

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RIVER AND DEATH / El río y la muerte (1954)

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 and hard-hitting dramas, including the featured action drama of this essay, *The River and Death* (1954). 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 *The River and Death* (1954) is a black-and-white melodrama set in the jungles of the Mexican state of Guerrero in the 1950s. The plot involves a toxic blood feud between two families. The film is an adaptation of Miguel Álvarez Acosta's novel *Muro blanco en roca* (1952). Buñuel cast Joaquín Cordero as the male protagonist Gerardo. Cordero had also played a doctor in Buñuel's melodrama *A Woman Without Love* (1952) a few years earlier. The female protagonist was played by one of the most popular character actresses of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, Columba Domínguez.

Background Buñuel shot the majority of the film on site in Guerrero. The screenplay was one of several scripts Buñuel wrote with his longtime collaborator Luis Alcoriza, who would later co-author one of the director's most acclaimed films, *Exterminating Angel* (1962). While Alcoriza certainly exaggerated the tension between families for dramatic effect, Buñuel asserted at the time of production that the plot was based on a real-life feud which had resulted in multiple deaths.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gerardo Anguiano	medical doctor recovering from polio
Elsa	Gerardo's nurse, friend, and love interest
Don Nemesio	Gerardo's grandfather and mediator / pacifist
Felipe Anguiano	Gerardo's father who tries to stop the feud
Sósimo Anguiano	Felipe's slain cousin
Mercedes	Felipe's girlfriend and Gerardo's mother
Chinelas	friend of the Anguino family
Rómulo Menchaca	villager trying to avenge his family
Polo Menchaca	Rómulo's father
Filigono Menchaca	Polo's slain uncle
Don Honorio	another elder Menchaca
Don Julián	the town priest

SYNOPSIS

Gerardo Anguiano is a young, kind doctor who lives and works in Mexico City. When he is struck with polio, the young doctor remains trapped in an iron lung, then suffers a long recovery. He is visited by Chinelas, a family friend, and Rómulo, an old enemy from his home town. Over the course of his treatment, Gerardo befriends the pretty nurse Elsa and tells her the sad story of his family's hundred-year-old blood feud.

As Gerardo describes his family history, the film launches into a long flashback of roughly 30 years ago (probably the 1920s). First, Gerardo explains the nineteenth-century culture of Santa Viviana, his home town in the Mexican state of Guerrero. Then, he segues into the specific feuds of his father's generation. The majority of the film depicts a series of duels and confrontations between Gerardo's father, Felipe Anguiano, and his counterpart in the feud, Polo Menchaca. For a while, the two principal youths manage to avoid killing each other, but their cousins and uncles refuse to back down. Eventually, most of the Anguianos and Menchacas die by the sword.

Felipe ends up shooting Polo's uncle when he (Felipe) is cornered. As a result, Felipe goes into exile. However, he cannot bear to leave his love Mercedes, who ends up pregnant with Gerardo at the height of the violence. When Felipe comes back into town for a wake, he is goaded into a street duel at night. He and Polo meet in the street but do not shoot until one of Polo's cousins shoots Felipe as he walks away. In the *mêlée* that follows, all three men die in the street.

Gerardo's narration resumes with his father's death, and he explains to Elsa that he cannot avoid going back home any longer. Once he is in town, Gerardo confronts Rómulo twice, but the doctor refrains from actually shooting or stabbing his rival. Eventually, Rómulo agrees to a truce and allows Gerardo to return to his life in Mexico City, unscathed.

SCENES

Tour of the Town An aerial shot of a marketplace is accompanied by a narrator who introduces the viewers to the small town of Santa Viviana. The narrator explains that the local farmers frequent the marketplace in this tropical region. The camera cuts to shot of a river from a side perspective and a cemetery on a hill. The narrator explains that the normally "deep and tranquil" river flooded one year, which resulted in the death of most of the villagers. The survivors buried their relatives on the hill on one side of the river, then rebuilt Santa Viviana on the other side. The narrator warns that while the town seems peaceful, it is replete with death.



A New Baby at the Day of the Dead Celebration There is a close-up shot of a *clavier* (skeleton) doll in the traditional Day of the Dead style. The camera zooms out to show a whole collection of dolls and a cheerful party with several couples dancing. In the center of the crowd is a young mother holding up her newborn son, who is dressed in a white christening dress. Off to the side, the young father and his *compadre* (a sort of lord or oligarch) celebrate the birth by drinking several shots and chatting. The *compadre* teases his worker as the father brags that he might have a daughter next—with the next woman who flirts with him. When the worker starts to make remarks about seducing the boss's wife, the *compadre* becomes enraged and screams at the worker for offending his honor. The two stand up and shout insults into each other's faces. The boss stabs his worker in the abdomen. The other men hold back the boss, who vows vengeance even as the worker lay dying.



