

# Like Water for Chocolate

## *Se Siente o No Se Siente*

In many ways, *Like Water for Chocolate* lacks polished technical excellence, though it was reported that its budget of \$2 million made it the most expensive Mexican film to that time. But, as asserted by such theorists as Glauber Rocha and Ismail Xavier, impoverished means of production do not necessarily preclude imaginative, artistically rich cinema. If the screenplay, direction and acting combine such that a diamond in the rough is recognized, then a multitude of sins can be overlooked. Such is the case with *Like Water for Chocolate*, which stands in welcome contrast to the big-budget, superficial, risk-averse filmmaking typical of a Hollywood paralyzed by conformity. As a result, perhaps, it held, for a time, the American record as the highest-grossing foreign-language film.

In *The Elements of The Arthurian Tradition*, John Matthews writes, “From the complex ethic of Courtly Love, defined like a religious code, came a new attitude to women, who were no longer seen as chattels to be bought and sold in the matrimonial market-place of feudal Europe, but as potential goddesses all.” Based not on a medieval romance but on a contemporary novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* nevertheless reflects the courtly love tradition every bit as much as *The Crying Game*. Latin-American postcolonialism is the context for neo-Arthurian reaffirmation of individualism and archetypal, mythical evocation of the eternal feminine. Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Guiu discuss how allegory emerges from this particular family chronicle in “Criss-Crossing Texts: Reading Images in *Like Water for Chocolate*,” part of *The Mexican Cinema Project* of 1994 (The UCLA Film and Television Archive, Studies in History, Criticism and Theory).

Leo Brower’s main-title theme employs a melody that suggests Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and harmonies that recall Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Thus the associations with archetypal stories of forbidden love begin immediately. The titles feature an outrage that will be repeated in the credits and cannot be appreciated before the film is experienced. The first image is of food. The significance of onions will be addressed in a subsequent essay. In *Othello*, Desdemona says, “My eyes itch. . . . Does it bode weeping?” The narrator smiles in spite of her tears. This mixture of mirth and sorrow sets the tone for the entire film.

Emblematically, Tita is born in the kitchen. She is premature and Nacha delivers her. Later, her niece will be premature and she will deliver her nephew. The narration regarding the salt introduces the exaggerated, fairy-tale style of magical realism. Salt, which will be referred to again, symbolizes purification, preservation, wisdom and incorruptible essence of life discovered through bitter suffering.

Hearing English being spoken may come as a surprise until it is remembered that the action is taking place on the U.S./Mexico border. Like Clytemnestra, Mama Elena has an extramarital affair that leads to her husband’s death. She is unable to nurse Tita. Nacha, though not Tita’s biological mother, assumes the practical maternal role and, gradually, the spiritual role of fairy godmother. Nacha says, “The first man who sees you will want to marry you.” This may be taken not only as a jesting wish, but also as prophesy or even as an intentional magic spell.

Notice that she does not say that he will marry her, but only that he will want to. Elena's edict that Tita will never marry is also a kind of prophesy, which in fact comes true, at least in the ultimately trivial literal sense. By precluding the arrival of any younger sisters, her father's death establishes Tita's fate immediately so that she will suffer right from the very beginning. Psychoanalytically, Tita's influences are the anonymous father and phallic mother. The psychological influence of parents will be further explored in the essay dealing with *Heavenly Creatures*.

Tita is raised in the kitchen, where she spends her apprenticeship sitting under Nacha's tutelage, learning not merely cooking but alchemical magic. The water that the young Tita is seen sprinkling may as well be holy water.

In accordance with the *amor* principle, Tita and Pedro establish their relationship voluntarily, out of their own experience. It begins as puppy love, while they are too young for *eros* (lust) to be a factor. The noble, gentle heart is willing to endure a long period of test and trial before *merci* (favor) is granted.

The action now moves to 1910, the year of the revolution. Frida Kahlo was born in 1907, but claimed to have been born in 1910, which allowed her to call herself a daughter of the revolution. The outer, political revolution is symbolic of the more personal kind to come. Tita and Pedro have just exchanged childhood glances. Now, the first of several versions of the song "Eyes of Youth" (*Ojos de Juventud*) is heard on the pianola. Tita's emotions are immediately translated into food imagery, and she tries to escape. She knows the consequences of love and seems to fear that her love for Pedro might be irresistible. At this point, she would rather switch than fight. Tita climbs a flight of stairs, putting her one floor above Pedro. The composition here is appropriately reminiscent of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Tita is on the high ground, the position of advantage and control. She is, as it were, on a pedestal, with Pedro in the position of a suppliant.

As if a kind of female wish fulfillment, Pedro declares his love with no hesitation or qualification. Additionally, he proclaims the irrational nature of love, insisting, "One doesn't think about love. Either one feels it or one doesn't." ("*El amor no se piensa. Se siente o no se siente.*") This reflects the Arthurian doctrine of personal choice of spouse based on love, which stands in opposition to the practice of arranged marriage. The message is similar to that in the story related in a previous essay about the guru who denied that his student was in possession of Buddha consciousness because the student had taken a logical stance. Pedro also gives his love in perpetuity. Tita commits herself and the die is cast. This is one of the few times that Tita is without her signature lone forehead curl, which may be taken as some sort of expressionistic, objective correlative. For example, it will be prominently absent while she is silent in Texas, during which time it will be flashed back to. It then reappears in time for John's proposal. As with Samson, there may be some correlation between the state of Tita's hair and her control over her situation.

Hoping against hope, as heroes must, Tita gently informs her mother that Pedro wishes to speak with her. Elena simply continues her abuse of tradition under color of authority. When the time comes, Elena spitefully suggests marriage between Pedro and Rosaura. Chenchá's assertion of the nonequivalence of tacos and enchiladas is a nice colloquial version of the *amor* principle.

Director Alfonso Arau now offers a wonderfully subtle red herring that exploits the unique potentialities of the cinema. In the novel, Mama Elena enters the kitchen and says "We'll toast your sister's wedding." She is obviously speaking to two of her daughters in the second person and referring to another in the third person. But which is which? At this point, Mama

Elena would not be expected to acquiesce to a marriage for Tita. Neither would Pedro be expected to have a reason to accept a marriage with Rosaura. In the novel, there is only Elena's ambiguous statement. In the film, when she addresses two unspecified children, the camera displays Gertrudis and Rosaura, implying that it is to Tita's wedding that she is referring. Tita seems to sense this and looks hopeful. Gertrudis gets the same impression. When the plans are specified and Rosaura is revealed as the third-person referent, Tita grieves and Gertrudis sympathizes with her. Rosaura's feelings are mixed, which for her is about as good as it gets.

Unwilling to face the problem boldly, Pedro employs stealth, but unsuccessfully, since Nacha overhears. Pedro decides that the best available compromise is to marry without love, or at least without love for his wife. This is the courtly love problem. For such famous couples as Tristan and Isolde, Francesca and Paulo, and Romeo and Juliet, an arranged marriage is a stock dramatic device. Literary tradition holds that it is the fault not of Pedro but of society for making his optimal choice an invalid one.

Tita's sensation of cold, her tears and her knitting are now metaphorically associated. Her experience is like that of Leopold Bloom, who feels "the cold of interstellar space." The preparation of the wedding invitations is part of the setup for a joke at the end. According to one of the theories reported below, Tita's addition to the batter of a tear as a magic ingredient may be deliberate rather than accidental. Nacha tastes the tear uncooked and nearly undiluted, and so is more drastically affected than the wedding guests the following day.

At the wedding, Doña Pacquita and her friend act as a chorus. Tita may have tried to hide her feelings, but they have become an open secret. When comforted by Gertrudis, Tita, with a wonderful little shrug, pretends not to care. Nacha could not convince her about Pedro. But now, straight from the horse's mouth, she finally understands Pedro's rationale. Tita turns to look at Mama Elena in the background, but the camera does not rack focus, keeping the attention on Tita. Elena does not just *know* what Tita is up to. She has "*done* everything" and yet remains unsympathetic. Elena's repressed emotions are projected onto Tita and Elena hypocritically resents her. When Elena walks away, Tita might be expected to look frustrated, as before, or perhaps frightened. Instead, she smiles. Antagonists typically gain an early advantage. Tita, however, looks on the situation as a challenge, and her attitude is one of eager, optimistic anticipation.

