

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **WILD FLOWER / Flor Silvestre (1943)**

Emilio "El Indio" Fernández

<https://youtu.be/lhSAM6Zvh24>

### **OVERVIEW**

Flor Silvestre, directed by Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, is the story of the two in love, Esperanza and José Luís, who marry in spite of the fact that José Luís is the son of a wealthy land owner, and Esperanza is of very humble beginnings. It is a tragic love story set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution. The movie is an adaptation of the novel, *Sucedio Ayer (It Happened Yesterday)*, by Fernando Robles. His first film with cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa and leading actors Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendariz, *Wild Flower (Flor Silvestre)* was a breakthrough that became one of the most emblematic of the Mexican Cinema's Golden Age. *Wild Flower* is a love story that crosses class and conventional boundaries, but more than that, it is about a defining moment in Mexican history, the Mexican Revolution. Only son and heir of a vast hacienda, José Luís Castro, defies his father and marries the woman he has fallen in love with, a woman of much lower social standing, and who is far from being a "criollo," which is to say a person of 100% European descent. In secret, José Luís Castro, the heir to the hacienda, marries Esperanza, which causes an irreparable rift between him and his father. All this takes place when the Mexican Revolution, which has, up to then, confined itself to other parts of the nation, engulfs their part of the republic, which is known for being incredibly productive and also a place where Mexican traditions are preserved. *Wild Flower* embraces Mexican traditions, the intense beauty of the Mexican landscape, and the passionate connection that virtually all Mexicans in the film felt toward the land. It also makes the viewer feel the fear, trauma, and terror of the Revolution while also understanding why land reform and an overthrow of the dictatorship occurred.

### **SYNOPSIS:**

The film opens as an aged Esperanza tells a young man in a military uniform (her son) the story of his father, his father's family, and how people are willing to die for land. The film moves twenty five years earlier, during the Mexican Revolution. José Luís Castro, the only son and heir to a vast hacienda, is standing at the portal of a Catholic church where his bride-to-be, Esperanza, expresses worry, saying that she does not want to cause him to have problems with his family because she is of a very low social class. José Luís declares his undying love for her, and also that he does not believe in class differences. They marry in the church. Later, José Luís tries to present his wife to his family at a hacienda rodeo. It is a complete disaster, and Esperanza is completely humiliated by the rejection. Don Francisco, the patriarch of the Castro family, declares that he has disinherited José Luís and refuses to admit him to the family. Esperanza and José Luís make a life for themselves on a small ranch. Esperanza and José Luís are expecting a baby when they learn of that the Mexican Revolution has come to their part of the country. José Luís supports the cause, and yet, is conflicted as he learns that his father has been killed by revolutionaries who have invaded the hacienda. Shocked by the loss of his father, and the trauma of his beloved mother, at his father's grave he vows vengeance. He leaves Esperanza to have their child and fend the best she can. She understands and continues stoically, even as her family is endangered and her own home is taken over by revolutionaries who hold her hostage. After trying to escape with her newborn, she is kidnapped and forced to sit in a brothel as revolutionaries carouse and celebrate their destruction of the haciendas and their owners. In the morning, Esperanza learns that José Luís has been captured and will be executed for having hanged the person responsible for killing his father. Esperanza breaks free and runs to the front of the mob eager to see José Luís executed by firing squad. Despite the fact that José Luís tells her to leave, she foists herself with him, even to stand with him in front of the firing squad (and next to the freshly dug open grave into which he will fall). The firing squad will not shoot her. She is forced to assume a position in the rabble. There, she witnesses her husband and the father of her

son shot dead by firing squad. Her son survives, as does she. Decades later, she introduces her son to the land that was the root of all the pain and conflict.

### **THE STORY:**

**THE LAND** In the first scene, with a voiceover by the protagonist, Esperanza, a meditation on the nature of the individual's love of the land results in an observation that there is perhaps no love more intense or destructive than the love for the land, which includes possessing it. She describes one plot of land so extensive that it takes more than a day to cross it by horseback. The land is fertile land that supports cattle and agriculture. The nearby pueblo has a colonial-era Catholic church, still the linchpin of society.



**THE MARRIAGE** Before entering the church to be married, Esperanza asks José Luís if he is absolutely certain of his decision to marry her. She is concerned about their very different stations in life. She is a very poor young woman, who is partly indigenous, poor, and on the bottom rungs of society. She wears typical indigenous dress. José Luís and Esperanza make a home in a ranch house near the hacienda. Nicanor and Reynaldo (nicknamed Conejo), who work on the ranch, come to visit and to wish them well.