Gerardo's Recovery in the Iron Lung We see a billows and the tube of a huge iron lung, then Gerardo's head resting on a pillow. A pretty nurse moves about the medical office while Gerardo's friend, Chinelas, asks him when he will get out of the iron lung. Gerardo replies that he thinks he will get out in a week, but he still can't breathe without the help of this "annoying machine." The nurse asks Chinelas why he has a pistol on his hip at the doctor's office, and he explains that his mother told him to always carry it. The nurse reminds Chinelas to avoid unpleasant conversations with Gerardo, and she leaves with a smile.



Chinelas Reports on the Family Disappointment

Chinelas compliments the nurse's friendly manner and Gerardo tells his friend that she was a friend, and now she has acted like a mother in his recovery. Gerardo goes on to complain that his actual mother never visited him, even when he was on death's door. Chinelas explains that his mother and the other Anguianos don't understand his pacifist attitude towards their rivals--they consider Gerardo a coward. Gerardo retorts that as an educated man and doctor, he should not have to put his life in danger over a stupid blood feud. He goes on to explain that his mother purposefully removed him from the village so that he could live in peace.



Confrontation in the Marketplace Gerardo's mother (Mercedes), dressed in black, sits on a bench and knits. Another woman accompanies Gerardo's mother across the plaza. The women spot their enemies, the Menchacas, congregated. Gerardo's mother scorns them for their violence. A friend of the Menchaca clan asks the ringleader (Rómulo) if he knew that Gerardo was paralyzed. Rómulo replies that he heard rumors, and the friend retorts that he is feigning ignorance. Rómulo reaches for his pistol, but another friend breaks up the fight before it begins.



Rómulo Visits Gerardo in the Hospital In the doctor's office, Gerardo (still lying in the iron lung) breathes in and out as the doctors examine him. The head doctor tells Gerardo that he is recovering well and will be able to breathe on his own soon. Gerardo thanks the specialists as they leave. Elsa, the pretty nurse, stays behind to chat with him. Gerardo tells her he wouldn't have been able to recover without her. Romulo enters tentatively, and Elsa tells him that Gerardo can't have visitors. Gerardo asks her to let him in. Romulo reports that some people in the village claim that he wasn't injured, and Gerardo retorts that Romulo is a witness to the truth. Rómulo vows not to come after him until he is cured, but Gerardo says he won't ever fight the Menchacas. Rómulo insists that he must avenge his father's death, but Gerardo argues that they should not carry on the blood feud. Gerardo asserts that the whole town has a backwards perspective about tradition and vengeance. Rómulo strikes him, offended, and starts to leave. Ashamed, Rómulo walks back towards Gerardo and admits that he "did wrong". Gerardo forgives him, and Rómulo leaves the office.



Elsa Helps Gerardo Walk In the garden outside the hospital, Elsa supports Gerardo as he walks around with a cane. After a few steps, Gerardo starts wheezing. Elsa steers him to a nearby wheelchair. Gerardo declares that it is good to feel tired. She asks him why he is melancholy, and he explains that Rómulo Menchaca refuses to let the blood feud go. Elsa asks why there is such rancor between the families, and Gerardo explains that there was a dispute over a wandering cow a hundred years ago. Elsa is astonished by the explanation.



Gerardo Tells the Tale of Vengeance Gerardo continues describing the vengeance culture of his home town while the camera fades to a series of images of the river, the mountains, and the streets of the town. Gerardo describes the “laws” of Santa Viviana: a man who kills a member of the other family may swim across the river to escape his rivals, and the fallen man is rowed across the river in a black coffin. Gerardo explains that his father crossed the river both ways. If there is a standoff between two men, the survivor may hide in the mountains in exile. Gerardo goes on to say that for several years, someone was shot in the street every day. He also explains that his grandfather, Don Nemesio, tried to act as mediator. The narration sequence ends with a shot of Don Nemesio in the street. He enters a store and sees a local, Tomás, buying an expensive pistol. Nemesio tries to convince the youth to invest in a horse and plant something rather than kill another. When Nemesio leaves, Tomás goes right back to the counter to buy the pistol.



Chinelas Paints a Death Offering Felipe, Gerardo’s father, visits a young Chinelas in his house. Chinelas is painting a picture of the cemetery and placing locks of hair into the composition that represent branches of a tree. Felipe asks him why he is including hair in the painting, and Chinelas explains that there is a saying that the hair of the victim reveals what happened to his soul. Felipe realizes that the painting is a tribute to a recently fallen youth named Antonio, and he laments that the boy had to fight so young. Chinelas reports that Antonio’s mother commissioned the painting for his grave. Felipe asks Chinelas to help him pick out earrings for his girlfriend. Doña Aurelia, Chinelas’s mother, insists that he carry a weapon with him.



Felipe and Mercedes Make Plans There is a close-up on Mercedes’s beautiful face as she tilts her head to show off Felipe’s present: the dangling earrings. The two lovers discuss their future. Felipe expresses a desire to move away from town so that he can escape the “black canoe”—the nickname for the coffin in the boat that is rowed across the river to the cemetery. Mercedes agrees that since he has some education, they should flee together.