At the banquet table, Dr. Brown is glimpsed. He has not yet been introduced, but his invitation has been seen. The sadness that now overtakes everyone need not be due to magic, but may simply be an exaggeration of a plausible psychological interpretation. There is a theory that the passion of Tristan and Isolde can be accounted for by a placebo effect. If Tristan and Isolde are secretly in love with each other and believe that their deaths are imminent due to poison, then a real love potion is unnecessary and a placebo will suffice to dissolve their inhibitions spontaneously and spark a frantic *carpe diem* attitude. Everyone knows Tita's situation and is poised to express empathy. Her food may simply derepress pre-existing feelings and prompt self-exploration and self-revelation.

Alone in her room, Mama Elena reveals her hidden feelings. It is not the lack of feelings but the hiding of them that is her sin. Rosaura, being the least subject to sentimentality, is the last to react, and Elena is not seen to vomit at all.

Most of those present merely get sick. But ingesting the strongest dose of Tita's tears and being the most sympathetic to her plight has proven fatal for Nacha, and the change of mood is abrupt when she is discovered to be dead. Her grave marker gives her name as Ignacia and seems to bear a date of 1882, which must certainly be 1832. As heiress to Nacha's legacy, Tita begins to

assume Nacha's role by singing the song that Nacha had sung to her. Tita is apparently the only member of her family to attend the burial, or is at least the last to leave.

Pedro tactically delays the consummation of his marriage and copes as best he can. Tita seeks sublimation through knitting, in addition to her cooking. Thus, in various ways, Tita constructs her own metaphors. As in *Barton Fink*, insomnia represents failure to face problems in the unconscious.

The dialogue featured on the version with English as the exclusive spoken language, available on VHS and as a DVD option, is a travesty in several respects, including characterization. Even the English dialogue featured in the original is replaced with new English. Without hearing the Spanish, one would not know, for instance, that Pedro's prayer rhymes (*traduttori traditori*). In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 10/21/07, Natasha Randall writes, "Translation is not one act; it is a continuing gesture. There is no such thing as a definitive translation – in fact, there's nothing definitive in the whole business, not even the dictionaries." And poetry, says Robert Frost, is that which is lost in translation.

The sexually fulfilled Rosaura sings the second installment of "Eyes of Youth" as she enters Tita's domain, the kitchen, with exuberant overconfidence. Her hubris justly results in failure. Even if Tita had helped, such wisdom may not be transferable to any but the adept. Rosaura literally has nothing to bring to the table.

Piedras Negras is a border town on the Rio Grande and possibly represents a threshold that is not merely geographical. Gertrudis experiences the electrification of *amor* when she first sees Juan. One look and she may not be pregnant, but she is *something*.

Pedro finds any lame excuse to give Tita roses. The other three women individually demonstrate their full comprehension of the sense of this act, and Elena reacts typically. In this situation, the most relevant symbolic aspects of roses are thorns, secrecy, and divine love. Though the rose typically connotes carnality, it is also the Western equivalent of the lotus, both being symbols of divine grace. It shares the radial structure of the mandala, with the still point at its center.

Even death cannot impede the ability of women to network. The voice of the dead Nacha instructs Tita to use the roses more in accordance with the spirit in which they were given. Mentors compensate for inadequate parents. They appear when the hero is desperate, bringing knowledge from the unconscious in the form of a personified thought. In this and other ways, Tita's experience is comparable to that of Cinderella. Cinderella waters her mother's grave with tears and is helped by a bird who is her mother's spirit. The same can be said of Tita. Tita's family features three sisters born of two different fathers, yielding step sisters, though in this case, Gertrudis is the odd one out. Elena is the mother and Nacha is the fairy godmother, the latter role being handed down to Tita. Tita does not bear sole responsibility for all the household chores, but hers most closely involve the fire from which Cinderella derives her name. Tita ultimately gets her man, and any practical, material deprivation that she experiences along the way focuses her attention on the cultivation of inner beauty and goodness.

The general secret ingredient in Tita's cooking, as she twice tells Doña Pacquita, is love. But there is also usually a special, symbolic, material ingredient. First it was a tear, now it is blood. In the kitchen, her flowers appear darker than in the previous scene. The novel explains that the pink roses are turned red by Tita's blood, so this is not a continuity error. The red color of the roses is symbolically associated with fire, blood, passion and new life, but also with revolution, war and hellfire.

A more extensive consideration of the significance of blood, which is symbolically ambivalent, will be postponed until the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*. It suffices here to note that the blood of Christ is associated with the philosopher's stone. Accordingly, the narrator makes the first of several references to alchemy, which is the Hermetic art involving the search for a transmuting agent, the philosopher's stone. The true goal of alchemy is transformation of a spiritual rather than material nature. It involves liberating and redeeming the spirit imprisoned in matter, like extracting meaning from a concrete experience. Mundane, everyday processes, like cooking, can serve as the rituals through which life's true value and meaning can be discovered, yielding spiritual purification and coordination of the personal and the cosmic.

Jung felt that Christianity alienated man from his natural roots in the unconscious, and that alchemy parallels the process of individuation. Projection of the shadow is the easy way out. The goal is the assimilation of the shadow and its integration with the ego. To that end, one must undergo an inner journey and confront the terrors of one's own unconscious. Elena, therefore, ultimately represents a psychological problem the solution to which is not some magical substance but a state of consciousness.

The philosopher's stone represents actualized wisdom and shares the name *lapis exilis* with the Holy Grail. It is also called the orphan, which could apply to Tita, and the Red Stone, which could apply to Tita's engagement ring. It is *lithos ou lithos*, the stone that is not a stone, and is said to be so subtle that it cannot be seen, felt or weighed, only tasted. (Tita's food can be physically sensed, but its taste is something special.) Like the compliment that Pedro pays to Tita's food, it is the food of angels. It affords the power to perceive and converse with spirits, such as Elena's ghost, and to cast out devils. It is also associated with baptism and viaticum, the Eucharist for the dying, especially in the psychological sense of death to the world and the withdrawal of projections. It is a Jungian symbol of the self, the center and totality of the psyche. According to Jung, the alchemist Gerhard Dorn said, "Transform yourselves into living philosopher's stones!" Pedro's roses and John's garden accord with the alchemical image of the philosopher's rose garden. Tita and Pedro ultimately achieve something like the alchemical marriage of the king and queen who confront each other naked, die and are reborn.

The fire of Tita's oven is also the transforming medium of the alchemical caldron, like the fire that prepares Barton Fink to meet Beauty. It is the creative fire of Hestia and Hephaestus. Alchemical fire has an incubating aspect as the vehicle of return to the womb (*regressus ad uterum*). Tita incubates eggs with the fire that she carries within herself. This is related to the Hindu notion that the fire of the sacrifice already dwells within the body, which in turn connects with the ritual aspect of cooked food as a burnt offering. Fire is reflected in the name Nacha (Ignacia), the keeper of the flame in the kitchen and the one who lights the candles at the end. Fire is also dangerous, as Pedro experiences when he is burned, foreshadowing the concluding fire of cremation that affords purification, renewal and rebirth at a higher level. Tita ignites that last fire via the power of the will to cause spontaneous human combustion.

As per the discussion of the placebo effect above, Pedro may just be a sucker for good food. He may be a time bomb, and Tita's cooking alone may be enough to set him off. Even assuming the authenticity and potency of Isolde's love potion, there are several alternative interpretations of how it comes to be consumed. One version has Tristan and Isolde both mistake it for wine and drink it accidentally. Wagner has them mistake it for poison and drink it as a suicide attempt. Yet another possibility is that Isolde knows it to be a love potion and drugs Tristan intentionally. Tita, at least eventually, comes to work her magic deliberately, in this case by way of quail in rose petal sauce. Her dishes are analogous to Cupid's arrows. A reminder of

the music that accompanies this scene (track #11 on the soundtrack CD) is to be found in Chopin's sonata #3 in B minor, opus 58.