**SCANDAL AT HACIENDA RODEO** It is the day of the big rodeo. A mariachi band plays while a singer of rancheros celebrates the opening with a rousing, impassioned song, which is an example of traditional Mexican music and culture. The rodeo is a time of celebration, with charros performing rope tricks, and vaqueros roping horses in order to brand them, and different types of riding contests, including horse dancing. The Castro family, as the patrons of the hacienda, sit in positions of privilege. Don Francisco and his wife, Adelita, are in the center, with Adelita, her daughter at her side. José Luís brings Esperanza to sit at the side of Doña Clara and introduces her as his wife. The family is scandalized. In a crowded cantina, Don Francisco confronts José Luís and tells him that he will never accept Esperanza and that José Luís has been a disobedient son who has humiliated the family by marrying a poor woman so many social classes beneath them. José Luís is outraged by Don Francisco's intransigence.



**FATHER'S ANGER** Drunk, José Luís returns with Melchor to the hacienda to confront his father, Don Francisco, and demand respect for his wife, Esperanza. Don Francisco is disgusted by José Luís's drunkenness and tells him that he no longer considers him a son. José Luís responds drunkenly and with disrespect. Enraged by the display of what he considers to be disrespect, Don Francisco reaches for the swords on the wall with the intent of hurting José Luís. Adelita, José Luís's sister, intercedes and pulls Don Francisco away.



**THE REVOLUTION** The newspapers announce that the Revolution has spread through the entire Republic of Mexico. Peasants are forming militias and are attacking haciendas and the holdings of the wealthy. Don Francisco is advised by a member of the military that it is not safe for him to stay on his hacienda. Don Francisco explains that he will never leave because generations of his family lived and died on the land, and that they are ineluctably, eternally connected. He revolutionaries have hanged Don Francisco, whose feet are visible, swinging from where he has been hanged in a tree.



**VENGEANCE** José Luís stands at his father's grave and vows that he will avenge his death, and also the destruction of the hacienda. Conejito dies a painful death from the "peste" (plague) that is ripping through the community and killing as many people as bullets. José Luís encounters one of the men who killed Don Francisco. He is trembling with fever and clearly sick. To José Luís's dismay, the killer dies before they are able to lynch him and thus exact vengeance. Although all that is left is a corpse, José Luís puts a noose around his neck and uses a horse to pull him up to hang from a tree branch, leaving the cadaver swinging in the wind over the crucifix marking the grave of his father. The low angle point of view shot and the silhouettes add to the intensity of the emotional impact.



**FIRING SQUAD** José Luís, dressed in black, is surrounded by revolutionaries, wearing their wide-brimmed sombreros and cartridge belts draped across their chests. They are marching to the town square where they will execute him by firing squad. The grave where he will fall has already been dug. He does not want her to see him be executed by firing squad. Esperanza flings herself onto José Luís and begs to be shot with him. José Luís stands in front of a freshly dug open grave that he will presumably fall into as soon as he is shot. Esperanza is not allowed to join her husband to be shot. She is pulled back and placed in the crowd of people witnessing the execution by firing squad. Shots are fired. Esperanza observes the execution of her husband.



**YEARS LATER** Years later, an older, care-worn Esperanza talks to her son about her experiences and the history of her husband, her son's father. She goes on to say that her experience was not unique; almost all Mexican lives were profoundly altered by grief during the Mexican Revolution. Standing with the vast valley, the distant mountains, and the glorious sky as a backdrop, Maria walks with her son, who wears a military uniform.



## THEMES:

**Love:** At a very basic level, this is a love story about a love between individuals who are in social categories that makes a marriage a social taboo because it could disrupt the social order, in just the way that revolution is upending the social system in Mexico at the time of the story. The story does not tell us how Esperanza and José Luís meet, but their paths crossed and they fell in love. Their idea of love is framed by traditional gender roles: Esperanza is modest, tends to the house, and after they are married, gives birth and takes care of the child, all in a very sacrificial manner. José Luís takes the lead in the love, and insists that they continue and marry, even though Esperanza tells him on more than one occasion that the family will never approve, and José Luís will lose his place in his family. José Luís persists, and in doing so, later recognizes he is a “disobedient” son, and his forbidden love for Esperanza results in consequences: first, he is unable to protect his father and mother from the revolutionaries (having in fact sided with them); and vexed position in society – first as a privileged son, joining forces with the revolutionaries, and then later, trying to avenge the death of his father, results in his death by firing squad by the revolutionaries. It is worth noting that many of the revolutionaries were in fact from the wealthy classes. One who comes to mind is Simon Bolivar, who was born into a wealthy Caracas (Venezuela) family, and was exposed to Enlightenment philosophy when he went to Spain to study at the age of 16. Esperanza is true and faithful to her love for José Luís, and she never begs him not to fight. Her love for him is so intense that she stands in front of the firing squad with him, willing to sacrifice herself (and presumably the infant son) to avoid separation from José Luís. Doña Clara is likewise loyal; she throws herself on the grave of her husband, Don Francisco, the patron and owner of the huge hacienda. Because he was so cruel and such a stickler for social hierarchy, one has to wonder if her love for him and devastation at the loss, was about her loss of status and identity.

