

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***El gran calavera / The Great Madcap* (1949)**

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, including the featured comedy of this essay, *The Great Madcap* (1949). 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 Great Madcap* (1949) is a black-and-white comedy set in Mexico City in the 1940s. The plot involves a dysfunctional family that is taking advantage of the alcoholic patriarch, Ramiro de la Mata. The cast features one of the most popular older male actors of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, Fernando Soler. Buñuel frequently cast Soler as an agitated patriarch in his comedies and melodramas of the 1950s, including the embittered Don Quintín in *Daughter of Deceit* (1952) and the husband fighting his desire in *Susana* (1951). The heartthrob Rubén Rojo plays the sincere electrician Pablo, and Buñuel would cast the actor as the young mechanic and suitor in *Daughter of Deceit* (1952) a few years later.

**Background** *The Great Madcap* was largely shot on location in the Mexican City. As Buñuel's second film in exile as a Mexican director, this comedy provided an opportunity for the young director to create a commercially successful film with seasoned actors. The gamble paid off, as *The Great Madcap* was a hit and made up for the commercial failure of Buñuel's first Mexican film, *Grand Casino* (1947). In addition, Buñuel began his longtime collaboration with Janet and Luis Alcoriza (screenwriters) and producer Óscar Dancigers, with whom he would create over twenty Mexican and French films in the 1950s.

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Ramiro de la Mata</i>	drunk patriarch
<i>Gregorio</i>	Ramiro's brother and doctor
<i>Ladislao</i>	Ramiro's moocher brother
<i>Milagros</i>	Ladislao's wife and Ramiro's sister-in-law
<i>Virginia</i>	Ramiro's daughter
<i>Eduardo</i>	Ramiro's son
<i>Juan</i>	the family butler
<i>Alfredo</i>	Virginia's gold-digger fiancé
<i>Pablo</i>	electrician and Virginia's love interest
<i>Alfonso</i>	Ramiro's business partner

### SYNOPSIS

Don Ramiro is a helplessly drunk businessman who is mourning the death of his beloved wife. As he drinks away his sorrows, his relatives and employees continue to take advantage of his state. Ramiro's drunkenness escalates until he has a temper tantrum and heart attack at the engagement party for his

daughter, Virginia, and Alfredo, her stuffy boyfriend. Ramiro's poor behavior results in Alfredo and his family breaking off the engagement and storming out.

When Don Alfonso, Ramiro's business associate, realizes that the business is going under, he calls Gregorio, Ramiro's responsible brother. Gregorio visits the family and suggests that the relatives play a trick on the patriarch. While he is unconscious, the family moves to a small apartment in a poor neighborhood. When Ramiro wakes up in the shack, the family tells him that he was unconscious for a year. They also explain that his business went bankrupt and the police put out a warrant for his arrest.

Devastated, Ramiro writes a suicide note and tries to throw himself off the top floor of the apartment building. The local electrician, Pablo, talks him out of suicide and vows to help the new tenants that have fallen on bad times. Meanwhile, Ramiro discovers the truth about the ruse and asks Gregorio and Alfonso to play the same trick on the other relatives. Over the next several weeks, Pablo sets up the family with odd jobs and courts Virginia. The young couple nearly gets engaged until Alfredo tracks down the family and re-proposes to Virginia.

In the final scenes of the film, the family moves back into the mansion and prepares for Alfredo and Virginia's wedding. When it is revealed that Alfredo knew that Ramiro was still rich, Virginia leaves Alfredo at the altar and chases after Pablo. Ramiro and the other elders rejoice that the virtuous lovers are reunited.

## SCENES

**Pile of Drunks in Jail** There is a close-up of several soles of shoes and intertwined legs. When the camera pulls back, the viewer sees several drunk men in a pile, with one older man dressed in a fancy suit. The man in the suit lifts up multiple other men's legs and says that he has an itch. When the man's neighbor wakes up and tells him to scratch his own leg, the rich man replies that he couldn't find his. The camera pulls back further to reveal that the drunk men are laying in the corner of a jail cell. A guard approaches and calls out: "Hey you, dandy!" The rich man replies and stands up when the guard tells him to report to the judge. The dandy bids his fellow drunks farewell and leaves the cell.