Poker Night at Don Nemesio’s House Felipe, Chinelas, a priest named Don Julián, and some other elders play poker and chat. The elder players complain that Julián is winning too many hands for a priest. Nemesio’s maid announces that a youth refuses to enter and asks to see the host. When Nemesio gets up, he realizes that Polo Menchaca is lurking at the door and refuses to come in. Nemesio urges him to join the party and forget about the blood feud, but Polo retorts that his blood is boiling just knowing that Felipe is there. Polo does promise not



to “start” a new duel and leaves. Nemesio goes outside to warn Felipe of the growing tension and asks if he (Felipe) or Sósimo (Felipe’s cousin) has mixed it up with the Menchacas lately. Felipe says that he is staying away but he will investigate the current disturbance. Felipe turns to Mercedes and warns: “things are getting ugly.”

The Elders Debate the Solution to the Blood Feud Back at the poker table, Nemesio rants about his inability to break up the fight. He wonders why the century-old argument still has so much power and why youths are willing to kill each other over old trivialities. Some of the other elders disagree and say that dishonor is not an option and this fighting is the Mexican way. Nemesio retorts that violence and death serve no country, and Chinelas exhorts Don Julián to condemn violence during his sermons. The priest replies that he does condemn it, but he also won’t advise his parishioners not to defend themselves. Nemesio keeps complaining about the town’s backwards attitudes and their willingness to spend all their money on guns. Nemesio jokes that it is only he and the priest who do not have guns, but the philosopher is cut off when Julián takes his own pistol out of his cassock.



Polo and Sósimo Prepare for a Duel Polo visits Don Honorio at his ranch. Polo borrows a saddle and a gun from the elder and explains that there will be a duel with the Anguianos soon. Don Honorio hands over the supplies and prays that Polo does not end up crossing the river like his own son. Back in town, a friend of the Anguianos sees Sósimo lurking outside of a bar and warns Felipe that his cousin is trying to start a fight. Felipe rides over to intervene, but Sósimo has already entered the bar and pulled his gun at Polo, who is playing pool. The other men at the bar grab Sósimo before he can get off a shot, and Polo shoots back from the pool table across the room. Sósimo falls down, dead. Felipe and Chinelas enter after the shots have subsided. Felipe slaps Chinelas for delaying him. Meanwhile, Polo runs back to Don Honorio’s ranch and reports what happened. He tells the elder that he will row across the river and hide in exile. Don Honorio wishes him luck.



Don Nemesio Appeals to the Sheriff After Sósimo’s death, Don Nemesio meets with the town sheriff in the bar. Nemesio begs him to break up the current iteration of the blood feud. The sheriff replies that the town has its own set of laws based on honor codes. Nemesio comments that the residents use “honor” as a term to cover all manner of sins. The sheriff says that he will not go against the local laws and that Don Nemesio should just stay out of it. Nemesio vows not to stand by with his hands crossed, and he leaves the bar abruptly.



Nemesio’s Small Victories Gerardo’s narration picks up the story. He explains that his grandfather (Nemesio) succeeded in getting the police to declare a disarmament, but this little success only bought the town a little time. This sentiment is supported by the images of the police searching the townspeople with little effect. Even the priest Don Julián claims to follow the law, but we see him touch and adjust his own pistol (still hidden under the cassock) as he walks past the officers in the street. Gerardo quips sarcastically that the town’s arms disappeared overnight due to “magic.” When the police enter Nemesio’s house, they declare that they are there to arrest Felipe. The police explain that while he has not committed a crime, they need to take him in as a preventative measure. Nemesio tells his son that it is better for him to hide out in jail for a while, and Mercedes agrees. Felipe goes willingly and vows to return shortly.



The Menchacas Make a Plan A rabbit hops in a field. Don Honorio carries his hunting rifle. He shoots the rabbit, then holds up the carcass to examine it. When he walks back to his cabin, he sees his brother has visited him. Honorio warns his brother that he will be shot if he ventures into the village. His brother replies that no one knows he is there and that he brought him supplies. Honorio eagerly rummages through the bag of goodies, takes out a bottle of tequila, and swigs it directly from the bottle. He remarks that good liquor is a cure for loneliness. Honorio's brother brings the conversation back to the blood feud and poses this hypothetical: if he were to kill Felipe Anguiano, no one would have to fight again.



Local Festival There is an abrupt cut to a wild procession of costumed individuals dancing in a parade while a band plays a march. The couples of the village, including Felipe and Mercedes, walk behind the parade. The parade comes to a clearing where the costumed marchers dance in a circle. Young maidens carry and wave white flags. As the dance continues, Honorio's brother approaches Filigono (another Menchaca) and reports that he has spotted Felipe. Meanwhile, Nemesio approaches his son and reminds him that he (Felipe) promised to stay hidden. Felipe and Mercedes leave the festival but cross in front of the glowering Menchacas. Mercedes tries to talk Felipe into going back to prison, but Felipe insists that he should leave town all together. Mercedes warns him that the Menchacas will pursue him and can kill him according to the town laws. Felipe says he prefers that the confrontation happen. Mercedes declares that she will not stay with him if she is to be yet another widow tomorrow. Seeing her rage, Felipe agrees to go back into custody. On the other side of the clearing, the Menchacas also decide to pack up and go home. However, Filipino stays behind to have one more drink.