**Social Class:** The rigid social hierarchy that was first set in motion by the Spanish colonizers and Catholic Church was so well codified in Mexican society that it was called the “casta” system, and it included 16 different officially recognized racial mixtures. The “casta” system was described in words and also in elaborate paintings that showed how people of the different blends of people might look. Much of the social hierarchy had more to do with the racial blend and your place in the “casta” system than your wealth, although it can be said that the casta was designed to keep the poor as poor as possible, and the “white” or those directly from the Iberian peninsula (the “peninsulares”) in control of land, professions, and business. On the absolute bottom of the class system were the blacks (former slaves) and the indigenous peoples (indios). José Luís and his family were not “peninsulares” because they were not direct immigrants from Europe. However, they had never intermarried, and so were pure “white.” The need to keep racial purity and the “white” status was paramount in a world where one could lose one’s lands, business, and privileged by being shunned for mixing with non-whites. Esperanza is clearly not on the lowest level – she’s not indigenous or black – and her grandfather has an adobe home and some sort of business. He does not live as precariously as the indigenous, who tended to live in dirt-floored huts made of sticks and palm leaf roofs, and who earned their daily sustenance through fishing or foraging for fruits and berries and then selling them on the street. The indigenous were completely illiterate and did not have access to medical, educational, or other basic resources. Society tended to completely dehumanize both blacks and Indians, and they considered them animalistic, “savage,” “primitive” and people to be shunned and feared. The social hierarchy was quite complicated and the 16 official levels made clear differentiations and showed “blood purity.” José Luís and his family would be “criollos” which is to say completely European descent. The product of a marriage between an Indian and a Criollo or Peninsular would be “mestizo.” The mestizos had some social standing, but Esperanza was completely shunned, as was her father. Her use of indigenous embroidery and native dress makes it fairly clear that she was probably mestizo and Indian, which would make her a “coyote.” Coyotes were a rung above the “indios,” which would put them in the day laborer group, where they would do the lowest kind of labor on the hacienda. The women “coyotes” would not work in the kitchen as a cook, but would do preparation of the fruits, vegetables, etc., and also split wood and keep the fire going, as well as the most grueling kind of cleanup. For the heir of the hacienda to marry a “coyote” was seen as a social sin. Such a system was shaped around social inequality, eventually there was sufficient social wherewithal to rebel. The indigenous people, blacks, coyotes, etc. were not in a powerful position and could not do much. However, mestizos and others higher on the social hierarchy could join the global wave of overthrowing monarchies and systems that catered to the inbred few. The Mexican Revolution lasted from 1910 to 1920, and based



on the fact that the story features people dying quickly of the “peste” (plague), it seems to have taken place in 1918, during the Spanish flu pandemic. The official statistics place the total death from the Spanish flu epidemic in Mexico at 300,000, which is not surprising since civil war (the revolution) would certainly disrupt medical supplies and attention.