Gottfried von Strassburg refers to the events and lessons in his *Tristan* as "bread to all noble hearts." Such food acts as nourishment for the spirit of those who can digest it, just as parables are for those who have ears to hear. Everyone is moved by Rosaura's cooking, but only peristaltically. The tables are now turned, but Rosaura has few if any dormant feelings to be awakened. Sickened, she realizes that she is out of the loop and has no business at the table. By contrast, Elena possesses emotions which now bubble to the surface, however much she tries to stifle them. Again, this hypocrisy is her sin. The wasteland problem represented by Elena and Rosaura is also symbolized by the stark physical landscape. Like Gottfried's metaphorical bread, Tita's food fortifies her and Pedro against the harsh emotional environment.

Eating and sex are mutually analogous. Tita's cooking becomes a highly developed vehicle of ecstasy. Recalling T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, the kitchen becomes her ritual domain. Cooking and knitting are the alternate channels into which her libido is redirected. There, her repressed wishes are disguised, her frustrated impulses are sublimated and her psychic energy is canalized. Eating can also be ritualistic. Ritual concretizes the abstract, as in the case of the Eucharistic Host, which is God made man made bread. As claimed in several of these essays, any object is adequate to help one contemplate the mystery of being because all objects embody that mystery.

Salt is considered one of the "philosophical elements" and represents the body, with sulfur representing the soul and mercury spirit. When Elena calls Tita's food "too salty," the alchemical meaning might be "too carnal." She also seems to be using the statement in place of another gustatory metaphor: sour grapes. While the others strive to control their arousal, Gertrudis indulges herself. As she flees, her personal passion becomes externalized, paralleled by the external, political revolution.

Tita misinforms her mother about her sister's departure. The magic realism of this story may be accounted for by imaginatively embellished retelling during the two intervening generations that transmit the story to the narrator. Tita seems to be a terse, incomplete chronicler whose own writings are not necessarily autohagiographic. It appears as though the gaps in her autobiography are filled in with exaggeration and hyperbolic wish fulfillment by a subjective narrator, the result being that the entry that Tita now makes in her diary/cookbook seems comically understated. The priest's name is given as Padre Ignacio, which matches that of Nacha (Ignacia). This is but one of several examples of paired names in the work.

Tita creates her own metaphor via her knitting. The size of her quilt is a measure of her desolation and suggests what Penelope might have produced had she not undone her weaving every night while awaiting the return of Odysseus. For Jung, the night sky is a particularly suitable target for projection. In his play *Salome*, Oscar Wilde uses the moon as a kind of Rorschach Test. Various characters describe the moon's appearance in a way that reveals something essential about their nature. Here, the audience shares Tita's subjective view of the sky as she, catastrophizing, projects onto the heavens an astronomical metaphor for the situation in which she finds herself embroiled: The Eternal Triangle. Celestial imagery may also point to her triumphant destiny (*sic itur ad astra*).

Tita's face is reflected in the portrait of her sister. She sees herself in her sister's face and thus also perhaps the potential for rebellion in herself as well as her potential for being disowned. When Elena enters, Tita hides because she is in violation of her mother's prohibition on

nostalgia. Elena, having disclaimed concern for Gertrudis, violates her own rule. She has regrets, but suppresses them, again committing the sin of hypocrisy.

Tita's use of the water pump is another setup for the joke at the end. The bathroom joke will also recur. Tita's maternal treatment of the eggs foreshadows her relationship with her nephew who is about to be born. At a time of need, Tita apostrophizes Nacha rather than Jesus or Mary. This conforms to the *idam* principle of personal, chosen deities to be considered in a subsequent essay. After soliciting Nacha's aid, Tita assumes Nacha's role by delivering her nephew as Nacha had delivered her. Tita does not project the sins of the mother onto the son. Having already made his rather remote acquaintance, Dr. Brown is now introduced to the audience.

Tita prepares mole, recalling the divine protection from Circe afforded to Odysseus by the herb moly, which was a gift from Hermes. After a reference to alchemical transformation is made, Tita undergoes a transformation that proves to be a timely one, as it leaves her prepared for the next scene. The love that Tita has to offer is symbolized by the fact that she can nurse her nephew in spite of the fact that she is neither his nor anyone's biological mother. This contrasts with Mama Elena's inability to nurse Tita even though she *was* her biological mother. In this respect, and others to be confirmed later, Rosaura is truly her mother's daughter.

Elena says, "Children should be with their mothers." The child already is, in the more important sense. Reflecting a deflationary assessment of genealogy, Tita acts not as biological mother but as fairy godmother. As demonstrated in *Howards End*, blood is thicker than water, but love transcends lineage.

Tita's actions recall not only the image of the goddess Isis nursing her son Horus (*Isis lactans*) but also that of her miraculously nursing a male child, who was not her biological son, from her finger. This marvel is related to the virgin birth by Mary. Isis sought to give this other child immortality by placing him in a fire to burn away his mortal character. When Tita places food in the fire, more than mere cooking occurs. Pedro will be burned by fire and will, in a sense, survive death. The scene ends with a wonderful shot of Tita silently confronting her mother with serene confidence.

The next shot is the cause of some consternation, as it is the one that suffers most from faulty letterboxing. The VHS release reveals the source of the sound to be an outdoor gathering, with some empty foreground visible at the bottom of the frame. The laserdisc and DVD conceal many of these people, displaying mainly the sky and background landscape. The matted and unmatted images share a common center when a common bottomline would have been far better. As a result, the voices heard remain partially acousmatic (Pierre Schaeffer's term for sound without a visible source), and the diegetic relevance of the sound, which this establishing shot was to establish, is not revealed as soon as it was meant to be. (The version of this film that was available for streaming on Netflix as of the spring of 2013 resolves this particular issue and, relative to the DVD, offers more inclusive formatting and superior picture quality generally.) A further annoyance connected with the overmatted letterboxed editions is the upward displacement of the subtitles, which are sometimes superimposed on a speaker's mouth.

Dr. Brown's mixture of English and Spanish is endearing. He is apparently accompanied by his son Alex, who is glimpsed only briefly. Elena feigns concern for Rosaura but really wants to send Pedro away out of spite. When she says that men are not so important, she is not expressing a general feminist philosophy of self-sufficiency, but is instead rationalizing the prohibition of marriage she has imposed on Tita. She also naively underestimates the significance of the revolution, both the political and the filial.

In another setup for the joke at the end, Chenchu is shown hauling a block of ice in a wheelbarrow. Pedro is not satisfied by watermelon and seeks forbidden fruit. Under the pall of unrelenting suspicion, the lovers enjoy a rare moment of physical intimacy. Tita's bathroom excuse has become routine. In the bath scene, the life of frustration that awaits Tita is seen in microcosm. The spring is now wound up tight.

Chenchu relates the news of Roberto's death. Elena again prohibits crying, but immediately reveals that she herself is affected. She immediately stifles these feelings of pity in herself and insists that Tita do the same. Tita cannot tolerate this level of hypocrisy, stands up to her mother (literally) and rebels with what Elena takes as a satanic declaration of "*Non serviam*." Elena responds by breaking the familial bonds that were already quite tenuous indeed.

Tita does not immediately conquer her mother, but her breakdown at least breaks the stalemate. Physically, Tita retreats to the dovecote. Psychologically, she withdraws within herself and begins her long night's journey of the soul in the belly of the whale. She enters a psychic wilderness as desolate as the material wilderness in which God is encountered by such ascetics as John the Baptist, whose namesake, John the doctor, now comes to the rescue. In doing so, this John Brown also recalls another of his namesakes, the famous abolitionist. The length of Tita's quilt, like the magnitude of her frustration, continues to grow. Perhaps as punishment, Elena allows Tita to travel north, which, in myth, is often the direction in which travel is prohibited and from which danger comes. But it is also the place from which the hero returns with boons. Tita's alienation will ultimately prove remedial and emancipatory.

Like Fergus in *The Crying Game*, Tita goes "across the water." The crossing of the Rio Grande to a foreign land is less important geographically than as a psychological journey from the ordinary to the special world. It recalls the crossing of such rivers as the Jordon, Rubicon and Stix. Tita arrives in Eagle Pass, the eagle being an important Mexican symbol with solar and phallic associations.

John functions as healer and mentor, giving to Tita aid not unlike that obtained by Dorothy during her trip to the special world in *The Wizard of Oz*. His apparent sincerity contrasts with the outwardly punctilious but fraudulent Elena. A wonderful moment occurs when he allows himself one brief moment to enjoy the feel of Tita's hair before his hand is abruptly withdrawn in a sudden spasm of professionalism. As if sensing this, Tita responds with a meaningful glance. John's hesitation may be negatively interpreted as being analogous to the hesitation of Parzival and to the sin of Tristan. John is pictured in what seems to be a wedding portrait. Since the only woman residing with him is a housekeeper, it could be that he is a widower.

