

Viva Zapata!

Written by John Steinbeck

Sequence 1

A caption: “Mexico City, 1909. A delegation of Indians from the State of Morelos has come to the Capitol for an audience with their President, Porfirio Diaz.”

The opening shots show the citizens being searched by soldiers before they enter, thus setting the scene: this is something of a military dictatorship where, one assumes, threats to the President are commonplace. Immediately upon their entrance, as they gaze up at a garish portrait of the President, a distinct separation is made between the hardworking farmers and the man who runs the country.

The men explain that their land has been stolen by the wealthy residents of a local estate and that they have been left with only barren areas where no crops will grow. Their land has been fenced off and their cattle are starving to death. The President is patronising and condescending. He insists that accusations of this kind can be dealt with only in court, asking them “Can you prove that you own this field?” and telling them to “verify your boundaries.” The farmers, who have brought various property deeds with them, are about to leave, content that their claims will be supported, when Zapata speaks, challenging the authority of President Diaz. He is a brazen, strong and outspoken man, a natural leader, and the President is immediately taken aback.

“The land is fenced and guarded by armed men. They are planting sugar cane in our cornfields right now,” explains Zapata. “Courts?” he questions, in flagrant opposition to the President. “Do you know of any land suit that was ever won by country people?” Again the President insists that the courts are the place to settle such issues and that the farmers must be patient. “We make our tortillas out of corn, not patience,” replies Zapata. Diaz, who has a list of the farmers’ names in front of him, circles “Emiliano Zapata.”

Sequence 2

The farmers and their families arrive at their field, which is fenced in. They pass under the barbed wire before cutting it, whereupon they are attacked by soldiers with machine guns. Zapata, on a white horse, leads the fight as women and children are mown down. Zapata escapes.

Sequence 3

Some time later. Zapata, his brother Eufemio and an associate, Pablo, have taken refuge at the top of a mountain. They issue warning shots at a man who, as he comes closer, is shouting Zapata’s name. The man claims to be sent from Zapata’s friends, “people of the village.” Eufemio searches the man, Fernando, who carries a typewriter, which he calls a “sword of the mind.”

Fernando comes “with news from Madero, leader of the fight against Diaz.” He explains that Madero is in Texas, preparing to lead an assault against the President. “He is sending out many people like me to spread the word and search out leaders in other parts of Mexico,” says Fernando. Zapata chides Pablo for never having taught him to read, and tells Pablo to go to Texas and talk to Madero. “I want you to go see if we can trust him,” says Zapata. “If you like what you see in his face, tell him about our troubles here, and tell him that we recognise him as a leader against Diaz.” The three men wander off, leaving Fernando to exclaim, “This is all very disorganised!”

Sequence 4

In town, Zapata and Eufemio follow two women to the church. Hiding from the police, by now they are clearly wanted men. Entering the church, Eufemio grabs the older woman, while Zapata speaks with Josefa. He hopes to marry her and wants to know when he can see her father to ask for her hand. She tells him she will never marry him, that she doesn't intend to end up “washing clothes in a ditch and patting tortillas like an Indian.” Zapata is furious, making clear that the “Zapatas were chieftains here when your grandfather lived in a cave.” Josefa tells him that “without luck you'll probably be in jail tomorrow.” Zapata makes clear he has been offered a job by Don Nacio and that he will likely be pardoned. Josefa is still resistant, threatening even him to kill him. She wants “to live a safe life, protected, uneventful, without surprises, and preferably with a rich man.”

Sequence 5

Zapata is working as a horse trainer, but his egalitarian streak is revealed when he attacks a man for beating a starving young boy. Don Nacio chastises him, insisting that “violence is no good” and telling him that he “can't be the conscience of the whole world.” Zapata's interplay with the Indians working in the stables makes clear whose side he is really on. Don Nacio reminds Zapata he now has a good job and money, and encourages him to speak with Josefa's father.

Zapata spots Eufemio and Pablo, who has just returned from Texas. Fernando is also with them and this time Zapata is much friendlier to him. The situation is made clear to Zapata: the time has come to launch an attack on Diaz, who is ready to drop “like an old bull with a sword under his shoulder.” Zapata is still resistant, exclaiming that he doesn't “want to be the conscience of the world” and that he has “private affairs” to attend to.

Sequence 6

Zapata, on his white horse, along with Eufemio, Pablo and Fernando, is riding through the countryside and encounters a friend, Innocente, who has a rope around his neck and is being led to jail by policemen on horseback. Zapata confronts the captors, telling them, simply, "I think you better let him go." He kills one of them but the other rides off at speed, with Innocente in tow. Zapata cuts the rope but Innocente is severely injured. "You should have cut the rope without talking," says the increasingly ruthless Fernando. We discover what Innocente's crime is: he crawled through the fence at night to plant corn. "Now they'll be after you," a farmer tells Zapata. "You can hide in my house," says another. "Thank you," replies Zapata, a man with an increasing sense of responsibility to his community.

