (1936), written by the prolific Spanish writer, Carlos Arniches, whose comedic farces on situations that could occur in Spanish middle class life delighted audiences.

SYNOPSIS

Juan de Diós is studying to become a lawyer and pass the Mexican bar exams. His mother, Eloisa Ruiz, has raised him as a single mother without any support from the father, whom she claims died long ago. She has kept food on the table and a modest roof over their heads through day and night efforts at sewing for the women in the city. Juan de Diós discovers that his biological father is alive, and that he is a wealthy small town “boss” who owns almost all the property in that municipality. Juan de Diós immediately goes to the town to confront his father, Don Cecilio, to inform him about his existence and to insist that he provide a home and a living for his long-sacrificing mother. Further, he announces that he intends to force Don Cecilio to acknowledge him as his right and proper son and heir. Juan de Dios meets with a great deal of resistance from Don Cecilio and his sister, Tia Domitila. In the meantime, Juan de Dios learns that the lovely “cousin” Lucía is not a blood relative at all, but was the orphaned daughter of a dear friend, and they raised her as their own daughter. After a number of challenges and close calls, Don Cecilio finally accepts Juan de Dios as his son, provides for Eloisa, and approves of the marriage between Juan de Dios and Lucía.

STORY

The story is a comedy with a serious side to it, given that shows several unsavory aspects of society, namely the shaming and shunning of women who bear children out of wedlock, the concentration of wealth in a few hands, and the challenges of a young man who learns he was born out of wedlock and his biological father wants nothing to do with him. In the end, it is a celebration of certain traditional Mexican values: loyalty to one’s mother, self-sacrifice, maternal love, responsibility to provide for one’s family, and the healing powers of Mexican cooking and hard manual labor.

MOTHER'S SUFFERING The film opens with the scene of a mother sewing all night and her worried son, a law student, urging her to stop working so hard and to rest. She says she will, but she does not. Juan de Dios goes to the kitchen to prepare his mother, Eloisa Ruiz, a cup of hot coffee. He does so, and he pauses, concerned that she is continuing to work. As he brings her the coffee, he reflects on the fact that they have worked very hard, and that she has sacrificed herself to support him.



SON'S DISCOVERY A classmate arrives and asks to borrow Juan de Dios's class notes. They go to his bedroom, and the classmate sees a photo of Juan's father hanging on the wall over the chest of drawers. "That's your father? – He's Don Cecilio Garcia, and he owns almost all the town where my parents live!" When Juan de Dios learns that his father is not dead, but is wealthy, he is indignant and determined to find the scoundrel father and to compel him to support the mother of his child.



ARRIVAL AT JUAN DE DIOS The son decides to go and see his father. Upon arriving at the train station, Juan is detained because he does not have enough money to pay for transportation into town. When he announces he's Don Cecilio's son, there is outrage and they lock him in the luggage storage room.



FIRST ENCOUNTER Father hears about his son's arrival. There is outrage at Don Cecilio's mansion. Don Cecilio is alarmed at the arrival of his "son" and is convinced he is there for the purposes of extortion. His niece, Lucia, is mystified, and even moreso when he talks about having received a letter from a "certain someone." When pressed about the contents, At the train station, Don Cecilio meets Juan de Dios at the railroad station. "Father!" he exclaims. Don Cecilio is disgusted – "You're a scoundrel and extortionist!" They argue back and forth. As usual, Juan de Dios expresses his goals in terms of "I want..." which means that he will become obsessive in order to make his desire a reality.

THE PRIEST: After the first rocky encounter, Father Cura implores Juan de Dios to leave. "Go away. Why would you want to ruin the reputation of the most respected townspeople?" To which Juan de Dios responds, "No problem, Father Priest. But, I want justice for my mother." He then describes a time when he stole bread from a bakery to keep his mother from starving. As he left, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to him. She opened her hands and spoke to him, telling him that all was forgiven because he had stolen in order to help his mother survive. "I believe the Virgin of Guadalupe has returned and has delivered you to me as a good Father in order to correct the behavior of the bad father (Don Cecilio)." The priest shakes his head in disbelief at the dogged insistence of Juan de Dios. Juan de Dios explains that he has come on a mission to confront his negligent and irresponsible father and to make him pay his mother so that she can stop suffering and destroying her health with overwork.