**Don Ramiro Returns Home to Eager Relatives** There is an interior shot of an elegant balcony in a stately mansion. A maid listens at the master's door and smiles when she hears him singing cheerfully. She descends a long staircase and passes Juan, the butler. She alerts him that the boss is drunk as per usual, and Juan goes up to knock on the doors of all of the relatives. They all leave their rooms excited and tell each other that Papá is home. Ladislao, Ramiro's brother, enters his brother's bedroom and finds him downing multiple glasses of liquor. The brothers greet each other cheerfully, and Ladislao teases Ramiro for staying up all night. Ladislao asks Ramiro if the patriarch would be willing to pay for the new suits he (Ladislao) just bought. Ramiro agrees and tells his brother to send him the bills.



**More Moochers** When Ramiro leaves his bedroom, Juan shows him the bill for the drycleaners, and Ramiro agrees to pay it plus a bonus for the butler. Ramiro goes down to breakfast and greets Ladislao and Milagros, his sister-in-law. Milagros also asks for help paying for her clothing and a multitude of medicines (tonic for the liver, pills for depression, and other items). Ramiro agrees to give her a check. Virginia and Eduardo, Ramiro's children, play heads or tails to see who gets to ask their father for money first. Eduardo wins, enters the dining room, and asks for a new Cadillac. When Ramiro asks about his old car, Eduardo explains that he totaled it in a wreck. Ramiro agrees that his son shouldn't be seen in a beat-up car.



**Virginia's Party** Virginia enters as her brother leaves. She reminds her father that he must attend her engagement party that afternoon. Ramiro agrees but remarks that he is not a big fan of her fiancé, Alfredo. The patriarch explains that Alfredo is after her money and he wants her to have a stable and loving spouse like he had. Virginia retorts that Alfredo is very handsome, and Ramiro admits that she is the one who will have to marry him. Virginia praises her father's kindness and kisses him. After Virginia leaves, Ramiro tries to find his cigars but is informed by Juan that the men in the house already smoked them all. The butler suggests that Ramiro visit his work office, and the boss agrees that he hasn't been to work in far too long.



**Checking in at the Office** Ramiro enters his office and greets his employees, all of whom are standing around talking. Ramiro remarks that they are always on break whenever he enters. The receptionist is knitting a sweater, and Ramiro quips that she should knit one for him as long as she has nothing to do. When he enters his private office, one of his board members confronts him with the truth of the matter. He warns the boss that the members of the board are threatening to quit. He goes on to chide Ramiro for drowning himself in booze and giving in to all of his family member's demands—even though they do not respect him. Ramiro continues drinking and reminds his employee that getting drunk is the only way to forget about his wife. The employee warns him that Ramiro will go broke quickly, and his idea to boost mining stocks will end in disaster. Ramiro commands his underling to obey his orders, and he agrees, reluctantly.



**Booze, Solitaire, and Pills in the Morning** When Carmelito, a friend, invites Ramiro over for a morning party, the boss leaves the office. The employee tries to stop him, but Ramiro quips that he should get a couple of drinks if the situation is as black as he says. The camera cuts to a series of cards laid out in a solitaire-like game. The camera backs up to reveal Juan playing and the maid sitting at his side, bored. The doorbell rings and the maid opens the door to a gentleman with eyeglasses who claims that he is a relative. He marches past the lounging servants and family members. Ladislao recognizes his brother Gregorio as the latter enters the living room. Milagros and Ladislao greet him and ask about his work. Gregorio reports that he is as busy as ever with his medical work in hospitals and insane asylums.



**Gregorio Lays Out the Case** After their initial pleasantries, Gregorio explains that he received a letter from Ramiro's attorney, Don Alfonso, in which he details Ramiro's drunkenness and neglect. Gregorio summarizes the accusations, including that Ramiro is always drunk, has been arrested several times, and never shows up at work. Ladislao declares the report an over-exaggeration and explains that they were giving Ramiro a mourning period to get over his grief. Gregorio retorts that they are taking advantage of the mourning period. He asks where his niece and nephew are, and Ladislao admits that they are out on a shopping spree. Gregorio vows to right the ship and starts by asking to speak with Ramiro. Milagros says that they don't know where the patriarch is.



**Ramiro Enjoys Carmelito's Party** Ramiro dances wildly with a young woman in Carmelito's living room. The older guests sit on the couch, exhausted, but Ramiro cajoles them into more drinking. Carmelito reminds his guest that they have been at it since noon, but Ramiro keeps guzzling drinks. One of the women asks to dance a rumba with the men. Ramiro sits on the couch with another guests and flirts with her. When she tells him her name is Helena, Ramiro gets agitated and grabs her violently, then runs off with another drink. Carmelita explains that Helena was the name of Ramiro's late wife. Carmelito approaches Ramiro and chides him for his brutish behavior, then notifies his friend that his brother is looking for him. Ramiro leaves.