Tita is shown with a saintly, Madonna-like veil and haloed with beatific backlighting. John's meiotic reference to Tita's knitting shows that he shares her taste for comical understatement. Note that the name of John's son Alex does not appear in the subtitles, though it is clearly spoken. This will retard the full realization of the situation at the end. The topic of transformation resurfaces when it is said that Tita's hands could "change into anything." A mystical theme previously encountered is revisited as a desire to lose herself is attributed to Tita. Her nostalgic recollection of childhood anticipates her employment of her memories at the finale.

The third reference to alchemy is heard when John speaks of the philosopher's stone. Following this film, Mario Ivan Martinez (Dr. Brown) experienced some typecasting when he went on to play an alchemist in *Cronos* and a chemist in *Clear and Present Danger*. Macaronic soraismus recurs as John again slips amusingly into English. In proper Arthurian fashion, he says that one must discover for oneself that which kindles the fires of love. This prerogative of choice



is an essential feature of the form of love known as *amor* and of the form of deity known as *idam*, both of which will be examined during the discussion of *Heavenly Creatures*.

In a brief subjective shot, it is implied that Tita's "candles" are her memories of happy times with Pedro. A similar reminiscence has also just occurred in the previous scene. John illustrates his talk with images that may have been made by his Grandmother.

"Since nothing can be hidden from the Philosopher's Stone," explains Edward Edinger in *Ego and Archetype*, "the Stone will be felt as a dangerous threat by any one who is trying to evade full self-awareness." Such evasion may be attributed to Elena and Rosaura. Further, an ancient source is quoted by Edinger as saying that the stone can "convey a spirit into an image, which by observing the influence of heavenly bodies, shall become a true oracle." Tita observes the stars in the sky. Also, elements in one of the images shown to her by John may be astronomical. The next image that he shows her prefigures the lovers' ultimate union. That former picture also features an eye-like image that may correspond to the light that illuminates a meaningful threshold near the end of the film. With respect to sibylline assertions, it should also be remembered that both Nacha's and Elena's come true: Tita, though desired by Pedro, never marries nor has children. John speaks of the Platonic concepts of knowledge forgotten at birth and of yearning to return to the original realm of ideas, free from the body.

The hero voyages into the abyss and survives. When Chenchu visits, Tita speaks again as if reborn, her recovery foreshadowing the finale. Rosaura and Pedro also experience recoveries, but the former is unable to capitalize further. Tita takes one more small emancipatory step on the left-hand path by refusing to return home.

Tita apparently *can* guess what John is thinking, but is nonetheless stunned when he proposes aloud. Her acceptance may seem shocking and it may be feared that she is simply marrying on the rebound. It does provide Tita with an opportunity to defy her mother. But in order for this defiance to be significant, it is critical for Tita to accept John's proposal while her mother is still alive. Unbeknownst to her, she barely makes it in time.

When Elena's ranch is attacked, the shot of the birds recalls Wotan's ravens that fly away just before Siegfried is killed. The raven is also an alchemical symbol of transformation. Tita returns to the ranch to find her mother dead. In the tradition of audacious, taboo-breaking women like Pandora, Tita opens Elena's private box, the forbidden nature of which is emphasized by an unannounced, unsignalled flashback. It is also to be remembered that the last spirit to emerge from Pandora's box was Elpis, the spirit of hope. Coincidentally, Rosaura is about to give birth to her last child, who will be given the Spanish name for hope: Esperanza. Tita discovers her bond with her mother. Elena lacked not passion, but the heroism to express it. Doña Pacquita continues to provide comic relief even at the funeral. Tita and Pedro are now both back at the ranch. Leaving the grave site, Rosaura goes into labor.

Awaiting news of the delivery, Tita turns to look at Pedro sitting in the background. Again, the camera does not rack but holds Tita in focus. Assisting the birth of Rosaura's children becomes something that Tita and John have in common. As with Tita, Esperanza's fate is sealed from the start. There can never be a younger daughter because Rosaura cannot have more children. The job of caring for her sister's child again falls to Tita, and she again sings the same song as did Nacha. This is another example of mystical kinship, wherein love counts for more than genealogy. Rosaura is a biological mother and inherits her mother's ways, while Tita follows in Nacha's footsteps and assumes the role of fairy godmother. When Rosaura cites parallels between her daughter and Tita, it may be feared that fate cannot be altered.

Alex freely and spontaneously, if innocently, chooses Esperanza and compares his situation to that of his father and Tita. Rosaura confirms the suspicion that she will continue the wasteland tradition that she has inherited from her mother. Then, as if to rub it in, a shot of the loathsome Rosaura provides a wonderful opportunity to consider her with scorn. Tita retires to the kitchen to give culinary expression to her feelings. The title of the novel is derived from Tita's anger in this scene, but the explanation is omitted from the film. Tita demonstrates that she is also able to use food as a weapon.

It was once believed that a ruby could remedy flatulence. A stone that at least resembles a ruby is now seen immediately following the display of Rosaura's gastric distress. Pedro maintains his poker face for a while but then betrays his feelings.

The plot involves two triangles sharing the Tita-Pedro axis, one of which is easily resolved because Rosaura is a mere caricature who is never seriously in contention. She is so easily disqualified that the triangle in which she participates is unbalanced and therefore uninteresting. On the other hand, Tita's dilemma is more difficult than Pedro's. She would seem to have two viable, valid alternatives. Though he apparently has destiny on his side, Pedro is not without his flaws, and John is a worthy, legitimate suitor who helps Tita through her crisis of the nadir. The novel even reports Tita as having maternal feelings toward John's son. Keeping Tita's choice from being easy and obvious generates genuine dramatic tension. John also has the same first name as Tita's father (and Gertrudis's husband), which could have Electra implications. John leaves and it is revealed that Chenchu has fortunately survived her attack.

Tita carries a lamp that recalls the lamp of Psyche, who stole into Eros's chamber while he slept, looked on him and let a drop of hot oil fall on his shoulder. Tita earlier likened the feel of Pedro's burning gaze on her bare shoulders to that of raw dough coming in contact with boiling oil. When Tita and Pedro finally become intimate, their passion is literalized as fireworks, with physical sparks being produced. Their desperate fear of discovery renders them too preoccupied and distracted to ignite all of their subtle matches. They thus survive until they can totally abandon themselves to their passion.

Elena having died, it is again permissible to speak the name of Gertrudis. Rosaura's narrow, self-deceiving outlook allows her to believe that Pedro dislikes her for superficial reasons and that Tita no longer loves Pedro. Rosaura's overeating accompanies her hunger for Pedro's attention.

If Elena herself were a literal, physical menace, then the problem would have been resolved with her death. The appearance of her ghost necessitates a psychological interpretation of the crisis and remedies any concretistic fallacy. Shakespeare facilitates a similar psychological interpretation by giving the same name to Hamlet and to his father. As Sophocles tells the story of the house of Atreus, Clytemnestra dies and that is the end of it. In Aeschylus, she dies and then the Furies torment Orestes. After Elena dies, she herself returns, eliminating the middle man.

Like Mrs. Grose in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, Chenchu does not see the ghost. Dead people encountered necromantically are said to represent truths arising from the unconscious of the subject. As Tita continues to struggle against the constraints of filial duty, the ghost of her mother acts as her personal, subjective, psychological demon and impediment. Elena is dead, but still personifies the internalized social pressure of the superego. She is a great limiter whose name (Helen) means "death." In this sense, she is a dragon lady. (The symbolism of the dragon and the dragon slayer will be discussed in the essay concerning *Heavenly Creatures*.) She is the threshold guardian keeping Tita bound in hell, which is the realm of separation, captivity and frustration. The fear and desire that bind one in hell must be conquered, but in the proper

way. Tita gets it right, but only after Elena's physical death proves insufficient. An inversion of this pattern will be considered in the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*.

