



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (047)

TEXT: *Sin Rumbo*

AUTHOR: Eugenio Cambaceres (1843–1889)

EDITOR / INTRODUCTION & NOTES: J. P. Spicer-Escalante

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

CAMBACERES, MODERNITY, AND SCANDAL

Vanguard posture and reception:

Cultural artifacts that break with prevailing aesthetic norms are often “predestined to scandal” or infamy. Spicer-Escalante emphasizes that **Sin Rumbo** belongs to this category: a work aesthetically and ideologically ahead of its time, clashing with late-19th-century Argentine notions of “good taste.” The problem is not only the graphic content but the audience’s limited capacity—or unwillingness—to receive a new vision.

Naturalism and modernity:

At the end of the 19th century, the irruption of modernity destabilized traditional bourgeois cultural foundations. Literary **naturalism** emerges as a response: a movement that appropriates scientific discourse (Darwin, Claude Bernard, Taine, Letourneau, Prosper Lucas) to analyze the “pathologies” of the social body. Authors conceive themselves as “scientists of the written word,” dissecting social, economic, and moral ills with methods analogized to laboratory observation and experiment.

NATURALISM IN FRANCE AND ITS ARGENTINE RECEPTION

- **French origins:**

Naturalism is a broad philosophical, artistic, and literary movement that radicalizes realism. In France it formally consolidates with Zola’s 1880 essay “Le roman expérimental,” but had already been practiced in works like the Rougon-Macquart cycle and *Germinie Lacerteux* (Goncourt brothers, 1864). Naturalist writers draw on scientific models, privileging heredity, environment, and physiological explanations of passion and behavior.

- **French controversy:**

From 1865–1875, naturalism is attacked in major French periodicals (*Le Figaro*, *Revue des Deux Mondes*) as “rotten literature” due to its graphic portrayals of vice and lower-class life. Naturalists respond via prefaces and press interventions, defending their works as necessary autopsies of social reality. By 1876–1884, the movement’s importance is recognized, even as scandals and polarized reception persist.

- **Arrival in Buenos Aires:**

In Argentina, the partial serialization of Zola’s *L’Assommoir* in *La Nación* (1879), followed by *Nana* (1880), triggers furious debates. Critics decry “pornographic” realism; defenders hail naturalism as a necessary “anatomía normal y patológica de la vida social” (Benigno Lugones). Newspapers like *La Nación* and *Sud-América* become battlegrounds where the aesthetic, moral, and social implications of naturalism are debated in local terms.

EUGENIO CAMBACERES: LIFE, POLITICS, AND TURN TO LITERATURE

- **Biography and social position:**

Born in Buenos Aires in 1843 to a French father (a wealthy saladero magnate) and a criolla mother of Anglo-Saxon blood, Cambaceres grows up in comfort. Educated at



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Colegio Nacional and the Law Faculty, he briefly practices law, then turns to a life of politics, social dandyism, and estanciero pursuits.

- **Political scandals:**

His liberal convictions lead him to propose Church–State separation (1871) and denounce electoral fraud (1874), triggering the Mitrista revolution and earning him the labels “ateo, impío, masón.” Despite re-election, he resigns from Congress in 1876 and withdraws from local politics.

- **Literary career:**

His first novels, *Potpourri* (1882) and *Música sentimental* (1884), appear anonymously and scandalize bourgeois taste with their frank depiction of adultery, sexuality, and illness. By *Sin Rumbo* (1885), published with his name, Cambaceres firmly adopts a naturalist stance, while *En la sangre* (1887) becomes his most overtly naturalist work on immigration and social climbing.

CAMBACERES’S OWN NATURALIST AESTHETIC

- **“Observación” and “verdad”:**

In correspondence with Miguel Cané, Cambaceres articulates his poetics: naturalism is the “study of human nature,” requiring deep observation “hasta los tuétanos.” The writer must take a character, penetrate all the folds of their soul, and show “everything, the good and the bad, the pure (if it exists) and the rot it contains.” Characters must be “flesh and blood,” not stuffed puppets.

- **Scientific method with human pulse:**

Like a scientist in a lab, the novelist must observe the subject in its environment; yet unlike a scientist, he must also heed “the impulses of the heart.” Naturalism is thus experimental and emotional; it rejects romantic idealization but is not purely mechanical.

- **Language and decorum:**

Cambaceres insists on linguistic verisimilitude: no syrupy speech in a dockworker’s mouth nor crude vulgarities in an English governess’s. At the same time, he confesses a personal “flaco por mostrar las cosas en pelota y por hurgar lo que hiede”—a taste for exposing what stinks, driven by truth rather than gratuitous sensationalism.