**Virginia's Engagement Party** Virginia, her fiancé Alfredo, and the two uncles chat at the engagement party. Alfredo commits that it is nice to have money, and Ladislao adds that one has to increase one's capital and maintain it. Gregorio quips that Ladislao has never worked, and Ladislao retorts that he adheres to "laid-backism"—a philosophy in which one does nothing since everything has already been invented. Virginia laughs heartily as Alfredo steals her away to another room, then tries to kiss her. He describes an elaborate honeymoon followed by undying love for one another. The two re-join the main party, where Milagros is describing her hypochondriac routine of pills. Virginia asks why her father is late, and her future mother-in-law agrees that it is curious.



**Ramiro Ruins the Party and Breaks the Engagement** Ramiro suddenly appears being carried in on the shoulders of two servants. His brothers watch horrified, and Ladislao warns Gregorio that it is the biggest drunken rampage yet. When they put him down, Ramiro proceeds to hug and jostle everyone within an arm's length. Upon seeing Alfredo, he declares that he will not let his daughter marry such a "fortune hunter," and he insults Alfredo's mother's facial hair. Virginia tries to intervene, but Ramiro continues to insult everyone and make declarations. The future in-laws and guests rush out. Eduardo and the brothers try to contain Ramiro, who lunges at Gregorio but passes out.



**Gregorio's Warning and Pronouncement** The camera cuts to Gregorio sitting at Ramiro's bedside and checking his pulse while he sleeps. He leaves the room and gives an update to Eduardo and Virginia: Ramiro is stable now, but he almost died three days ago. Gregorio asks to speak to the whole family in the living room. He declares that everyone will need to make sacrifices so that Ramiro does not end up penniless or dead. Virginia vows to help and agrees to postpone her wedding—which is already in doubt after the disastrous party.

**New Lodgings** Ladislao and Milagros walk across a courtyard and into a new, poor neighborhood. Milagros complains but Ladislao reminds her that their move will help save Ramiro. Two neighbors wash their laundry in the courtyard and gossip about the new arrivals. They both wonder why a seemingly posh couple moved in during the middle of the night with a sick man. When the two come in, the viewer sees the whole family settling in and becoming accustomed to a tiny apartment. Gregorio exhorts Ladislao to work as a carpenter. The women show Gregorio their new "poor" dresses, and the doctor agrees that they are appropriate costumes. Virginia vows to commit to the experiment, and Eduardo hopes that it works. Gregorio explains how they will trick Ramiro by showing him fake papers.



**Ramiro Has a Literal Rude Awakening** Ramiro stirs in his bed, and the relatives get in place for the show: Milagros knits, and Ladislao sands lumber at his carpenter's bench. Ramiro looks at out at the living room, then dazed, lies back down thinking he is dreaming. He goes back out and marvels that his brother and sister-in-law are actually working. Ladislao retorts that he is keeping the family afloat. The two explain to Ramiro that he declared bankruptcy a year ago and had a warrant out for his arrest. The children and Gregorio listen from another room. Milagros then describes how Ramiro had taken ill and the whole family had to move in order to hide Ramiro from the cops. Ramiro listens, amazed, but then studies Ladislao fixedly. He approaches his lazy brother and quips: "I can believe everything except the idea that you would work!"



**Eduardo and Virginia Act Their Parts** Eduardo enters while brushing a shoe incorrectly. He explains to his father that he couldn't get a real job because of the family reputation. Ramiro breaks down and apologizes, then vows to shine shoes himself for penance. Eduardo feels guilty and tries to tell him, but Gregorio comes out and tells the family to stick with the plan. Virginia follows her father in to the bedroom and confirms the bankruptcy story. In order to convince him, she shows Ramiro fake newspaper clippings that detail Ramiro's "escape" and the crash of the mining stocks. Ramiro bemoans the fact that he did not listen to Alfonso's warnings in the office. He then vows to find a solution and life everyone out of poverty.