Felipe Confesses to Mercedes Later that night, a depressed Felipe rides across the field to Mercedes's house. She awakens the sound of the horse's hooves and comes to the gate. Felipe explains that he encountered Filigono on his way back to the jail. He asks Mercedes to forgive him for another murder. Mercedes starts crying and asked why he broke his promise. Felipe replies that Filigono was stalking him and a duel was inevitable. He goes on to explain that he will cross the river and go into exile. The two give each other a tearful goodbye.



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The Menchacas Chase Felipe Meanwhile, a group of Menchacas ride to Felipe's mother's house. They tell her of Filigono's murder and threaten Felipe if he doesn't cross the river. The mob of Menchacas track Felipe's escape and shoot at him while he is swimming across the river. When Felipe raises his hat in the air, the mob realizes that Felipe will make it to the other side alive.

Menchaca Funeral A group of pallbearers carry a black coffin containing Filigono into the street. Filigono's wife cries hysterically alongside the coffin and holds up her toddler daughter. She says that her daughter will never see her father again. One of the pallbearers, Honorio's brother, cries out that they should never forget who killed their kinsmen. The pallbearers continue to carry the coffin down the town's main street in a long procession. Several musicians play in an off-key brass ensemble. The mourners follow behind.



Confronting the Assassin Gerardo's narration comes back to explain that in Santa Viviana, the mourning family stops by the door of the assassin to confront the rival family. The Menchacas scream outside of Don Nemesio's house until he emerges at the front door. Nemesio does not participate in the accusation ritual. The elder reminds the Menchacas that the whole town is trapped in a perpetual state of mourning and death. The camera fades to the scene at the river's edge, where the family is loading the coffin onto a boat to cross the river.



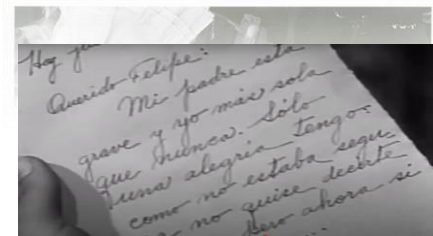
Felipe Sneaks Back from Exile Honorio ventures into the jungle to check on Felipe. He reports that several youths wish to follow his example and escape into exile. Later that night, Felipe sneaks back to the village, climbs over a fence, and rushes to a waiting Mercedes. They embrace and walk back towards the house arm-in-arm. There is a close-up of a rooster crowing.



Doctor's Visit to the Ailing Don Nemesio A doctor writes a prescription in a tight shot. When the camera pulls back, we see Mercedes sitting by a bedridden Don Nemesio. The patient asks the doctor to give it to him straight, but the doctor merely says that he can recover as long as he takes his medication dutifully. The Menchaca outside talk about vengeance but decide to postpone their plans until Don Nemesio improves. When the doctor leaves the house, however, he reports to the concerned neighbors outside that Don Nemesio's heart could fail at any moment. The crowd reacts fearfully and remarks that the elder's death will be a great blow to the community.



Mercedes Reveals a Secret There is an interior shot of Mercedes pacing in her nightgown and shawl. She sits down to finish a letter she has started to compose to Felipe, and the camera zooms in on her dainty cursive. A voiceover reads the letter while Mercedes writes the last key sentence, which she underlines: "I am pregnant with your child."



Polo Declares a Temporary Ceasefire Polo walks through the jungle with a rifle and comes upon Felipe swimming in a small pool on the riverbed. Felipe sees him and thinks that the Menchaca has come to execute him. Polo continues to hold his rifle but assures Felipe that he (Polo) has not come to ambush him. As Felipe tentatively gets dressed, Polo explains that he sought him out to tell him that Don Nemesio died. Polo suggests that the two walk together back to the village and remarks that they don't have to be friends to travel together. Felipe follows Polo but hangs back a few feet. When the two sit on a rock to rest, they lament that Don Nemesio is no longer there to break up the blood feud. Polo remarks that his brother thinks they should kill Felipe so that the Anguianos are cleared out for good. Felipe retorts that killing him won't kill the feud. The two start arguing over which kinsmen killed which relatives unjustly. Felipe gives Polo a cigarette as a peace offering, and the two continue walking down the path towards the village.



Don Nemesio's Wake Felipe and Polo, dressed all in white, act as pall bearers, then stand next to each other at Don Nemesio's wake. The Menchaca cousins marvel that the two rivals are getting along, at least for the moment. The camera cuts to a group of older men on the other side of the room. They



reminisce about another violent feud from generations ago, when one man beheaded his enemy and displayed it at a cantina. Then, the rival family avenged their beheaded relative by skinning the murderer alive. The camera cuts back to Polo and Felipe carrying Don Nemesio's black coffin as the first two pall bearers. Outside, a young stranger asks a young boy to deliver a letter to Felipe Anguiano inside Don Nemesio's house. Back inside, Felipe pulls Mercedes aside. Felipe tells her that he must leave before the wake ends. They make another plan to escape the village together so that their son can be born in peace. Felipe leaves with Chinelas.