As if to foster a psychological interpretation, the appearance of Elena's ghost is always associated with a physical phenomenon: the shutters blown by wind, the barking dog, and the bullet breaking the window. These events could be construed as triggering the apparitions, except that the dog does not bark until after Elena is seen. Doña Pacquita senses Tita's pregnancy even though it is only "psychological." Also, this second visitation by Elena is preceded by another installment of "Eyes of Youth."

Like the Valkyrie Waltraute, Gertrudis is a martial equestrian who comes to counsel her sister. The music to which she and her husband dance ("*Jesuita en Chihuahua*") is the same to which director Alfonso Arau, as El Guapo, dances in *¡Three Amigos!* from 1986. Gertrudis speaks of the contingency and subjectivity of truth. Hamlet says, "For there is nothing good or ill, but thinking makes it so." Gertrudis offers advice in the courtly love tradition. The lack of love invalidates Rosaura's role as wife and sanctions adultery. (The essay on *The English Patient* will examine this issue further). As Gertrudis glances out the door, she is deliberately pacing the conversation so that her finale will coincide with Pedro's arrival.

As Pedro and Tita walk by the river and talk of going far away, the music that summons to mind *Tristan und Isolde* is again heard. When Tristan and Isolde talk of going far away, they both understand this to mean death. The dispositions of Rosaura and Esperanza are not a dilemma for the audience. Tita and Pedro could take Esperanza with them, and Rosaura, in keeping with the food imagery, can stew in her own juice.

A dog may function as a spirit guide (psychopomp) and mediate between the living and the dead. A rustling sound draws the attention of the couple to the dog that has already proved responsive to Elena's ghost. Like the boy crying wolf, this false alarm could cause one's guard to be let down.

Having earlier considered the stars, Tita is serenaded by Juan and Pedro singing "*Estrellita*," a song by Manuel María Ponce (1882-1948) sung to a star. She is again positioned one floor above Pedro, as when he first declared his love for her.

The ghost of Elena appears yet again. Tita has challenged her mother during the latter's lifetime, but has always then retreated from the outer tyranny of her material mother. To the extent that the realm of death, from which Elena emerges, represents the unconscious, a psychological rather than physical solution is required. The inner forces that threaten to hamper further development must be confronted. This is the critical moment. Tita cannot afford to be passive, and must establish a claim on her destiny. It is her's for the taking, but it must still be taken. Like Parzival, Tita must heroically dare to be herself.

As the two converse, Elena's demeanor indicates that Tita must be on to something. When Elena's hypocrisy is exposed, she speaks in a guilty whisper as if she is afraid that her secret will get out. This also creates a more ominous effect than would shouting. Tita is no more deterred by the threat of damnation than is Tristan (see the essay on *The English Patient*). She aggressively steps forward, adopting an in-your-face stance. Tita is asked who she thinks she is. This question ("*¿Pues qué crees que eres?*"), a worthy candidate for the motto of the film, proves to be crucial, and Tita capitalizes on the opportunity that it provides.

Elena facilitates her daughter's emancipation by prompting Tita to admit her hate. Elena misses Gertrudis, yearns for her old love and grieves for the dead Roberto, but then hypocritically hides or denies these sentiments. Honesty now becomes Tita's salvation, even though the honesty is about hate. Honesty overrides love.

Her own anxiety causes Tita both to be “late” and to conjure the specter of her mother’s ghost. In the manner of Gnostic self-emancipation, she liberates herself from both psychological pregnancy and psychological haunting, and achieves her potential for self-proclaimed independence. As mentioned when discussing *The Crying Game*, Gawain gives his wife Dame Ragnall “the right to be herself and to express her own nature.” Tita’s fierce honesty disenchants her and gives her sovereignty. As discussed in a coming essay, the crisis in Steven Soderbergh’s *King of the Hill* is resolved similarly.

As Tita is restored to a nonpregnant state, Elena’s ghost vanishes and the window is restored to its former unbroken state, as Mary’s virginity is said to have been restored. At the end of the film, the restoration of Tita’s virginity is suggested, at least metaphorically.

The next challenge arises immediately. Pedro is faced with the physical ordeal of being burned. Having confronted and disposed of the ghost of her mother, Tita dispatches her sister with one glare. Unable to deny her own redundancy, Rosaura voluntarily withdraws, at least temporarily. Pedro’s injury recalls the burning away of mortality by Isis, and his recovery portends his and Tita’s victorious arising, like the Phoenix, from the fire at the end.

As Tita desperately tries to soothe Pedro, Nacha is seen for the first time since her death. In her role as mentor, Nacha continues to provide help in the form of personified knowledge. The woman accompanying her may be assumed to be John’s grandmother, Morning Star. In the novel, she has already been encountered at John’s house.

Tita and Pedro had considered physical flight, which Elena’s ghost had endorsed, at least for Tita. This option must now be postponed and would probably have been futile if the psychological problem had remained.

When confronting her mother, Tita had stepped aggressively forward. As John now treats Pedro, the conversation makes her uncomfortable and she defensively steps backwards. John will have a similar effect on her again later. By contrast, when Pedro threatens to tell John of Tita’s pregnancy, she does not negotiate, but takes charge and will not permit it. Tita’s hindsight about kidnapping is 20/20, but it is a little late now.

As Rosaura enters to initiate a talk, her narrow waist indicates that the special diet worked. Tita argues based on deep, human, natural, fundamental rights. Rosaura appeals to local, parochial, superficial, arbitrary traditions (*argumentum ad antiquitatem*). These are her version of “family values.” No outsider can ever hurt one as deeply as can a family member. How must it feel to have your own sister call you a whore? Rosaura is exerting her legal rights, but she is bruising people as she swings them around. Some traditions are better off dead. Accordingly, as if offering her niece a Buddhist escape from the cycle of reincarnation, Tita declares, “The tradition will die with me.”

As John arrives with his Aunt, Tita is seen scrubbing her teeth, which is explained below. There is again cause for surprise when English is spoken. Tita can usually at least hold her own in confrontations with Elena, Pedro and Rosaura. When Pedro, as just mentioned, wants to announce to John what he believes is Tita’s condition, Tita says, “No, you won’t say anything. . . . I won’t allow it.” Now, as if she could not resist him, she says to John, “Don’t make me tell you now.”

Tita finds herself in a genuine dilemma, as compared to more elementary triangles. Her choice is between tranquil security and passionate electricity. The Arthurian standard demands the latter. Tita seems surprised that John knows that Pedro is her lover, revealing her denial about just how open this secret really is.

Preparations similar to those seen earlier for Rosaura's wedding are made. Invitations are written, including one addressed to Doña Pacquita. It is as if Tita is about to marry John. Gradually, a series of apparent anachronisms emerges. Up until now, the characters in the story have experienced only live, acoustic music, and transportation has depended on horses and bicycles. Now, a radio is seen and a song about a car is heard. Cooking is now done, as never before, on a gas range. Tita has been seen using an outdoor water pump to wash her hands. Now indoor plumbing is seen being used. A refrigerator now replaces the block of ice carried in a wheelbarrow. IMDb.com got suckered into inferring one (but, curiously, only one) of these anachronisms and listing it among the film's "goofs" thus: "Background music while Tita and Nacha are cooking in the kitchen tells the story of a car breakdown." The reference to Nacha mischaracterizes the situation further. The other alleged "goof" involving champagne may have merit.

The camera tilts up to reveal an anonymous bride and groom in place of Tita and John, who had been planning to wed. To the strains of the song "Eyes of Youth," the anachronistic dissonances are finally resolved with the revelation that it is 1934. Pedro dances with Tita and speaks of an interval of 22 years between proposals. Unless two years elapse between his initial declaration of love and his engagement to Rosaura, the period in question is from 1910 to 1934. Pedro's proposal to Tita invites speculation about their availability. The possibility suggests itself that Tita married John all those years ago and that she is now available due to widowhood. John is then shown to be present. Pedro whispers to Tita after both weddings. This time, he tells her that he always dreamed of marrying her in a church full of white flowers, such as those seen during the preparations for the current wedding. Pedro asserts that there is nothing to stop Tita from wearing white when she marries him, suggesting the restoration of her virginity.

Some of the characters may not look as if they have aged enough in twenty years. Some of this might be blamed on the low budget. However, if Tita looks too young to be pushing forty, she could be a candidate for the Michelangelo defense. His Pieta was criticized because Mary appeared far too young to be the mother of Jesus. He explained that sin is the cause of age and decay. The virtuous do not show the effects of age (*virtutem forma decorat*). One who is without sin does not age at the same rate as ordinary people. So perhaps it would be wrong to depict Tita in a more mature state, even if it could be afforded.