**Attempted Suicide** Virginia checks on her father in bed while the family eats at a small table. Ramiro yells from the bedroom that he is resting, so Virginia returns to the table. The camera fades to a close-up of Ramiro's hand writing a suicide note. He then gets up and finds his way to the balcony of the building. He sits on the concrete wall, then throws himself over the side. A worker runs over and looks over the side. Ramiro has landed on scaffolding and manages to get up. He starts to look down again, but the worker intercedes by jumping onto the scaffolding. The worker convinces Ramiro that he will only break his legs and live the rest of his life disabled. The two climb back up to the balcony, where the worker says he will show Ramiro how to commit suicide "properly."



**Ramiro Discovers the Truth** After saving Ramiro, the worker (Pablo) tries to cheer up the new tenant. Ramiro confesses that his family has fallen into poverty, and Pablo urges him to keep going and turn over a new leaf. The worker asks about why they moved in yesterday, and Ramiro begins to realize that the story was a scam. Pablo confirms that it is still May of 1949. Infuriated, Ramiro vows to kill Ladislao. The worker holds him back, then knocks Ramiro out cold. Pablo carries the patriarch up to Number 7. Meanwhile, Virginia discovers the suicide note and calls out for the family. They all rush out and meet the worker carrying the unconscious Ramiro.

**Ramiro Comes To** Ramiro wakes up with the family hovered over him. He apologizes for his suicide attempt and thanks the youth who saved his life. Ramiro notices Gregorio and starts to form a plan for revenge. He declares that he will take a walk. The family protests, but Ramiro assures them that he is "a new man." Gregorio follows him out and tells the family he will prevent Ramiro from learning the truth. Outside, Ramiro confronts Gregorio about the ruse, and the reformed drunk vows to learn his lesson. The brothers decide to keep the plan alive so that the family learns a lesson, too.



**Virginia Flirts with Pablo** Back on the balcony, Virginia hangs sheets on the line while Pablo pretends to work on various projects. He approaches her and comments that according to her father, they are too rich to live in this little apartment. Virginia starts to explain how they lost a fortune, but Pablo says she doesn't owe him an explanation. He asks why he doesn't see or smell cooking, and Virginia replies that they are too poor to buy food. Pablo promises to return at night with enough food for the whole family.



**New Plot at the Office** Ramiro, Gregorio, and Alfonso have a meeting in Ramiro's office in which they agree to carry out a plan with the employees and with the family. Ramiro assembles his employees in the lobby and tells them that anyone who doesn't do their work will be fired. The employees continue to enter the interior office as Ramiro leaves.

**Don Alfonso Plays His Part** Back at the apartment, Milagros continues griping about her condition and taking pills while Ladislao eats candies. Don Alfonso appears at the door, and Virginia lets him in. Alfonso launches into a pedantic monologue with aphorisms. The family becomes increasingly irritated and tells him to get to the point. Ramiro listens from the other room and laughs. Alfonso explains that Ramiro is actually bankrupt and his fortune is gone. Ladislao asks for proof. Alfonso describes the crash of the mining stock and the possibility of Ramiro going to jail. Virginia mandates that they sell the house, but the others fear "real" poverty. Ramiro enters and exhorts everyone to get to work. When Ladislao protests, Ramiro smashes a chair and commands that his brother repair it. Pablo enters with groceries, and Virginia starts to prepare a meal while Ramiro lies down.



**Too Much Work** Milagros and Ladislao walk back from the market and stop to grouse with the neighbors. Ladislao compliments Milagros's working-class slang, and she explains that she picked it up at the market. The two enter the house, and Ramiro complains that Milagros did not get all of the groceries. She replies that there was not enough money. Milagros and Ladislao continue complaining about how hard they work and how they have too many customers. Ramiro reminds them that Pablo is helping out the family by finding them customers and setting them up with odd jobs. Ramiro also reminds his brother that he is working at a funeral parlor. When he hears Pablo reading ads over the speakers (and therefore approaching in his Cadillac), Ramiro remarks how much he likes the industrious youth.



**Pablo and Virginia Go on a Work Date** Pablo delivers washing and chairs to the family, then offers to help Virginia with deliveries. The two get into Pablo's "new" Cadillac with loudspeakers on top. Pablo puts on a record in between his advertisement announcements. When the car breaks down, Pablo buys chocolate popsicles and compliments Virginia's beauty. He declares his love, but Virginia gets startled, gets in the driver's seat, and starts the engine. As they approach the apartment, Pablo reads an ad for dresses but forgets to turn off the speakers. The family convenes on the balcony to listen to Pablo's monologue, and the neighbors listen in, as well. Pablo urges her to admit her love and marry him. Virginia resists, and Ramiro is annoyed that his daughter is so hard to convince. The workers surround the car, smiling and laughing, and the couple realize that the neighborhood heard their whole conversation.