Polo and Felipe are Set Up Just as Felipe is leaving town, the little boy delivers a letter telling him to show up at Vicario Street at 10:00 PM. Chinelas demands that Felipe ignore the letter and leave town immediately. The camera cuts to an interior of the Menchaca home, where Polo has received the same letter. His cousin from out-of-town eggs on Polo and reminds him of avenging their dead. Polo slaps him but agrees to meet Felipe in the street. There is a panoramic shot of the two men approaching each other on Vicario Street while Polo's young cousin looks on from the shadows. When the two greet each other, however, they realize that neither one called for a duel. They continue walking in opposite directions, but Polo's young cousin follows Felipe down the street. The young man calls out, and Felipe turns around and shoots him. Felipe is also hit but stays up. Polo hears the shots, turns around, and shoots Felipe, who also manages to get a shot off.



Felipe's Last Breath Chinelas sees Felipe in the street and calls out the mourners from the wake. Mercedes, the doctor, and Don Julián, among others, gather around to see if Felipe is still alive. Felipe sees Mercedes, whose face is framed in a tight shot from below (that is, from Felipe's prostrate perspective). Felipe asks Don Julián to marry them before he dies.



Back to the Present with Gerardo y Elsa The camera fades from Felipe's death scene to Gerardo in the wheelchair. Gerardo explains that he is the last Anguiano, born of the death marriage, and Rómulo is the last Menchaca. Elsa remarks again that such violence is amazing. Gerardo explains that the feud is a product of rural, uneducated culture. Elsa retorts that not everyone can have access to an education, and Gerardo declares that the door of culture should be open to everyone. As Elsa wheels him back to the hospital, Gerardo laments that he still has to deal with his hometown's "dark mandate."



Chinelas and Mercedes Debate Gerardo's Fate Back in Santa Viviana, Chinelas and a group of men gossip about Gerardo in the local store. The men wonder whether Gerardo has recovered enough to come back to the village. Chinelas reports that Gerardo is in better shape but still has trouble walking upright. The men show Chinelas a newspaper article with a picture of a healthy Gerardo in his white coat. The camera cuts to an interior shot of Mercedes's house, where she, too, is reading the newspaper article. Chinelas exhorts Mercedes to be proud of her learned son, but Mercedes retorts that he is still a man and an Anguiano—and he must defend the name that he inherited. Chinelas reminds her that her father (Don Nemesio) was virtuous and raised her to be kind. Mercedes declares that she is not a saint like her father and insults Chinelas by calling him a hen (as opposed to a rooster) who doesn't have honor to defend. She tells him to go home and put on a skirt, and Chinelas agrees to leave before he says something he regrets.



Gerardo Can't Escape the Blood Feud Back at the office, Gerardo reads a letter from his mother to Elsa. He summarizes the guilt trip by explaining that his mother demands that he defend her honor and his name. Elsa reminds Gerardo that they have a future together in Mexico City and she doesn't want him to be hurt. Gerardo replies that he will do what he can to avoid violence, but he can no longer avoid a trip back home.

Mother and Son Reunited Gerardo rides into town in his suit and asks a man to row him across the river. When Gerardo walks through town a few minutes later, several villagers recognize them. One youth runs to the Menchaca house and reports to Rómulo that Gerardo is back. Rómulo is shaving and remarks that Gerardo is probably in town for the Candelaria festival. Rómulo sits down to have dinner with his mother. The camera cuts to Mercedes's house, where she is also serving Gerardo dinner. He confronts her about not visiting him in the hospital. Mercedes explains that she thought about it every day but always found an excuse not to go. Chinelas and multiple relatives rush in to greet and welcome Gerardo. They also embrace him warmly but pressure him to defend the family honor.



Gerardo Decides to Confront Rómulo at the Dance A brass ensemble plays while multiple couples dance at the Candelaria party. Several men wonder whether Gerardo will show up. A group of cousins leave to report the situation to Gerardo and Mercedes at home. Gerardo at first rejects their pleas. When they leave, Gerardo tries to explain his enlightened philosophy to his mother, and she pretends to agree with him. Gerardo finally decides that he will go to the party and confront the Menchacas, as he is tired of being branded a coward. Mercedes tells him that he does not have to go, but he leaves anyway. Mercedes grabs him at the door and apologizes for her harsh words in the letter. Gerardo assures her that while he may cross the river, it will only be to return to Mexico City.



Back at the Dance When Gerardo shows up at the dance, the cousins celebrate his arrival. Chinless tries to intervene, but Rómulo approaches Gerardo in a menacing fashion. Rómulo declares that he is done with Gerardo's fancy words and is ready for action. Rómulo's girlfriend keeps him from striking Gerardo, who still tries to argue for peace. Gerardo follows Rómulo across the room and suggests that they meet in the cemetery in an hour. Rómulo agrees.