The bride is identified as Esperanza, and Pedro is revealed to be a widower. Like Odysseus killing the suitors after years of odyssey, Tita, with another example of culinary prowess, kills Rosaura to allow Esperanza to marry. Esperanza does not violate tradition because she does not marry until after her mother dies.

Doña Pacquita, Chenchá, Gertrudis, Juan and Sergeant Treviño all reappear. Gertrudis's daughter "looks just like her grandfather," which, in the novel, comes as a relief to the suspicious Juan. The groom is identified as Alex Brown. In case he is not remembered as John's son, Chenchá so specifies him. As a child, Alex wanted to marry Esperanza and has had to wait, but his wish has come true. Pedro comically handles his toast with John a little more gracefully than the last time. The green peppers, white walnut sauce, red pomegranate seeds of the featured recipe replicate the colors of the Mexican flag. Not surprisingly, Tita's chiles work, producing the opposite effect to that of the cake at Rosaura's wedding. The guests on both occasions are overcome by an emotion that expressionistically reflects the situation.

As the newlyweds drive away, it is as if Tita, Pedro and John are asked, "Will the two most sympathetically and heroically portrayed characters please raise your hands?" As Tita and John wave, all Pedro can do is shrug. Like the earlier shot that helps cultivate hatred for Rosaura,

a wonderful moment is given in which to consider Dr. Brown. Tita's renunciation of marriage is done for Esperanza and not for the sake of tradition, which would have been the worst possible excuse. Dr. Brown makes the corresponding noble sacrifice by not marrying Tita, thus allowing her to "save" Esperanza. As he tips his hat, it is hard not to reciprocate.

The world has receded and the lovers are left truly alone for the first time. They walk to a door that is overseen by a fixture reminiscent of the light/sun/eye/explosion figure at the top of Picasso's *Guernica*. Among the pictures that John shows to Tita during his earlier talk about matches is one that features the image of an eye in a doorway. If those pictures were made by his grandmother, then she joins the various women in this story whose predictions come true. Pedro carries Tita over the threshold as if they were just married. In the Arthurian sense, they have been so for quite a while. Love, not clergy, sacramentalizes their relationship. They thus choose love instead of marriage, which are considered mutually exclusive alternatives by courtly love standards.

Tristan and Isolde find a cave containing a bed as an altar of sex. An analogous space is now encountered. Pedro dreamed of marrying Tita in a church full of white flowers. The room that they enter is filled not with white flowers but with white candles. And though not in a church, they are on holy ground that their own love has sanctified. Like the stable in Bethlehem, this humble place can become sacred.

Nacha offers supernatural sanction for this self-consecrating consummation, which is like that of Parzival and Condwiramurs. Though Tita does not always wear her hair long, it here accords with the observation made in an earlier essay that marriage is signified when Condwiramurs puts her hair up. Tita is also about to follow another model by letting her hair down. After Nacha dies, Tita first perceives only Nacha's voice. The second time that Nacha communicates from beyond, her voice is accompanied by her image. This third time, she does not speak, but influences physical objects as she lights candles. She had previously prescribed bark as a remedy for burns. By lighting candles, she may now be recommending fire as being the solution rather than the problem. Since the dog is said to bark at anything, it may be Tita alone who is able to perceive the ghosts of Elena, Nacha and Morning Star. It is not clear whether Pedro now sees Nacha. If he does, then it may indicate a change in his status. It may be remembered that the only mortals to whom the divine Brünnhilde is supposed to reveal herself are those who are about to die. Outside, the heavens roar, but are powerless to disturb the lovers, for they are as insensitive to distraction as those depicted in Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*.

During his first sexual encounter with Tita, Pedro's distraction and concern about detection allow him to survive the experience. This time, Tita assures him, "We're alone. Nobody can hear." When Pedro loosens the restraints on his emotions, he ignites all his subtle matches, sees the radiant tunnel of which John spoke and expires.

Robert Donington writes, "Wotan rises to the tragic dignity of willing his own destruction," and that certain of Wagner's characters die "undisguisedly from inner necessity." Like Isolde and Juliet, Tita voluntarily follows her lover to the realm of death. Husband and wife are one, and according to the Hindu tradition of *suttee*, both are brought to eternity through this heroic act of the widow. Tita opts for self-immolation in imitation of Brünnhilde and Hercules, the latter having been consumed by inner fire. She is already in the presence of many real candles, but opts to work from the inside out. Her memories are an objective correlative that function as subtle candles sufficient to ignite her subtle matches, but a gross fire requires the ignition of gross matches. For each physical match that Tita eats, she summons, in chronological

(biographical) order, one of her memories of her relationship with Pedro. Each episode in this torrent of reminiscence ignites a subtle match which in turn ignites a gross one.

Cremation is symbolic of the transformation of the material into the spiritual. The lovers melt into the landscape like Finnegan. Like Pyramus and Thisbe, they die and reunite on the other side, silhouetted against the aforementioned tunnel. Whether this portal leads to heaven or hell matters not to Tita and Pedro as long as they are together. (An explicit Arthurian expression of this sentiment is cited in the essay dealing with *The English Patient*.) There is, however, every indication that it is a death of triumph, transfiguration and ecstasy that embraces them.

In his *Phaedo*, Plato says that “whoever goes uninitiated and unsanctified to the other world will lie in the mire, but he who arrives there initiated and purified will dwell with the gods.” Gottfried says of Isolde’s successful trial by ordeal, “Thus it was made manifest and confirmed to all the world that Christ in His great virtue is pliant as a windblown sleeve. He falls into place and clings whichever way you try Him, closely and smoothly, as He is bound to do!” Either Elena’s threats of damnation were groundless or Tita, like Parzival, has changed God’s law.

The epilogue resumes the frame story to which the narrative has been repeatedly linked by the narrator, whose genealogy is restated and clarified. Esperanza’s name is not spoken but is interpolated into the subtitles, as if to compensate for the earlier omission of Alex’s name. Esperanza and Tita, as mystical fairy godmothers, supervise from beyond. They seem not to be suffering the torments of damnation. Rosaura was never really in the loop, except genealogically, and so is outranked, while Elena is *right out*. The emphasis is on the mystical aspect of heritage and family. Speaking of family, Esperanza is played here by Sandra Arau, the daughter of director Alfonso Arau and novelist/screenwriter Laura Esquivel.

Robert Donington writes of the miracle of denunciation when the dead Siegfried raises his arm, observing that the hero is destroyed, but that for which he stood is not. Similarly, Tita remains posthumously informative and inspirational.

The Rodney King video in *Malcolm X* is meant to suggest the persistence of certain social problems. A similar impression is made in *Like Water for Chocolate* by the intensely ironic sexism of the credits, where Lumi Cavazos takes second billing to Marco Leonardi. This arrangement also exists in the titles, but its atrocity can be appreciated only after the film has been viewed.

Comparisons with Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* invite themselves. Gottfried calls his story “a desperate tale of forbidden love.” *Like Water for Chocolate* is marketed as “The passionate tale of forbidden love.” Tristan is “like any other man,” but Isolde is “a goddess.”

Tita’s relationship with Pedro is not without its rough moments. However, joy and sorrow in love may be inseparable. For Gottfried, according to A.T. Hatto in the introduction of his translation of *Tristan*, the true, proper lover “accepted and even welcomed love in the totality of its antitheses—the sweet and the bitter, joy and sorrow, life and death. To such a mode of life he is so fervently devoted that he will be damned or saved with it.” Hatto continues, “How tragic, then, that all but a few are doomed to lose love’s benefits because they will not bear its sorrows!” In Hatto’s judgment, “Had not the lovers of whom this story tells endured sorrow for the sake of love, they would never have comforted so many.”