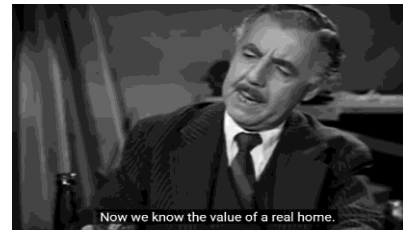


**Alfredo Tracks Down Virginia** In the lobby of a luxurious mansion, Ramiro comments that this sort of “work” would make Ladislao jealous. Ramiro orders a lobster and a glass of wine from a butler in the funeral parlour. The butler remarks that Ramiro has cut down on his drinking. Ramiro leaves as Alfredo, Virginia’s ex-fiancé, enters and greets the butler. The camera cuts to the family having dinner together and Pablo and Virginia walking arm in arm down the street. Alfredo watches the couple from his car with his mother in the passenger seat. He drives over to confront Virginia, but she runs away, she fled, and Virginia replies that she doesn’t want to talk to old friends.



started. Pablo asks Virginia why

**Good Dinner and the Upside of Poverty** The family enjoys a plentiful dinner prepared by Pablo’s mother. Ladislao and Milagros eat with gusto. Ramiro remarks that when they were rich, they never interacted with each other. He also notes that Milagros can eat anything and no longer has digestive problems. Ramiro toasts poverty for making the family appreciate life. He goes on to say that everyone has reformed themselves—but he notes that Virginia always had a good heart.



**Alfredo Proposes Again** Alfredo and his mother disrupt the conversation by knocking on the door. When they see the humble apartment, they ask for an explanation. Ramiro tells them that they lost their fortune, and Alfredo’s mother says that they should have come clean earlier. Alfredo assures Virginia that he still considers her his fiancée, but she tells him that things have changed. Ramiro apologizes to Alfredo for thinking he was only interested in the family money. Pablo, wounded, escorts his mother out. Virginia yells after him. Alfredo embraces Virginia and vows to help the family move out of poverty. Ladislao embraces him, saying: “I always knew you were special.”



**Booming Business** Alfonso visits Ramiro in the small apartment and tells him that the business is growing like soap bubbles. The lawyer asks after the family, and Ramiro reports that the adults are working and that Virginia is trying to reconcile with Pablo. Ladislao enters and overhears the two talking about the scam. Alfonso suggests that Ramiro tell them the truth, but the patriarch says he wants to keep the lie going so that his relatives don’t resume their selfish and lazy ways. Ladislao storms in and threatens to strike Ramiro with a hammer. Milagros runs in to restrain her husband, and Ladislao continues yelling at his brother for making him work like a “negro” for six weeks. After calming down, everyone admits that the lie was good for them.



**Virginia Tries to Persuade Pablo** Virginia chases Pablo down the street and tries to explain that the wedding was cancelled. Pablo accuses her of “killing time” with him while she waited to get back together with her rich fiancé. Pablo asserts that he is better than Alfredo due to his good character. Virginia drags him to her father so that Ramiro can change his mind. Pablo lashes out at the family for their deceit and accuses them of making fun of the poor. He says he regrets helping them out so much and that they should go back to their dishonest, rich lives. Virginia, infuriated, throws him out and then cries on her father’s shoulder.



**The Reformed Rich** Back in their mansion, all of the family members are working cheerfully. Ladislao repairs the living-room chairs, and Milagros bakes. Eduardo enters and reports that he has gone back to school. Ramiro asks him to send Virginia to his office for a chat. When she arrives, he asks her whether she really wants to marry Alfredo—and if she has gotten over Pablo. Virginia replies that Alfredo is nicer than they thought and her fling with Pablo was only due to their extreme circumstances. He responds by saying that he only wants her to be happy.



**Pablo Mourns the Relationship** Pablo's mother checks on him and tells him that she is worried that he hasn't been eating. Pablo explains that he still loves Virginia, but his mother tells him she was the wrong girl for him. Pablo retorts that it can't be all about class.

**Preparing for the Wedding** The family is dressed in tuxes right before the wedding. Juan the butler pulls Ramiro aside and confesses a list of sins: stealing the boss's cigars and watch, and telling Alfredo about the scam. Agitated, Ramiro runs up the stairs to warn Virginia, who is pacing in her wedding dress. He tells her that Alfredo knew about the plot and was lying to everyone. Despite Ramiro's protests, Virginia says that she will still marry him and it is better to know what she is getting. The camera cuts to the ceremony and Ramiro walking Virginia down the aisle.