**Revolution:** By the time the Mexican Revolution reached the doorsteps of José Luis Castro’s doorstep along with the Spanish flu, the Revolution had already been in swing since 1910. It broke out primarily in response to the 30-year Porfirio Diaz dictatorship which, in the early years had led to foreign investment in industry and infrastructure in Mexico, which appeared at first to be a great boon, but later revealed itself to consist of Ponzi-type stock schemes, the plundering of natural resources (with payments to prominent Mexican families), and hand-in-glove relationships with vital industries resulting in family monopolies over certain industries in certain regions. The same basic structure seems to persist in the “territory control” of different informal businesses, including drug production and trafficking and human trafficking. There were many separate revolutionary groups in the Mexican Revolution and they worked in different regions. The most well-known were the Zapatistas and the Villistas, although there were numerous. All had the same objective: to overthrow the government of Porfirio Diaz and then restore economic access, primarily through land and resources reform. For most revolutionaries putting their lives on the line, this generally translated to the very palpable and tangible break-up of the immense land-holdings by single families, the “hacendados.” It was deemed unfair that individual families could control blocks of land that were the size of entire states. In “Flor Silvestre,” the Castro family had the hacendado, and they considered themselves to be the rightful owners. The revolutionaries begged to differ, and they ferociously expressed their desire to break up the big blocks of land and to make it possible to allow all Mexicans to own land. After Porfirio Diaz was overthrown, the presidency of Venustiano Carranza and later of Alvaro Obregon focused primarily on land reform. The values and goals of the Mexican Revolution are echoed in Esperanza’s prologue as she states that there is nothing more intense than an individual’s love for the land, and their sense of blood connection to it. Such sentiments are echoed throughout, and even those who may not necessarily benefit from maintaining the “ancien regime” (the workers on the hacienda) find themselves being loyal to their employers, even if when not beneficial to them in the long run. Also, in marrying into the hacendado system (a relic of the Spanish latifundista system), she is betraying the interests of her people (by race, caste, and social hierarchy). It is surprising that the revolutionary forces and the mob of people who assembled to see José Luis executed by firing squad, did not cheer her on as she offered to have herself shot with her husband.

**What it means to be Mexican:** The film is, in many ways, a celebration of what it means to be Mexican with traditions that extend across social class, but which are embraced and internalized on a very deep level by the mestizos and the coyote class. Mexican music and traditions are celebrated in the film in a way that is seamless and forms the underlying sentimental texture of the film. The songs in the film are particularly touching, if at times intellectually discordant. At the hacienda rodeo, a singer belts out a joyous ranchera, while being accompanied by a mariachi band. After Esperanza falls into unconsciousness after being lectured by Doña Clara about the refusal to mix classes (and races), José Luis is shown with a small musical entourage as he makes his way across the vast valleys and chapparal. They sing “Flor Silvestre / Wild Flower” in a way that both celebrates the love of two people and the love of nature and the land of one’s origins. In the most intellectually jarring scene, a partially undressed group of musicians sing a soft Mexican melody as they are surrounded by the fruits of violent, revolutionary debauchery: broken glass, empty alcohol bottles, burned furniture, and looted treasures. Framed in terms of comparative literature, the scene reminds one of the Chartist movement in the 1830s and 40s in England, when striking factory workers and miners invade, loot, and burn the country houses of the wealthy in Benjamin Disraeli’s classic social novel, *Sybil, Or, the Two Nations*. It seems very weird to hear such soft, soothing lullaby-type music after an orgy of ecstatic destruction. Other aspects of Mexican culture in *Flor Silvestre* include the horsemanship in the rodeo, the charro and the rope tricks, the elaborately embroidered blouse worn by Esperanza, and the enormously wide sombreros worn by the men. It must also be noted that the photography by Gabriel Figueroa emphasizes the nature of the Mexican landscape, with the vast valleys, the volcanic peaks, and the rugged mountains.

## CHARACTERS

José Luís Castro:	Only son and heir to the vast hacienda of the Castro family for generations
Esperanza:	A young woman many rungs lower than the Castro family in the social order
Doña Clara:	José Luís's mother and defender of the social order, and arranged marriages
Don Francisco Castro:	The patriarch and paterfamilias for the Castros
Melchor:	Esperanza's grandfather
Conejo:	Loyal employee of Don Francisco, and a true friend to José Luís

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**José Luís Castro:** José Luís Castro is the only son of a rich landowner, a “*hacendado*,” who is a direct beneficiary of the “*latifundia*” system from the Spanish colonial viceroy system which granted land to the friends of the Spanish monarch who made the trip from Spain to Mexico, and then kept the land tightly in their hands by only marrying other “pure” descendants of Spanish emigres to Mexico. Needless to say there is a great deal of inbreeding, and it is almost surprising that José Luís, his mother, Doña Clara, and his father, Don Francisco, do not have obvious genetic defects. That said, the reality of the system is assumed to be of common understanding to the audience during this classic of the Mexican cinema's Golden Age. José Luís falls in love with Esperanza, who is of the lower levels of the social order, or 16-level “*casta*” system. She is most likely a “*coyote*” – that is to say, of mestizo and indigenous descent. As such, she is uneducated and her family would work at the lowliest of manual labor jobs. They are subject to scorn, judgement and dehumanizing treatment. In deciding to marry her, José Luís is making a strong statement that he supports the Mexican Revolution's rejection of privilege and monopolistic ownership of land.