Gottfried declares, “He that never had sorrow of love never had joy of it either!” and, “Doubt *should* have part in love. Love must find her salvation with it. So long as Love has doubt there is some hope for her; but when she sees the truth, she is suddenly past all remedy.” He

recounts, “And now it happened, as it was meant to happen and as an equitable fate would have it, that Isolde, the young Princess, was the first to set eyes on her life and her death, her joy, her sorrow.” It is said of those who drink the love potion, “They would share one death and one life, one sorrow and one joy.” Gottfried more specifically proclaims, “And if anyone were to say that anger is out of place between such perfect lovers, I am absolutely certain that he was never really in love, for such is Love’s way. With it she kindles lovers and sets fire to their emotions. For as anger pains them deeply, so affection reconciles them, with the result that love is renewed and amity greater than ever.”

It is also noted, parenthetically, that amatory complexity is not confined to the Arthurian realm. “A love story can never be about full possession,” writes Jeffrey Eugenides in the introduction to *My Mistress’s Sparrow Is Dead: Great Love Stories From Chekhov to Munro*. “The happy marriage, the requited love, the desire that never dims – these are lucky eventualities but they aren’t love stories. Love stories depend on disappointment, on unequal births and feuding families, on matrimonial boredom and at least one cold heart. Love stories, nearly without exception, give love a bad name.” In reviewing the book, Louisa Thomas acknowledges this while simultaneously offering the counterexamples of Jane Austen.

For a time, Mark allows Tristan and Isolde to live in his household and “make[s] trial of their intimacy.” Elena takes her time sending Pedro away to Texas, tempting and daring Tita to misbehave. Gottfried says, “Women do many things, just because they are forbidden, from which they would refrain were it not forbidden. . . . Women of this kind are children of mother Eve, who flouted the first prohibition.” As previously noted, Tita places herself in the honorable tradition of fortunately disobedient women who demonstrate that good can ultimately result from the breaking of rules, and that progress may require a *felix culpa*.

Additional interesting correspondences may be briefly listed:

- Tristan pretends to be a musician. Pedro offers a drunken serenade.
- Isolde nurses Tristan back to health, as Tita does for Pedro.
- The love of Tristan and Isolde is mediated by a cup of wine, while that between Tita and Pedro is influenced by food.
- In some versions, Isolde concocts the love potion. Tita uses food to achieve her ends.
- The potion and the poison in the medieval story are basically the same. Rosaura is sickened by the quail that is an aphrodisiac to the others. Subjective predisposition determines the response.
- Isolde marries her beloved’s uncle. Pedro marries his beloved’s sister.
- By accepting and consummating marriage to the wrong person, Pedro commits the sin of Isolde. He then undergoes Isolde’s trial in which he is burned not by an iron bar but by fire itself.
- Tristan placed his sword between himself and Isolde. By denying her love, Elena commits the sin of Tristan.
- Tristan tries to distract himself “through martial exploits.” Tita distracts herself with cooking and knitting.
- Tristan and Isolde arouse suspicion when they exchange glances, as do Tita and Pedro.
- Recalling Dido and Aeneas taking refuge from a storm in a cave, Tristan and Isolde flee to a forest cave that has a crystal bed. Tita and Pedro go to the “dark room” and create their own storm.
- Without food, Tristan and Isolde survive on love. Tita and Pedro have food but not each other.



- Tristan forms a second triangle with Isolde of the White Hands. Tita forms a second triangle with Dr. Brown.
- Tristan marries the other Isolde, but the marriage remains unconsummated. He says, “Do not let it vex you if I leave this for now - we shall have our fill another time, when you and I both wish it.” Pedro behaves similarly with Rosaura.
- Music reminiscent of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* plays in the background as Pedro tells Tita that they should go far away. When Tristan suggests this to Isolde, she understands him to mean death.
- Isolde thinks to herself, “Without me you cannot live for one day longer than I can live without you.” Isolde and Tita are quickly united with their lovers in death.

As cited above, *Like Water for Chocolate* resembles Arthurian literature in terms of its postcolonialism atmosphere and its championing of the *amor* principle. However, for all the shaking of her fist and thumbing of her nose at convention, in certain respects, Tita is less than maximally rebellious. True, she never wavers, notwithstanding her acceptance of John’s proposal, during an ordeal that is no doubt very trying. But as a story of patience, endurance and sublimation, hers would seem to follow the unfortunate model of *Cligés* by Chrétien de Troyes, a story that is eccentric with respect to the conventions of courtly love, as will be explained in the essay on *The English Patient*. Demonstrating the Arthurian authenticity that is central to *Parzival*, Tita’s honesty about her hate triumphs over Elena’s dishonesty about her love. As with Parzival and Condwiramurs, love is confirmed through loyalty, and the final consummation is achieved without clergy. Of course, even ecclesiastical endorsement is no guarantee of legality. The adultery engaged in by Tristan and Isolde seems to distinguish them from Romeo and Juliet, who actually marry each other. But the latter couple would not be famous if it were not that their love was considered equally adulterous in their society, where loving the wrong person, whether married to them or not, could be a capital offense.

One further subtle structural feature may be noted. The film is approximately 105 minutes in length. Therefore, events that temporally divide the film into segments related to each other by the golden ratio (explained in the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*) would occur at elapsed times of approximately 41 and 65 minutes. These points roughly correspond to a pair of nocturnal encounters between Tita and Pedro, the first after Pedro eats watermelon, and the second when Tita carries a lamp and Pedro follows her into the room. Both encounters are preceded by Tita working with Chenchá, first obtaining ice and preparing for a meal, and later washing dishes after a meal.

Finally, Laura Esquivel’s novel on which this film is based will now be briefly considered. In it, Tita’s family name is De la Garza, and the story offers a properly broad definition of “that sacred institution, the family.”

Nacha lives to be 85, is illiterate, never marries nor has children, but has had a fiancé who was sent away by Elena’s mother. Nacha is half-deaf (foreshadowing the total deafness of John’s Aunt), but hears Tita crying *in utero*. Tita is thus like the grace Thalia, who can be heard only by the spiritually adept. Tita has a similar gift and thinks that she hears a chick in a preserved egg. For Tita, when Nacha passes away, “It was as if her real mother had died.” It is said, “So skillful was she that it seemed Nacha herself was in Tita’s body.”

Tita breaks rules in sewing and dares to be creative rather than obedient in both the kitchen and in life. At age nine, she swam fastest across the Rio Grande. The significance of this

number is discussed in the essays on *Barton Fink* and *Whale Rider*. During preparations for Rosaura's wedding, Tita, preoccupied with the color white, recalls entering a church with white candles and flowers in childhood, foreshadowing the end when Pedro equates Tita with white flowers and then carries her into a room filled with white candles.

Tita could not wait to leave Rosaura's wedding reception so that she could tell Nacha about Pedro's love. Carreno's manual of etiquette said that one could not leave the table until everyone was finished with the cake. Elena sobs in response to Tita's cake, though she had not cried in response to her husband's passing. Rosaura suffers a rather more extreme fate as a result of all the vomiting.

In the novel, "Juan had thrown the reins aside," as does Parzival, yielding to nature. The transcendence of duality is suggested when it is said of Gertrudis, "she might have been an angel and devil in one woman." It is in the "Christmas roles" chapter that Pedro's father is referred to as Don Pascual, linking Christmas and Easter. Echoing the nonequivalence of tacos and enchiladas, Pulque the ranch dog mistakes a rabbit for a cat.

Capons are served at Rosaura's wedding. These are roosters that were castrated and fattened. In *Parzival*, castration is used to symbolize Western spiritual impotence. Rosaura will later be fattened and has little love to offer. Tita identifies with the capons and feels that she may as well be neutered. Elena is referred to as a castrating mother, and she castrates not just verbally. It is recalled how much Elena enjoyed cracking nuts. As if this reference were insufficiently explicit, it is said that she used to do it "with a sack of nuts between her legs." Tita achieves potency by confronting this castrating power.

Additional castration imagery is associated with Sergeant Treviño. He has the same last name as Gertrudis's father, providing another example of paired names and suggesting that they could be related or that Gertrudis keeps him close to her because she senses some significance to the name.

Tita fails to kill the first quail on her first attempt. "She realized that you can't be weak when it comes to killing: you have to be strong or it just causes more sorrow." Elena had been killing Tita slowly. After being attacked, Elena is not dead, only crippled. Tita finally employs sufficient strength and "kills" her mother's ghost on its third appearance. (A paramount example of strength that is both deficient and misdirected will be lamented in the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*.)