**Dueling Narratives at the Wedding** Outside of the church, Pablo pulls up in his advertising Cadillac. Virginia and Alfredo kneel at the altar while the priest pontificates on the role of the wife in marriage: to be chaste and obedient to her husband. The priest's rhetoric is interspersed with Pablo's speech over the speakers in his car. Pablo talks of Eve's deception and then connects the story to ads for Venus's Stockings and the lottery. Everyone looks uncomfortable. The priest asks "if anyone objects..." Ramiro can't contain himself and interrupts the ceremony.



**Final Reunion** The parents crowd the altar and start fighting, and Virginia runs out of the church. She chases Pablo's Cadillac down the street and gets in when he stops. The wedding party runs out in time to hear Virginia professing her love to Pablo over the speakers. They all laugh, delighted. The brothers and Milagros walk behind Pablo's truck with their arms linked, and the final frame is a following shot of the elegantly-dressed elders from behind.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**RAMIRO** Ramiro is the amiable (but dangerously drunk) patriarch of the de la Mata family. In the first half of the film, Ramiro can barely function and agrees to everyone's requests. After cleaning up his act, Ramiro becomes more forthright and manipulative.

*Amiable* Ramiro's drunkenness in the first half of the film makes him acquiesce to every request, regardless of how outlandish or wasteful. He continually tells the family to bill him for all expenses, and he does not chide his employees for their laziness or left. Instead, he shows remarkable flexibility.

*Manipulative* Once Ramiro understands the depth of Gregorio's ruse, he becomes the master manipulator in feigned poverty. He pretends to work at the funeral parlor and convalesces at the apartment. Meanwhile, he insists that everyone else work continuously.

*Forthright* Despite his deceitful maneuvers to teach the family a lesson, Ramiro also fosters a reformation for himself and for his family members. He recognizes the vices that drove the family into crisis, and he appreciates Gregorio for taking extreme measures. Ramiro also gives credit to those characters who behave responsibly: he praises Pablo's work ethic and Virginia's consistent virtue.

**PABLO** Pablo is first and foremost Virginia's upright and handsome suitor and the poor foil to the rich Alfredo. Beyond furthering the romantic plot line, Pablo exemplifies the virtuous characteristics that the rich family members lack: honesty, kindness, generosity, and industriousness. On the other hand, Pablo becomes highly judgmental and unforgiving when he learns of Virginia's previous engagement.

*Industrious* Pablo works several jobs and does so diligently. He has several practical skills, such as working as an electrician and a carpenter. He also acts as an ad spokesman as he drives around town.

*Kind* Although some of Pablo's kind acts become part of his courtship of Virginia, he also does favors for the whole family. He saves Ramiro from attempted suicide, and he brings the other family members jobs from around town. Pablo also empathizes with the family's supposed misfortune to the point that he brings them food to help them survive.

*Righteous / Judgmental* While Pablo sympathizes with Ramiro's plight and mistakes, he refuses to forgive Virginia or the family for their deceit. He considers Virginia's past life as akin to adultery and an affront to him. He also characterizes the ruse as a way of mocking the working class. All of these resentments boil up to the point that he is willing to disrupt Virginia and Alfredo's wedding with his diatribe about deceitful women.

**VIRGINIA** Although she also asks favors from her father, Virginia is arguably the kindest and most sacrificial character in the film. She focuses on her father's well-being, and she is willing to give up on her fortune and her wedding in order to do the right thing.

*Kind* Virginia shows true concern for her father and the estate rather than merely trying to take advantage of Ramiro. Instead of gifts, Virginia wants her father's support for her engagement with Alfredo. Ramiro continuously characterizes her as a sweet girl with a kind heart, and he notes that she is one who needed the least reform of all of his relatives.