*Macho:* José Luís is passionate and exhibits all the traits of a man who is born to privilege in an honor culture. It is the heart of “*macho*” or hyper-masculine behavior. While this is romantic, and José Luís passionately defends the honor of his wife, Esperanza, it is something that makes it almost impossible for him to explain his actions except in actions and broad strokes. He is willing to fight to the death to defend what he believes in, but one hardly knows if he recognizes the larger implications of his choices. For example, situated as it is within the Mexican Revolution, José Luís's decision to marry a woman who is from a mestizo married to an indigenous person (a “*coyote*”), makes him a brash warrior against the “*casta*” system, and the rigid social hierarchies. However, he never seems to be aware of the deep philosophical and social ramifications – just wants to love her for who she is. His father rigidly adheres to the social mores. Again with the backdrop of the Revolution, his position is tantamount to a Southern Planter fighting to defend his land and way of life. There is something perverse and evil about it, and that, in and of itself, impugns the notion of machismo itself.

*Romantic:* José Luís embodies a kind of nihilistic romanticism that kills everything it touches. He believes in the individual, and yet he finds himself placing people in great danger due to his idealistic and romantic belief in the freedom of people to love who they want to love and to live where they want. He first places Esperanza in danger and subjects her to humiliation as the social order is threatened. Then, in breaking with his father, he is not there to protect him when the Revolutionaries come to take the land and the hacienda. To avenge the death of his father, he leaves Esperanza and his infant son in great danger, as they are kidnapped and abused by the same Revolutionary pistoleros.

*Loyal:* José Luís considers him a loyal husband and friend. But, from one perspective, he is infinitely disloyal, a situation that leads to his execution at the end. He loves his family, but, by his own admission is “disobedient” to his father. And yet, values and times have changed, and he can no longer accept the rigid class system that would insist that he marry only another “*criollo*” of Spanish descent in probably what would be an arranged marriage to a distant (or potentially not so distant) relative, probably a cousin or second-cousin. He considers himself loyal to his friends and wife, but when he avenges his father's death, he opens the door to lose his wife and son. In the end, he is executed; a sad end for a person who tried to be loyal in a world where rapid changes meant mortal conflict no matter what decisions were made. :



*Conflicted:* José Luís loves Esperanza, and he also sympathizes with the plight of the disenfranchised, oppressed, and exploited, such as Esperanza's grandfather, Melchor, and also the workers on the ranch. In theory, however, he should not be friends, and should keep his bloodline pure and thus maintain his position in society as one of the upper caste. However, things are not so simple. José Luís, is caught in generational / paradigmatic conflict which ultimately burned everyone at that time period in Mexico. While the injustices, social inequality, and lack of economic access of the Porfiriato (the 30 plus years of dictatorship under Porfirio Díaz) needed to be rectified, there is no doubt that the destruction to the people and the economy was profound. The level of infrastructure and economy in 1910, the first year of the Mexican Revolution, were not to be achieved until more than 20 years later, and the worldwide economic depression during the 1930s further flattened the curve of recovery. Ultimately, José Luís's situation and inner conflicts lead to his refusal to support his father and protect the hacienda, and later, in avenging his father's death, crime punishable by death.

#### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. The Mexican Revolution, which spread over all the states of Mexico in a ten-year period, was particularly violent in the countryside where the vast land holdings were the main target of reformists. Identify three scenes in *Wild Flower* that illustrate how and why land reform might be a passionate issue in the Revolution.
2. Don Francisco is portrayed in a very unsympathetic and rigid light in *Wild Flower*. Select one harsh scene and describe how it illustrates his values, rigidity, and unwillingness to change.
3. Describe how the film denotes the differences in rank and social enfranchisement, along with their different positions in the social hierarchy (illustrated by the "casta" paintings, etc.). For example, describe the differences in their dresses at the rodeo, and how Esperanza characteristically uses a rebozo while the Doña Clara and Adelita may wear an mantilla. Explain how such differences visually reinforce the notion of "casta" – the complex social hierarchy built on race and European colonialism.
4. Select three scenes that incorporate Mexican culture and how they unite all Mexicans and form a deep core of their identity, cutting across race, position in society, class, and profession. They may include music, rodeo traditions, and more.
5. *Wild Flower* is, among other things, about the way the Mexican landscape creates an indelible imprint on the Mexican psyche and sense of self. Select four scenes from the film and describe why they might function as illustrative symbols of Mexican identity.