Final Struggle and Confrontation Rómulo prepares to row himself across the river but notices that his oar is broken. He borrows another one and crosses. Gerardo waits for him on the shore and surprises him from behind. Rómulo turns around quickly and points his gun. Gerardo tells him he doesn't want to duel. Rómulo charges him, and the two wrestle for control of Rómulo's pistol. Gerardo eventually gets the gun and points it at Rómulo, who dares him to shoot. Gerardo explains that Rómulo shot first and he could claim self-defense, but he is not going to kill him. Rómulo declares that he wants blood, and Gerardo notices that his own hand is bleeding from a small wound. Gerardo flicks drops of blood onto Rómulo's face and says: "you'll have to be satisfied with that blood." Gerardo denounces Rómulo for his stupid machismo and dares Rómulo to shoot him in the back as he walks away. Infuriated, Rómulo squeezes his pistol but does not shoot.



Gerardo Says Goodbye to Santa Viviana The next morning, Mercedes and Chinelas bid Gerardo farewell in the street. Rómulo walks over and tells Gerardo that he has been thinking obsessively about their encounter. Gerardo acknowledges that it is a big step for a Menchaca to talk to (and not threaten) an Anguiano in front of the whole town. Rómulo agrees to stop worrying about what the town thinks, and the two embrace. The shot of the men embracing fades to a pan of the river, which is now sparkling in the bright sunlight.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

GERARDO ANGUIANO

Gerardo is an accomplished young doctor who suffers from polio. He is a rational intellectual but also a sensitive person. In some ways, Gerardo is the protagonist of the film, as it is his actions that finally bring the blood feud to a close. On the other hand, Gerardo also acts as the narrator of his father's story, which really forms the crux of the action.

Rational Although Gerardo is drawn into the emotional trap of defending his family's honor, he also knows and asserts that the blood feud consists of an unending cycle with no benefit to society. He echoes his grandfather's arguments: 1) the blood feud is based on an ambiguous fight that originated 100 years ago and is no longer relevant to the descendants of the rivals; and 2) if the Santa Vivianos could get out of their isolated area and get an education, they would stop obsessing about their honor. Gerardo adheres to this philosophy when Rómulo strikes him while he is trapped in the iron lung; rather than vow vengeance, the doctor accepts his rival's apology and refrains from challenging him to a duel.

Sensitive As a model of "modern" Mexican masculinity, Gerardo does not place his value in physical strength, honor, and emotional stoicism. Instead, he tries to empathize with his relatives and rivals and appeal to their sense of logic. He treats his mother and Chinelas with affection and understanding, even to the point that he forgives Mercedes for her emotional manipulation and for not visiting him in the hospital.

MERCEDES

Loyal Throughout the first half of the film, Mercedes remains a dutiful daughter to Nemesio and a loyal girlfriend to Felipe. When Nemesio falls ill, she waits by his bedside. She also agrees to help Felipe hide in town and cross the river; then, she helps him plan an escape for the whole family. In addition, it is Mercedes who convinces Felipe to intern himself in prison in order to avoid street brawls.

Fierce Although she supports Felipe and Gerardo in their endeavors, Mercedes also confronts them when they choose an ill-advised path. As a young woman, Mercedes threatens to break up with Felipe when he considers dueling with the Menchacas. Later, she raises Gerardo by herself after Felipe dies in the street. As a prominent matriarch in the 1950s, Mercedes stands up to the villagers' taunts and exhorts her son to avenge the family's honor.

POLO MENCHACA

Polo is arguably the most reasonable and level-headed member of the Menchaca family in Santa Viviana. As the foil to Felipe Anguiano, Polo also debates whether to mend fences with his rival or kill off the last surviving one. When he decides to fight, however, he is particularly brave and scrappy. This pattern of trying to sidestep the fight, then engaging the other side bravely, is reflected in Felipe's own behavior towards Polo.

Reasonable (Fair) Although Polo does not give up on avenging his honor, he is methodical and reasonable about the time, place, and provocation of a duel. Unlike his relatives, he does not ambush the Anguianos or attack them given the opportunity. He only kills Sósimo in self-defense, and he refrains from killing or dueling Felipe several times. One telling moment is when Polo comes upon Felipe

swimming in the lake, but refrains from shooting at him or demanding a duel. Instead, he invites Felipe to attend Don Nemesio's wake.