*Sacrificial* Virginia is willing to marry Alfredo twice in order to secure the family fortune. Rather than motivated by greed, Virginia considers the marriage a necessary evil. When Ramiro ruins her engagement party, she focuses on his health rather than her relationship with Alfredo. During their time in the poor neighborhood, the dutiful daughter commits to the plan and works without complaint. She hopes that the family sacrifice will cure her father of his alcoholism.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Work** Many of the problems of the family derive from their laziness and their inability to value work. Ladislao, in particular, avoids work at all costs as part of his personal philosophy. Eduardo quits school because he knows he is already a trust-fund baby, and the women also enjoy their lives of leisure and shopping trips. When the characters are forced to work, each one finds virtues they didn't think they had. Specifically, manual labor becomes their penance: Milagros and Virginia clean what is dirty, and Ladislao repairs what is broken. Moreover, their new jobs provide for a new sense of fellowship with one another, and in the case of Virginia, work (and a period of poverty) gives her the chance at true love. Conversely, the working-class characters of the poor neighborhood have suffered their whole lives and understand the value of community. Pablo exemplifies this sentiment, as he helps the family earn a living and feeds them several times. In addition, Pablo holds down several jobs, which makes him an ideal suitor in Ramiro's eyes. Pablo's virtue shines through his work ethic.

*Illustrative Moment: Pablo Professes His Love at Work* Pablo delivers washing and chairs to the family, then offers to help Virginia with deliveries. The two get into Pablo's "new" Cadillac with loudspeakers on top. Pablo puts on a record in between his advertisement announcements. When the car breaks down, Pablo buys chocolate popsicles and compliments Virginia's beauty. As they approach the apartment, Pablo reads an ad for dresses but forgets to turn off the speakers. The family convenes on the balcony to listen to Pablo's monologue, and the neighbors listen in, as well. Pablo urges



her to admit her love and marry him. This sequence underscores Pablo's good character and also provides comic relief via the gag of broadcasting the private conversation between lovers. However, the viewer is also reminded that the "date" occurs within the premise of work. In essence, the poor never rest.

## RELATIONSHIPS

**Marriage** Throughout the film, Buñuel showcases two "pure" couples and two marriages of convenience. Virginia ultimately has the choice between the practical and stable husband, Alfredo, or the loyalty and industriousness of Pablo. Despite the family's desire to keep an upper-class lifestyle, Ramiro distrusts Alfredo's motives from the first scene of the film. In contrast, he appreciates Pablo's work ethic and roots for him even when the patriarch discovers that he still has his business (and his fortune). For Ramiro, love trumps wealth—he wishes that Virginia has a special relationship with her spouse. The patriarch's sentimentality derives from his own realization that he and his wife had an ideal marriage. Conversely, Ladislao and Milagros tolerate each other in a neutral fashion. The implication is that their marriage is based on a shared desire for wealth and leisure rather than love. Although all of the characters learn to appreciate the privilege of wealth, Virginia's family much prefers that she reunite with her true love, Pablo. In addition, Pablo's industriousness and talent as a provider ensures that he will make a reliable and loyal husband.

### *Illustrative Moment: Ramiro Has Doubts About Alfredo's Motives*

Virginia enters as her brother leaves and reminds her father that he must attend her engagement party that afternoon. Ramiro agrees but remarks that he is not a big fan of her fiancé, Alfredo. The patriarch explains that Alfredo is after her money and he wants her to have a stable and loving spouse like he had. Virginia retorts that Alfredo is very handsome, and Ramiro admits that she is the one who will have to marry him. This early scene presents one of the central questions of the film: Is it better to marry for love or money? Even before Ramiro's transformation, the patriarch has a strong opinion on this point. He is not worried about legacy, but rather focuses on his daughter's happiness.



**Brotherhood** Just as Pablo and Alfredo act as boyfriend foils for Virginia, so too do Ladislao and Gregorio act as opposite brothers in character and in relation to Ramiro. Ladislao is a lazy loafer with no discernable skills; Gregorio is a doctor with multiple jobs and areas of expertise. Ladislao is content to mooch off of Ramiro until the business collapses, whereas Gregorio drops his own career in order to stabilize the business and save Ramiro's life. In his drunken state, Ramiro's attitude towards life mirrors Ladislao's—both prize immediate self-gratification, leisure time, and parties. After his epiphany, Ramiro partners with Gregorio. He vows not only to clean up his own life, but also to force a reformation in his relatives and employees. Ultimately, the life lessons succeed in changing the relatives' behavior. The implication is that all three brothers form a team and hold each other responsible, which is a sentiment that is visually represented with the brothers walking arm-in-arm in the last frame of the film. Their newfound solidarity will lead to a better future for the whole family.