Sequence 7

Zapata is talking with Josefa's father. He explains that Don Nacio "has assured me that I will be a man of substance." Josefa's father makes it clear that Zapata will never marry his daughter. "What is wrong with me?" asks Zapata. "You are a rancher without land, a gentleman without money, a man of substance without substance. A fighter, a drinker, a brawler," replies the father, who delivers the same line about tortillas that Josefa herself threw at Zapata earlier. Zapata, furious, manhandles him, and says, "Find her a merchant, a musty moth-eaten man like yourself."

As he leaves, Zapata is arrested. Eufemio and Josefa look on. Eufemio signals to the townsfolk and they immediately rally around Zapata as he is marched out of town, a rope around his neck. Fernando witnesses this and is astonished. By the time the column of horses has reached the countryside, the farmers start following, machetes in hand. Workmen come down from the mountains and join the group as it passes them. Within minutes the police are surrounded and Eufemio confronts them with a shotgun. Zapata is released, aware of his new role and high status within the community. Fernando tells him to cut the telegraph wire and they ride off.

Sequence 8

A train rides through the mountains and is attacked by Indians. Zapata, increasingly the military leader, is disappointed that there is no ammunition on board, though there is plenty of dynamite.

Sequence 9

Women approach a fortified encampment occupied by soldiers who have clearly already been fighting against Zapata's forces. The women place dynamite at the gates and blow them open. Several are killed in the process. Fighters on horseback arrive and defeat the military.

Sequence 10

Later, Zapata and his forces are celebrating their victory. Zapata is introduced to a young boy who, with his brother, destroyed an enemy machine gun. Upon hearing that the boy's brother was killed, Zapata offers him a reward. The boy wants Zapata's white horse, which Zapata gives him.

Josefa's father approaches and addresses Zapata as 'Don.' He brings Fernando with him, who has a letter from Madero appointing Zapata a General. Zapata is unimpressed, though Josefa's father seems to be warming to him.

Sequence 11

Zapata, wearing a bandolier bullet belt, spends time with Josefa's family, though Eufemio is contemptuous of such socialising. Zapata continues to push for Josefa's hand, stating that "He who has a good wife, wears Heaven in his hat." Josefa's father now considers Zapata a worthy match for his daughter. Pablo arrives announcing that President Diaz has fled from Mexico, news that brings Zapata and Josefa closer together.

Sequence 12

Zapata and Josefa's wedding.

Sequence 13

Zapata and Josefa on their wedding night. Eufemio, Pablo and Fernando talk outside. Fernando impresses upon Eufemio that the battle has only just begun. "There will be a lot more bloodshed," says Fernando to the drunken Eufemio.

Zapata seems restless. Josefa asks him what he is worried about. "We'll find a good piece of land someplace and settle down," she tells him, believing that the fighting is over. "Madero is in the capital," Zapata tells her, "and tomorrow I'll go see him." Josefa announces that they will name all their children Francisco, "after Madero, because he brought peace." Zapata is clearly skeptical, and expresses his embarrassment that he cannot read. She takes a book and starts to teach him.

Sequence 14

Zapata, Fernando, Eufemio and Pablo are with Madero in his office. A portrait of President Diaz is being removed from the wall. Zapata asks Madero a simple question: "When will the village lands be given back? The country people are asking." Madero stalls, insisting "We will build slowly and carefully," and hides behind the same legal arguments as Diaz did earlier. Madero offers Zapata some property as a reward for his contribution to the revolution. Zapata is furious. "I did not fight for a ranch," he says. "The land I fought for was not for myself." He insists

the land distribution be done immediately. Madero leaves. “This mouse in the black suit talks too much like Diaz,” Zapata tells Pablo and Eufemio. Only Fernando sides with Zapata, telling him that the government needs to be cleaned out of people like Diaz and Madero. Madero returns and asks Zapata and his forces to hand in their weapons, and submit to the rule of law. Zapata knows that a disarmed population can achieve nothing. He leaves, telling Madero he is going home to “wait, but not for long.”

Huerta, another of Madero’s generals, enters and advises Madero to kill Zapata. Madero refuses and challenges Huerta when the general suggests he assist in the disarming of Zapata. Pablo returns, telling Madero that he should visit with Zapata outside Mexico City. Madero agrees, and tells Huerta that “troops are not necessary... There is such a thing as an honest man.” Madero leaves, and Huerta reiterates that as long as Zapata is alive, progress cannot be made. For this ruthless general, Madero is a mouse who “can be handled. Zapata is a tiger. You have to kill a tiger.”