Brave Polo avoids fighting sometimes, yet he shows bravery when he decides to fight. When he is ambushed (like in the bar), Polo reacts quickly and shoots Sósimo. He also turns back to shoot Felipe when he hears the exchange of bullets in the street. Despite the danger involved, Polo invites Felipe to return to town, then agrees to meet him in the street at night. Rather than fly off the handle, Polo tries to plan according to the circumstances of the moment.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Modernity (Urbanity) vs Tradition (Rural Culture) From the very first scenes of the film, Buñuel juxtaposes Mexico City with Santa Viviana, or urban and rural Mexican culture, more broadly. Gerardo acts as a representative for Mexico City: the beacon of culture and education. Gerardo has adopted the enlightened city mentality, which is best exemplified by his intellectual prowess, his professional career, and his physical weakness and disability. Conversely, most of the Santa Viviana residents are trapped in the nineteenth-century, rural mentality of an 'uncivilized' frontier. The heartbeat of the town is the river, which suggests that the Santa Vivianos are tied to nature. Because they do not have access to education (a fact which both Don Nemesio and Gerardo repeat multiple times), the villagers cling to honor and vengeance. History infuses the present, which indicates that Santa Viviana exists in a rural time warp and is removed from twentieth-century progress. The Santa Vivianos treasure their traditions, from festivals to funeral rituals. Much of the conflict in the film derives from the Anguianos' efforts to break up the blood feud, or at least delay it. As a young woman in love, Mercedes also yearns to escape the backwards provincial culture and provide a modern life for her son. Later, Mercedes adopts the town's vengeance mandate and insists that Gerardo defend her honor. However, she regrets this stance when she sees her son in person and is reminded of the futility of perpetual death. She even goes so far as to say that she was affected by the "poisoned air" of the town, which further underscores the idea that the villagers exist under a rural spell of ignorance and rage.

Illustrative Moment: The Elders Debate the Value of the Blood Feud

Nemesio rants about his inability to break up the fight. He wonders why the century-old argument still has so much power and why youths are willing to kill each other over old trivialities. Some of the other elders disagree and say that dishonor is not an option and this fighting is the Mexican way. Nemesio retorts that violence and death serve no country, and Chinelas exhorts Don Julián to condemn violence during his sermons. The priest replies that he does condemn it, but he also won't advise his parishioners not to defend themselves. Nemesio keeps complaining about the town's backwards attitudes and their willingness to spend all their money on guns. Nemesio jokes that it is only he and the priest who do not have guns, but the philosopher is cut off when Julián takes his own pistol out of his cassock. This debate clearly lays out the contrasting attitudes of Don Nemesio and the rest of the town. Although his identity is rooted in Santa Viviana, Nemesio is one of the few villagers who has embraced a mid-twentieth-century concept of modernity, and more specifically, he wishes to foster a modern Mexican nation-state. Conversely, the other elders value honor and tradition over any new ideas, even when tradition leads to perpetual death.



JUSTICE

Revenge and Violence Despite Don Nemesio's efforts to dissuade his fellow villagers, the youths in Santa Viviana are motivated by and consumed by vengeance. There is always a new death to avenge or an exiled enemy to stalk. Even the laws of the town are designed to exacerbate the ongoing blood feud. For many characters, only complete extermination of the rival family will quench their lust for blood. The Menchacas, in particular, seek to avenge the original victim of the compadre's knife, as well as the most recent death in the family. The fact that the lust for vengeance only results in death or exile does not dissuade the participants. In fact, most of the villagers "double down" on violence by buying guns, carrying weapons, staging duels, and ambushing rivals. Everyone expects to be attacked, so everyone carries a gun. Wives and mothers remind their men to prepare for violence, and even the priest hides his own weapon. In the rare instance that guns are not available or useful, there remains a constant threat of violence. Rómulo strikes Gerardo in the iron lung, and the villagers also use their knives to threaten each other.

Illustrative Moment: Rómulo's Lust for Blood in the Cemetery

Once the two rivals meet at the town cemetery, Gerardo tells Rómulo he doesn't want to duel. Rómulo charges him, and the two wrestle for control of Rómulo's pistol. Gerardo eventually gets the gun and points it at Rómulo, who dares him to shoot. Gerardo explains that Rómulo shot first and he could claim self-defense, but he is not going to kill him. Rómulo declares that he wants blood, and Gerardo notices that his hand is bleeding from a small wound. Gerardo flicks drops of blood onto Rómulo's face and says: "you'll have to be satisfied with that blood." The cries for blood manifest themselves literally with Gerardo's gesture. Ironically, the bloody confrontation does not end in death or vengeance. Ultimately, Rómulo is satisfied and presumably drops the blood feud from that point on.



PYSCHOLOGY

Honor In many ways, the Santa Vivianos are motivated to kill in order to avenge their relatives' death. This tit for tat mentality keeps the blood feud going across the generations. However, the rivals (particularly the Menchacas) perpetuate the duels because they wish to maintain the family's honor stretching back to the original conflict. The connotations attached to the surname becomes as important as the life of each newly slain individual. In this sense, the younger rivals are reenacting the original conflict from a hundred years ago, in which the compadre Anguiano stabbed his peon, Menchaca. The injustice of this original power dynamic makes it all the more difficult for the Menchacas to suspend their quest for blood. Moreover, the town has created special laws that are meant to allow the men to defend their honor. Both the Menchacas and the Anguianos worry about the stain of dishonor across their respective families—that is to say, their wives and children are also dishonored when their fathers and husbands refuse to defend them. This cultural trap provides the primary obstacle to Nemesio's and Gerardo's pleas for peace.