### *Illustrative Moment: Gregorio Calls Out Ladislao and Comes to the Rescue*

After their initial pleasantries, Gregorio explains that he received a letter from Ramiro's attorney, Don Alfonso, in which he details Ramiro's drunkenness and neglect. Gregorio summarizes the accusations, including that Ramiro is always drunk, has been arrested several times, and never shows up at work. Ladislao declares the report an over-exaggeration and explains that they were giving Ramiro a mourning period to get over his grief. Gregorio retorts that they are taking advantage of the mourning period. Gregorio vows to right the ship and starts by asking to speak with Ramiro. In this early scene, the viewer clearly sees the two brothers as polar opposites with contradictory motives. Through Gregorio's leadership, the brothers manage to forgive each other and come together as a family.



## FLAWS

**Seven Deadly Sins** Whereas work is a virtue (as exemplified by Pablo), the vices of the de la Mata family nearly lead them into ruin. Almost all of the characters indulge in several of the seven deadly sins—most predominantly, sloth and greed. Both the relatives and employees know that they do not have to work to get paid, so they choose to loaf around the house and office. The relatives view Ramiro and his business as a cash cow—they indulge in whatever luxury they desire in the moment. This greed leads to vanity purchases such as designer clothing and new cars. Most of the expenses are superfluous and unnecessary, from Milagros's litany of pills to Ramiro and Ladislao's imported cigars. Although none of the characters are particularly fat, the characters do suffer from excess and indulgence. Ramiro is a raging alcoholic, Ladislao is a chain-smoker, and Milagros is likely addicted to pills. In fact, the film's title refers to Ramiro's addiction and his destructive trajectory. Surprisingly, none of the characters has a sexual obsession or problem with lust (although illicit desire is often the central sin in Buñuel's melodramas, thrillers, and satires). Still, the family in *The Great Madcap* has to be "cured" of their pernicious vices in order for the family to avoid disaster—and find their happy ending.

*Illustrative Moment: Ladislao's Personal Philosophy of "Laid-Backism"* Virginia, her fiancé Alfredo, and the two uncles chat at the engagement party. Alfredo commits that it is nice to have money, and Ladislao adds that one has to increase one's capital and maintain it. Gregorio quips that Ladislao has never worked, and Ladislao retorts that he adheres to "laid-backism"—a philosophy in which one does nothing since everything has already been invented. The engagement party exemplifies the vices of the characters before their transformation. The party itself is excessive, with the family dressed to the nines and drinking like fish. Moreover, the family does not hide their love of wealth and their lazy intentions; rather, Ladislao argues in favor of a hedonistic lifestyle.



## APPEARANCE

**Deception** Throughout the film, the ruse of fake bankruptcy keeps the plot moving forward. At some point or another, each of the characters tricks the others for the greater good. Although the audience knows the truth the entire time, the characters in the know must put on a performance. These tricks of the trade also provide amusing moments for the audience, such as when Alfonso purposefully irritates the family by pontificating and rambling about the supposed ruin of the business. In the initial set-up after Ramiro's collapse, all of the relatives put on a visual play to convince Ramiro of his new "reality": the set is the shack and the carpentry bench, the props are the fake documents and news articles (and tools), the costumes are the aprons and ratty work clothes, and the actors pretend to perform the tasks that they are assigned. Ironically, the performance leads to the family members actually learning the skills of their character. In this sense, the appearance of poverty leads to the reformation of all of the characters.

*Illustrative Moment: The Family Plays Dress-Up to Sell The Ruse* The viewer sees the whole family settling in and becoming accustomed to a tiny apartment. Gregorio exhorts Ladislao to work as a carpenter. The women show Gregorio their new "poor" dresses, and the doctor agrees that they are appropriate costumes. Virginia vows to commit to the experiment, and Eduardo hopes that it works. Gregorio explains how they will trick Ramiro by showing him fake papers. This scene is significant in that it marks the family's first step towards transformation, and the first step is acting and creating the new version of themselves. At first, they are inept actors, but the new surroundings succeed in convincing Ramiro of his downfall. In other words, the "production values" of the performance make it an effective illusion. This emphasis on the performative elements of the ruse also speak to Buñuel's frequent use of satirical metafilm (film within a film) or metatheater (theater within a film) in much of his oeuvre.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you interpret the meaning of the title "The Great Madcap?" Who, or what, is the madcap?
2. By all accounts, the tricks work, and the family learns their lesson. Do you think that the characters will return to their vices?
3. There are many dark themes in the film, from addiction to suicide. Yet, this film is considered a comedy. How does Buñuel infuse humor into the seemingly depressing situations?