SIN RUMBO (1885): PLOT AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

- **Synopsis:**

Sin Rumbo centers on **Andrés**, a young wealthy estanciero: rich, liberal, cultured, but spiritually hollow. Bored and morally adrift, he seduces and rapes Donata, the daughter of an old peón, then abandons her to spend the winter in Buenos Aires, pursuing an affair with opera singer Marietta Amorini. Returning to the estancia with renewed hope, he discovers Donata has died in childbirth, leaving a daughter, Andrea. Andrés devotes himself to Andrea for two years, only to see her die of croup. Broken, he commits suicide as his wool—symbol of his patrimony—is burned by a vengeful peón.

- **Psychological pathology and patriarchy:**

Andrés is portrayed as a paradigmatic “man of the 80s”: successful by external measures yet internally corroded by pessimism and existential ennui. Influenced by Schopenhauerian pessimism, he drifts in “negro pesimismo,” unable to channel liberal ideals into ethical leadership. Cambaceres exposes the liberal landowning patriarchy as decadent, egotistical, and ultimately unfit to lead a rapidly changing Argentina.

- **Double mission:**

The novel thus fulfills a double function:



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- **Aesthetic:** introduces full-fledged naturalist narrative techniques into Argentine literature.
- **Social:** uses that aesthetic to diagnose the moral and psychological breakdown of the oligarchy and, by extension, the national project. *Sin Rumbo* buries lingering romantic ideals and anticipates modernist and avant-garde explorations of paralysis and existential crisis.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. **Naturalism and “Truth” in *Sin Rumbo***
How does Cambaceres implement his own program of “observing to the marrow” in *Sin Rumbo*? Identify scenes where Andrés’s psychology is dissected in naturalist detail. To what extent is the narrator “objective,” and where do judgment and irony enter?
2. **Decadent Patriarchy and National Leadership**
In what ways does Andrés represent the liberal, landowning elite of the 1880s? How does his boredom, misogyny, and self-destruction function as a critique of the class charged with steering Argentina’s modernization?
3. **Violence, Sexuality, and Class**
Discuss the scenes involving Donata and Marietta Amorini. How does Cambaceres relate sexual violence and libertinism to class and gender hierarchies? Does the text invite sympathy for Andrés at any point, or does it consistently undermine him?
4. **City vs. Countryside: From “Bestial Monotony” to Purifying Space**
In Cambaceres’s oeuvre, how does the opposition campo/ciudad evolve? How is the estancia configured in *Sin Rumbo*—as monotonous, as refuge, as site of tragedy? How does this compare with *En la sangre*?
5. **Reception and “Good Taste”**
Examine contemporary reactions (e.g., Miguel Cané’s criticisms of “bad taste” and pornography). How do these objections reflect broader cultural anxieties about naturalism, modernity, and the role of literature? What parallels can you draw with the French reception of Zola?
6. **From Naturalism to Modernism**
Spicer-Escalante argues that *Sin Rumbo* anticipates modernist and avant-garde preoccupations with boredom, paralysis, and inner crisis. Identify elements in the novel that point toward 20th-century concerns rather than purely 19th-century ones.

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

1. **What is one of Cambaceres's declared goals for naturalist fiction, as cited in his letters?**

- A) To return to idealized romantic heroes and heroines
- B) To create purely fantastical worlds unrelated to reality
- C) To take a character and "register them to the last fold," showing both purity and rot
- D) To avoid any mention of contemporary society

Correct Answer: C

2. **How is Andrés, the protagonist of *Sin Rumbo*, best characterized?**

- A) A hardworking immigrant striving for education
- B) A poor gaucho persecuted by the state
- C) A wealthy, liberal, cultured estanciero paralyzed by ennui and moral decay
- D) A pious priest fighting social injustice

Correct Answer: C

3. **What primary social function does *Sin Rumbo* serve, according to the introduction?**

- A) It is purely escapist entertainment.
- B) It serves as a social and psychological diagnosis of the liberal landowning patriarchy in fin-de-siècle Argentina.
- C) It is a romantic glorification of gaucho life.
- D) It is a children's moral tale.

Correct Answer: B

4. **In Cambaceres's view, how should a naturalist writer handle language and decorum?**

- A) Use the same refined language for all characters, regardless of class.
- B) Place sweet, euphemistic language in the mouths of workers and crude vulgarities in those of governesses.
- C) Respect linguistic truth: no syrupy speech in a dockworker's mouth, nor crudeness in an English governess's, and avoid artificial "almíbar."
- D) Avoid any depiction of lower-class speech.

Correct Answer: C

5. **What scandal surrounded Cambaceres's early works (e.g., *Potpourri*, *Música sentimental*) and continued with *Sin Rumbo*?**

- A) Their overt defense of socialist revolution
- B) Their use of experimental typography
- C) Their frank treatment of sexuality, illness, and elite hypocrisy, which many critics saw as violating "good taste" and morality
- D) Their plagiarism of French novels

Correct Answer: C

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