Illustrative Moment: Mercedes Debates Chinelas About a Man's Honor

Chinelas exhorts Mercedes to be proud of her learned son, but Mercedes retorts that he is still a man and an Anguiano—and he must defend the name that he inherited. Chinelas reminds her that her father (Don Nemesio) was virtuous and raised her to be kind. Mercedes declares that she is not a saint like her father and insults Chinelas by calling him a hen (as opposed to a rooster) who doesn't have honor to defend. She tells him to go home and put on a skirt, and Chinelas agrees to leave before he says something he regrets. In this exchange, Mercedes has internalized the concept that it is a man's duty to defend women's honor. She expects Gerardo to do his duty, and she equates Chinelas's defense with an effeminate or weakened state.



LIFE STAGES

Death As the title of the film suggests, death is the crux of the plot and themes of *The River and Death*. Nearly all of the characters die within the framework of the blood feud, and those who sidestep duels still end up dying of disease. Gerardo and Rómulo only survive because Gerardo finally manages to suspend the blood feud. There are repeated sequences of men dying in the streets and funeral processions with pallbearers carrying the adorned black coffins through town. The river itself becomes an emblem of death, as each slain relative is rowed across the river in a black coffin to the cemetery on the “other side.” This repeated imagery evokes both the Greek myth of crossing the river Styx and the universal concept of crossing over into a spiritual plane after death. Moreover, the cemetery exists due to a massive flood with multiple casualties—a massacre orchestrated by the river itself. Even the tradition of post-duel exile occurs when the assassin manages to row himself across the river, thereby enacting a social death. Along with the rich symbolism of the river, there are also multiple visual signs or metonyms of death throughout the film. The origin of the blood feud occurs during a Dia de los Muertos party, where the camera offers a close-up of skeletal (calavera) figurines, followed by a tableau of the party guests posed in similar pattern to their skeletal counterparts. Later, Felipe visits Chinelas when he is working on a commissioned painting for a gravesite. Buñuel also includes his favorite auger of death, a perched rooster, at the end of the scene where Felipe sneaks back into the village in the middle of the night.

Illustrative Moment: Chinelas Creates a Grave Painting

Felipe visits Chinelas in his house. Chinelas is painting a picture of the cemetery and placing locks of hair into the composition that represent branches of a tree. Felipe asks him why he is including hair in the painting, and Chinelas explains that there is a saying that the hair of the victim reveals what happened to his soul. Felipe realizes that the painting is a tribute to a recently fallen youth named Antonio, and he laments that the boy had to fight so young. Chinelas reports that Antonio’s mother commissioned the painting for his grave. Not only does the painting depict the cemetery; it is also a relic to be placed literally at the slain youth’s grave. Moreover, Chinelas incorporates lock of the victim’s hair into the composition of the painting. This creates a triple visual reference of death and alludes to the Mexican practice of creating art and artifacts to place on an altar for the dead.



PAST

Memory Because the feud has festered over the course of a hundred years, and the town itself has existed even longer, the Santa Vivianos live in a sort of suspended reality. Like a Mexican Brigadoon, they are largely divorced from the outside world. The river also acts as an ancient anchor that keeps the villagers in their antiquated rural state. In this sense, Santa Viviana is frozen in time and condemned to a pattern of repeated violence. The youths refuse to forget the dishonor visited upon their families, and they vow to avenge their great-great-grandfathers to the point of killing off the rival family. The progress of 1950s Mexico City does not reach or influence the residents of Santa Viviana. It is only by physically removing themselves that the characters can escape the long memory of their enemies. Despite his distaste for his hometown’s “backward” culture, Gerardo participates in keeping the memory alive by telling the story of his father and ancestors. In the end, the rivals agree to forgive but not forget. It is likely that tales of the violence will be passed down from generation to generation. Buñuel reminds the viewer that Mexico City itself was built on the Aztec ruins of Tenochtitlán, and we see the references to Aztec iconography in the plaza outside of the hospital. Even in the bustling modernity of a huge city, Mexicans feel the presence of history all around them.

Illustrative Moment: Santa Viviana is Founded on Commemorating the Dead

An aerial shot of a marketplace is accompanied by a narrator introduces the viewers to the small town of Santa Viviana. The narrator explains that the local farmers frequent the marketplace



in

this tropical region. The camera cuts to a shot of a river (from a side view) and a cemetery on a hill. The narrator explains that the normally “deep and tranquil” river flooded one year, which resulted in the death of most of the villagers. The survivors buried their relatives on the hill on one side of the river, then rebuilt Santa Viviana on the other side. The narrator warns that while the town seems peaceful, it is replete with death. Along with explaining the meaning of the film’s title, this opening sequence also describes the emotional history of the town. It is not only that the flood happened, but also that the villagers go out of their way to remember the dead through the prominent placement and adornment of the graves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you interpret the symbolism of the river? Does the river mean more than just death?
2. If Don Nemesio is a respected elder and long-time resident of Santa Viviana, why is he unable to convince the villagers to give up the fight?
3. Why does Mercedes change her position and attitude on duels and honor?
4. What is the effect of having Gerardo as both narrator and secondary protagonist? How does his condition (polio) affect the development of his character?