DON CECILIO'S HACIENDA Juan de Dios arrives at Don Cecilio's hacienda to the mystified amusement of the employees, and the startled surprise of Lucia. The residents of Don Cecilio's hacienda are intrigued by the new guest who claims to be the boss's illegitimate son. Don Cecilio is outraged and insists that he leave. Somehow, though, Juan is able to wrangle himself inside to stay as a manual laborer.



LETTER TO MOTHER: Eloisa received a letter from her son. He describes live at Don Cecilio's hacienda. It is a tissue of lies. "Dear Mamacita, You can't imagine how comfortable and well-rested I am here, and also welcome I am." This is actually quite comical because it is quite the reverse.



WORKING HARD The reality is that Juan de Dios is working and doing all the hard, manual labor jobs that no one wants to do. His shirt has been reduced to rags, and he carries loads of firewood on his back. Tia Domatilita is equally rejecting and exploitative. She barks orders and tells him to keep hauling firewood. Fermina discusses the way in which Juan de Diós is working day and night doing hard manual labor on the hacienda to gain favor; they feel sympathetic. Juan de Diós is on his hands and knees scrubbing the floors as Tía Domilita looks on.



LUCIA It turns out that Lucia is not actually his cousin. She was adopted as an infant because she was orphaned. Juan de Diós tells Lucia that he wants her to be happy; and when she explains they're not related by blood, but that she was adopted as a child, he expresses even more fervent wishes for her happiness.



SAVING FATHER There is a serious conflict between Don Cecilio and a land owner. He wants Don Cecilio to sign over a Deed of title to the land. It is not clear whether or not the title dispute is something legitimate. At any rate, the land owner insists and even draws a revolver from a holster underneath his jacket. Just as the Metralleta begins to attack Don Cecilio, Juan de Dios runs into the room and wrests the gun from the Metralleta. The gun discharges, but no one is hurt. The police arrest the Metralleta. Lucia embraces Juan de Dios: "You were sent by God to save us from assassins!" Don Cecilio is shaken and grateful.



MOTHER ARRIVES Later, at Don Cecilio's desk, Juan pens a letter to his mother, inviting her to come to the Hacienda and be a guest. As he does so, Don Cecilio grumbles. Eloisa arrives by train. She is wearing a black dress, and a black mantilla. She looks very old-fashioned and respectable. Before they go to the hacienda, Juan insists that they pass by the church. He introduces her to Father Cura, who is moved to tears by her story. At dusk, on a signal from Lucia, Juan de Dios smuggles his mother into the hacienda. She does not know why there is not a warmer reception. Juan explains that everyone is busy.



MOTHER AND FATHER MEET Eloisa faces Don Cecilio and discusses how his lack of support made her suffer, and how difficult it was for her to feed and clothe her son, and how much hunger they had to endure. "But, even through all of that, in all the privation, I never said a single word against you."



FATHER ACKNOWLEDGES HIS SON In a sharp, new set of clothes, Juan de Dios acknowledges to Don Cecilio that his is about to sit for the bar exam. His father is visibly impressed with that news. Don Cecilio is impressed that Juan de Dios is about to sit for the bar exam, and he admires his hard work. However, he continues to be harsh on the topic of his paternity. However, he does listen as Juan de Dios explains the benefits of having a son who will be noble, loyal, and on his side. Juan de Dios then informs Don Cecilio that he wants to marry Lucía, and if that happens all his wishes will come true. With that, the phrases, "I wish...." that punctuated the narrative in which Juan de Dios expressed his fondest desired for the future (and signaled an obsessive focus on making them a reality), come together in a final resolution as his wishes do come true.



THEMES

Family. *Padre contra hijo* explores different types of family configurations and roles in Mexican society. They can be complex and in many cases, nothing is really as it appears from the outside.

Single mother raising a son. Living in a tiny, barren apartment in a noisy city, the mother goes without food and clothing to make sure her son has enough to eat and decent shoes on his feet. She is self-sacrificing and she maintains the invented story that the son's father died in some sort of heroic manner just after the son's birth. It is a very difficult life, and not at all unusual in Mexican society.