When Gertrudis is carried off by Juan, "Like silent spectators to a movie, Pedro and Tita began to cry watching the stars act out the love that was denied to them." Tita's subjectivity will allow her to see astronomical stars do the same. There is also an allusion to the distortion of history, which could in turn reflect on the reliability of the narrator.

Initially, Pedro always used the nuptial sheet and had never seen a naked woman before Gertrudis. He longed to touch a little patch of skin on Tita's leg, which recalls a moment from *The Piano*. Tita wanted to flee with Pedro to "where there were no rules to keep them apart, where there was no Mama." To speak in terms of a place is to invoke Mosaic literalism. Unfortunately, the Mama Elena Problem is not geography-dependent.

Pedro is guilty of the sin of Parzival. "When nobody eats the last chile on the plate, it's because none of them wants to look like a glutton, so even though they'd really like to devour it, they don't have the nerve to take it. . . . Within it lies the secret of love, but it will never be penetrated, and all because it wouldn't be proper. Damn good manners! Damn Carreno's etiquette manual! . . . Damn Pedro, so decent, so proper."

Nursing her nephew, Tita is said to look like Ceres. "It was as if the child's mother was Tita, and not Rosaura." Tita takes Rosaura's place at the banquet celebrating Roberto's baptism, the establishing shot of which in the film is the one noted above as being least well-served by letterboxing. "What did her fate matter, when she had this child near her, this child who was as much hers as anybody's? Really, she did a mother's work without the official title. Pedro and Roberto were hers and that was all she needed." But her mother is ready to disappoint her. Elena waits until Tita is within earshot to tell Padre Ignacio that Rosaura should go to San Antonio.

Elena, the phallic mother, meets rebels with a "shotgun hidden in her petticoats." Those who suffered her gaze "fell prisoner to a childlike fear of maternal authority." Her ghost continues to exert these abstract properties of the superego even after she dies. The captain that she confronts is Juan Alejandro, who says, "Understood, my general." In the film, this is said to Gertrudis by Sergeant Treviño.

Tita takes with her to the dovecote a helpless pigeon and the worms that she has been feeding to it. A week later, all the sausages are swarming with worms. Elena's evil touch contrasts with Tita's secret ingredient: love. Chenchu finds Tita in the dovecote trying to feed the pigeon, which has died, recalling Lennie's dead mouse in *Of Mice and Men*. Dr. Brown finds Tita with a broken nose. As Tita leaves for Texas, the bedspread is one kilometer long and is said to "drag behind the carriage like the huge train of a wedding gown." This may indicate that Tita is predisposed to marry John.

Tita travels to Texas. "Her arrival was like a dream." More than the crossing of a geographic border, her journey is a little like that of Dorothy from Kansas to Oz. Living with John is his son Alex, "whose mother had died when he was born." Tita's "food was brought to her there by Katy, a seventy-year-old North American woman" who becomes "Sue Ellen" in the film. Tita encounters John's dead grandmother, who had "initiated" him into medicine. They establish an affinity and "a communication that went far beyond words." Anticipating something that becomes a central issue in *Heavenly Creatures*, John "had no trouble separating mental and physical activities."

The recipe for matches includes saffron, suggesting the color of Buddhist monastic robes that are modeled on death shrouds. Saffron and death are also associated in *The English Patient*. John says of phosphorus that "it does burst into flame very rapidly at an elevated temperature." He also explains that phosphorus is present in urine and bone. This links the concepts of the ignition of metaphorical, internal matches with carnal incineration by literal, physical fire. Ignition of all one's matches "would produce a splendor so dazzling that it would illuminate far beyond what we can normally see." Tita and Nacha demonstrate perception beyond the normal limits of hearing. The experience of which John speaks suggests a radiance that penetrates what Stephen Dedalus calls "the black adaphane." Tita subsequently returns home with "splendid beauty and radiant energy."

The soul alone cannot provide the food to nourish itself, "only the body . . . is capable of providing that food." Spiritual fulfillment is achieved through nature, not instead of it. Food is referred to as "sacred sustenance" and the last meal of the day is referred to as "the last supper."

John's proposal comes nine months after Tita's breakdown and rescue from the dovecote. He gives her a dress that reminds her of doves' plumage, which suggests the Holy Ghost by which Mary conceived Jesus. It is thus implied that Tita's engagement is the result of a mystical conception and gestation of her relationship with John. In the film, this period also roughly coincides with Rosaura's pregnancy with Esperanza, but probably does not refer primarily to this

because the child is born prematurely. The proposal is made while celebrating a neighbor's discharge from military service. Tita discharges herself from service to Elena.

Elena survives her attack but is paralyzed from the waist down, neutered like the Fisher King. "For the first time Tita firmly held her gaze, and Mama Elena lowered hers." The film postpones any submission of this magnitude on Elena's part until after her death. As when Stephen yells "Nothung!" and breaks the lamp in *Ulysses*, Tita and her mother silently "severed the strong tie of blood and obedience." Elena spits out Tita's ox-tail soup because it contains love, which tastes bitter to her. She kills herself by purging herself of Tita's food (and love) using syrup of ipecac. Tita discovers letters from Elena to José Treviño Jr., the mulatto, the love of her life. When pregnant with Gertrudis, Elena had planned to run away with José, but he was killed.

John feels obliged to observe the formality of asking for Tita's hand, but "he had resolved to marry Tita with or without Mama Elena's permission" as soon as Tita is eighteen years old. He thus scores Arthurian points compared to Pedro. The day that John comes to ask for Tita's hand, she cuts herself, so that blood and cooking again coinciding. John then offers her a red stone that reflects the color of her blood.

It is explained that "Tita was literally 'like water for chocolate' – she was on the verge of boiling over." "As usual Chenchá had dropped from the sky just when Tita needed her most." (*Checha ex machina* to the rescue.) Chenchá marries a man who says, "Jesús Martínez at your service." The film gives this form of introduction to Juan. Tita runs away after Pedro sees her bathing, echoing the actions of Gertrudis. The likelihood of Gertrudis returning is compared to the resurrection of the dead. Tita holds the doll that is to be baked into the bread and makes wishes, including that Gertrudis would return. Gertrudis and Elena both do, each in her own way.

"Since . . . [Pedro] found out that Tita was thinking of marrying John, he had been possessed by the furies," which are dealt with elsewhere in these essays. Pedro hears Gertrudis say that Tita is pregnant. "He was dying of love for Tita," but only figuratively as of yet. Moments after the dead Elena says, "If you don't want blood to flow in this house," Tita experiences "a violent menstrual flow."

After the argument with Rosaura, Tita "wished with all her heart that her sister would be swallowed up by the earth." Then, in a scene omitted from the film, chickens fight over the tortillas that Tita has thrown to them, generating a whirlwind in which Tita is caught. Tita's wish then achieves distorted fulfillment when a hole is bored in the earth and most of the chickens disappear into it. Afterwards, Tita brushes her teeth. One of the ingredients in her tooth powder is dragon's blood (see the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*).

Rosaura allows Tita to feed Esperanza in exchange for Tita's agreement not to have Pedro's baby. Esperanza is more Tita's daughter than Rosaura's. "When Esperanza told Tita that when she felt Alex's eyes on her body, she felt like dough being plunged in boiling oil, Tita knew that Alex and Esperanza would be bound together forever."

Tita cannot find any matches with which to light the oven, so John, who never remarries, presents her with a box of matches. Pedro does not understand and thinks it a ridiculous gift. "The platters of chiles proudly wore the colors of the flag: the green of the chiles, the white of the nut sauce, the red of the pomegranates." The shelling of a thousand nuts suggests *sahasrara*, the *cakra* of the thousand-petaled lotus. As *My Beloved Captain* plays, Gertrudis remembers that Juan was a captain when they met.

The dark room to which Tita and Pedro retire has a floral rug (in accord with his wish to enter a church full of flowers) and 250 candles (one for each chile prepared). The gross and the subtle intersect: "The striking of the brass headboard against the wall and the guttural sounds that

escaped from both of them mixed with the sound of the thousand doves flying free above them.” “Some sixth sense had told the doves that it was time to flee the ranch.” In the film, birds fly away when Elena and Chenchu are attacked. In proper yoga fashion, Tita “tried to still her breathing.” In accordance with the Tibetan Book of the Dead, when Tita sees the tunnel and Pedro, she does not hesitate, but holds to that image and is released.