Sequence 15

Zapata’s forces are handing in their arms as Madero watches. While Pablo expresses happiness about this, Zapata clearly does not. News arrives that Huerta’s forces are converging on the town. Madero is genuinely flabbergasted, Fernando insists that Madero is not to be trusted. Pablo challenges Zapata and Fernando, saying that only Madero can bring peace. Eufemio suggests that Zapata now kill Madero. Zapata, Eufemio and their men ride off, without Pablo, to fight Huerta.

Sequence 16

Zapata’s men attack Huerta’s soldiers, leading them into a trap and massacring them.

Sequence 17

President Madero is being held prisoner by Huerta in his government office. He is taken to what he thinks is a meeting with Huerta but is assassinated by soldiers as Huerta looks on.

Sequence 18

A makeshift tribunal, where Eufemio and the rebels interrogate a man accused of consorting with the enemy. Eufemio wants the man shot. Zapata orders it done.

Zapata, Fernando and Pablo talk. Pablo admits meeting with Madero, explaining that the dead president was a good man who wanted “to build houses, plant fields. If we could begin to build, even while we’re burning, if we could plant while we destroy...” Pablo asks Zapata if “a good thing can come from a bad act.

Can peace come from so much killing? Can kindness finally come from so much violence?” We hear the shots of executions in the background. Zapata has no answer to Pablo’s questions and orders his execution. Pablo asks that Zapata himself be his executioner. Zapata kills Pablo.

Sequence 19

Josefa and her father at home. He exclaims that Zapata has made nothing of his status of a general, unlike the well-dressed Pancho Villa. “Being a general is a business opportunity, and he’s not taking advantage of it,” Josefa’s father explains. Zapata arrives with news that Huerta’s forces have been defeated. “We have won,” he says.

Sequence 20

Zapata meets Pancho Villa in Mexico City for a photo opportunity, something he clearly feels uncomfortable with.

Sequence 21

Zapata and Villa talk. Villa announces that he has a ranch where he now wants to live. We note Eufemio’s reaction. “I’ve been fighting too long. Lost my appetite for it,” he says. “What about Mexico?” asks Fernando. “I’ve figured it out,” says Villa, and turning to Zapata says, “Only one man I can trust.” He appoints Zapata President. Zapata refuses, but, as Villa explains, “There isn’t anyone else.”

Sequence 22

Zapata and Fernando are in the government palace. Zapata now finds himself in precisely the same situation that Diaz did earlier. A delegation from Morelos arrives. They explain that Eufemio has taken over a ranch, taken land distributed to the farmers, and killed a man. Zapata asks if this is really true. He is convinced that he must return to Morelos immediately. Fernando begs him to stay. Zapata tells Fernando he has “no fields, no home, no wife, no woman, no friends, no love. You only destroy. That is your love.”

Sequence 23

Zapata finds Eufemio drunk in a ranch house, and is furious with his brother. Eufemio is equally angry. “I can’t even buy a bottle of Tequila,” he says. “I have to beg pennies in my own village from people who never fired a gun.” Zapata sits with the farmers and tells them the land is theirs, but they must protect it. “There are no leaders but yourself. A strong people is the only lasting strength,” he says. As he leaves the house, Eufemio is shot and killed. Zapata is distraught.

Sequence 24

Generals in Mexico City decide to wipe out Zapata and his guerilla army. Fernando (who, convinced that Zapata is not sufficiently revolutionary, has switched sides), explains that the problem is Zapata himself. “Cut off the head of the snake and the body will die,” he says. “Kill Zapata and your problem is solved.”

Sequence 25

Zapata’s forces arrive telling him they have made contact with a general who has been stripped of his rank, and in retaliation offers Zapata a cache of arms and ammunition. “It sounds like a trap,” one of the rebels says. Zapata decides it is worth the risk. Josefa begs him not to go, convinced he will be killed. Zapata insists he must do “what is needed.”

Sequence 26

Zapata and Josefa talk. “If anything happens to you, what would become of these people?” she asks him. “What would they have left?” “Themselves,” he replies. Zapata tells her the people don’t need to be led any longer. They can lead themselves. “Strong people don’t need a strong man.” He leaves.

Sequence 27

Soldiers await Zapata’s entrance into the garrison town. He inspects the weapons and is reunited with his white horse. Zapata is shot down by soldiers as the horse escapes. Fernando screams at them to shoot the horse.

Sequence 28

Zapata’s body is dumped in public. The locals doubt the body is Zapata’s. “They can’t kill him,” they say. “He’s in the mountains... If we ever need him again, he’ll be back.”

Sequence 29

Zapata’s white horse on a mountain cliff-top.