Extended family with "paterfamilias" under one roof. This is the Mexican ideal, with a powerful male head of household ("paterfamilias"), but with the mother of the paterfamilias wielding much power behind the scenes, usually as a morality enforcer. The paterfamilias demand respect and dutiful obedience. All children must clearly demonstrate their loyalty to the family and willingness to uphold appearances to the outside world. The extended family can include cousins and also occasionally, once married, the couple continues to live within the family compound.

"Cousin" not really a cousin. In an attempt to maintain the illusion that all children were born within the bounds of holy matrimony, despite the fact that the culture itself is deeply machista and men pride themselves on "conquests," and women fool themselves by wanting to believe the lies, families would often welcome a "cousin" that was, in fact, a child born out of wedlock, and very inconvenient for all involved. Sometimes the child may be the son or daughter of a close family friend; the informal adoption occurs to avoid a calamitous scandal that could potentially derail an arranged marriage or alliance.

Love. *Padre contra hijo* features a number of different types of love, particularly those that one could find in Mexican culture. Overall, Bustillo Oro's depiction of different types of love is deeply populist and designed to appeal to a largely middle and working class audience.

Maternal love. The mother's love is unwavering and self-sacrificing to the point that she wears herself out before her time by working day and night, going without proper nutrition, and fraying her nerves with constant worry and fretting. She pours out emotional support to her son and tells him he is capable of anything. In the meantime, her devotion engenders not only a reciprocal love from her son, but a deep resentment for the actions that put her in that situation.

Romantic love. Romantic love is sweetest and most productive when it is taboo and off limits. The father's seduction of the mother was outside marriage and thus, in conservative Catholic culture, completely taboo. When the son falls in love with his cousin, he knows it is outside the bounds of permissible love since it would be incest. Despite the prohibition against incest, his desire for her only intensifies. When he finds out his "cousin" is not related at all, he is relieved, but some of the romantic tension is relieved. Similarly, when the paternity is acknowledged, there are tears of joy and relief, but the tension is definitely relieved.

Filial love. The love of a son for his mother is unwavering, and he is willing to fight for her honor. The love of a son for his father tends to be tinged with fear and even a bit of resentment, as love is rarely shown, but absolute obedience, loyalty, and deportment are required.

Fatherhood. *Padre contra hijo* explores what it means to be a father, and illustrates the difference between paternity (being the biological father) and a true father who is responsible, caring, and above all, supportive and protecting.

Role reversal. When the son puts his own life in danger to protect and save his father from an assassination attempt, the son demonstrates his loyalty. However, he actually does what a father would do – that is, he puts himself in harm's way to protect the son, and all the generational implications. The long-term goal is the preservation of the family line, and lines of support so that

all have their roles and a system of mutual protection for mutual survival. The father is grateful for the son's bold move, but the audience realizes the father should be protecting the son as well. Juan also points out there are benefits to having a loyal, dedicated son who will always be at his side with respect and love, which is something that speaks directly to the idea of preserving the family line.

Irresponsible Paternity. Don Cecilio denies his paternity at every turn. In this case, fatherhood simply means paternity, and that he was the one who impregnated Eloisa Ruiz. He claims he had no idea that he had a son, and that Eloisa was pregnant, but his protestations ring hollow. Juan de Dios, with his powers of persuasion as a trained attorney, finally convinces him to acknowledge the fact that he is a father, and will assume the role of father going forth. The refusal to acknowledge paternity seems harsh and insensitive, particularly given the travails of the mother trying to raise her son on her own.

Women's Roles in Society. The film depicts several different roles for women in the Mexican society, often with rather sobering results. Juan de Dios is a hard-working champion for his mother, and through his perspective and that of other men, such as his father, Don Cecilio García, we can see the way that men define and delimit the options open for women.

"Loose" woman who gives birth out of wedlock. Don Cecilio does not acknowledge the fact that he is the father of Juan de Dios, and in doing so, he reduces the woman he seduced to a very low level. The fact that he will neither acknowledge the fact that they were together as a couple, nor recognize his son, seems quite harsh. His treatment of Eloisa is in no way unusual, however, and reflects the values of Mexican society. Don Cecilio thinks so little of the mother of his son that he will not even let her into the house.

Self-sacrificing mother. Juan de Dios refers many times to the fact that his mother literally went hungry and worked herself half-blind just to make a living to support him through her sewing. When Don Cecilio abandoned her, she did not make a scene or force herself on him, but accepted her fate with dignity.

Judgmental moral enforcer. Tía Domitila is Don Cecilio's sister, and she rejects both Juan de Dios and Eloisa Ruiz. She is scathing and dismissive and considers Eloisa a woman of low moral character, and her son nothing more than a con artist scoundrel.

Dutiful daughter. Lucía, the orphan who was brought into the family to raise as a daughter, is obedient, with a pleasant demeanor and the ability to tolerate the harsh, judgmental and elitist attitudes of both Tía Domitila and Don Cecilio. She represents the proper role of daughter: conservative, reserved, obedient, and cheerful.

CHARACTERS

Juan de Dios	Young man who finds he is the illegitimate son of a town boss
Eloisa Ruiz	Mother of Juan de Dios
Don Cecilio García	Father of Juan de Dios; wealthy small town "boss"
Tía Domitila	Don Cecilio's sister
Señor Cura	Priest
Fermina	Loyal servant in Don Cecilio's household

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Juan de Dios: Juan de Dios is the dutiful, hardworking, intelligent son of Eloisa Ruiz. He always thought his father died when he was an infant, and is shocked to learn that his father is Don Cecilio García and that he owns pretty much all of the village of Juan de Dios in Durango.

Hardworking: Juan de Dios makes himself useful at the hacienda by being willing to do the hardest possible work, including splitting firewood and carrying loads of wood on his back. Such

work is considered virtuous in the context of the film, and also in the larger context of Mexican society.

Loyal: Juan de Dios is fanatically loyal to his mother, and instead of condemning her for having “loose” morals when he finds out that he was born out of wedlock, he is outraged at the fact that his biological father did absolutely nothing to support her or his little son. He constantly refers to her sacrifices, and he complements her at every possible opportunity.

Determined: Once he realizes that his biological father is wealthy and influential, and his mother has been suffering in poverty simply because of the father’s refusal to help, and the fact that once she was pregnant, the normal marriage chances were not available to her, thus dooming her to a life of sewing and cleaning day and night, nothing will shake his determination to have his father recognize his son and to provide his mother with the kind of home that she deserves. He single-mindedly pursues that as well as a degree / license as an attorney, and an engagement to marry the young woman he falls in love with, Lucía (the “cousin” who is not actually a cousin.)

Wily: Juan de Dios is intelligent, but he’s even more than that. He’s wily. He knows how to appeal to an unwilling father, especially one who has arrived at a vulnerable time in his life when he is approaching retirement age, but still does not have a son. Juan de Dios uses his argumentation skills which were honed in his study to become an attorney, along with his understanding of the emotional glue that holds fathers and sons together in the very patriarchal Mexican society. When Juan de Dios turns the other cheek to slap after slap, and he risks his life to defend his father, Don Cecilio is emotionally impacted. Further, when Juan de Dios shows physical strength, a willingness to work hard, a fundamental humility, but then also the ability to dress well, speak well, and mesh well with the upper class of the town, it is also very appealing to Don Cecilio.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the aspect of Eloisa Ruiz, the mother. Describe how she is depicted as a virtuous, loyal, supportive, sacrificing mother, and how the years of privation and struggle have affected her.
2. Explain how the father behaved toward the mother of his child by pointing out two or three scenes that illustrate his desire to avoid his obligations, and then to reject his son because he suspects he’s simply there to extort money from him.
3. Discuss the steps that Juan de Dios took to gain acceptance from Don Cecilio by selecting four or five scenes that show Juan de Dios’s drive, determination, willingness to work, and to put himself at risk.
4. Much of the film involves social stigmas, and the desire to avoid them. Describe how social stigma plays a part in this film and how it influences the decisions and attitudes of Eloisa Ruiz, Juan de Dios, Don Cecilio Garcia, Tia Domilita, and Lucía.