



## STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (052)

**TEXT:** *La pasión del obstáculo*

**AUTHOR:** Juana Borrero

**EDITOR:** Francisco Morán

### PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

(Based on Francisco Morán's introduction and commentary)

#### LIFE, FAMILY, AND EARLY GENIUS

Family background: Juana Borrero was born in Havana on May 18, 1877, into a highly cultured family. Her father, Esteban Borrero Echeverría, was a physician and poet; her mother, Consuelo Pierra y Agüero, also wrote verse. Artistic training and literary sensibility were part of the household.

Precocious development: By age five, Juana was drawing symbolic scenes (one surviving piece depicts "Romeo and Juliet"). At seven she was already taking drawing lessons and writing poems (e.g., "Sol poniente"). In 1886 she enrolled in the prestigious San Alejandro art school, receiving formal training in drawing and painting.

The Puentes Grandes "world": The Borrero house in Puentes Grandes (on the Almendares River) became a charged domestic space where art, literature, political discussions, and intense emotional dramas—up to and including murder, attempted suicides, and Esteban's eventual suicide—intersected. Morán underscores how this environment of "orchestrated" proximity to death (loaded pistols, a dagger under Juana's pillow) shapes the erotics and violence that permeate Juana's writing.

#### ENCOUNTER WITH JULIÁN DEL CASAL: CATALYST, NOT ORIGIN

Casal's arrival: In early 1891, Juana meets the modernista poet Julián del Casal, whose presence Dulce María Borrero later evokes as a "broad ray of moonlight" filling and multiplying through the mirrored house. Casal's image—ashen, elegant, melancholy—fascinates the entire family and especially Juana.

Influence and rupture: Casal wrote about Juana's artistic precocity and praised her pictorial and poetic talent, but their personal relationship remains partly mysterious. Juana's letters suggest familiarity, emotional intensity, and a traumatic rupture on November 3, 1892 ("a perfidy of mine... that day at five in the afternoon I made a very great being suffer").

"Virgen triste" and the script of early death: Casal's poem "Virgen triste," published in 1893, with its closing line about "the sadness of beings who must die young," became an obsessive text for Juana. She internalized it as if it were addressed to her and repeated its verses in letters and suicidal fantasies. Morán argues that this poem did not "cause" her death wish, but gave symbolic form to a pre-existing death-driven eros.

#### DESIRE, OBSTACLE, AND THE LETTERS TO CARLOS PÍO UHRBACH

From Casal to Carlos Pío: After Casal's death (1893), Juana transfers her desire to another "impossible" figure: the young poet and future independence fighter Carlos Pío Uhrbach. Reading the Uhrbach brothers' *Gemelas* (1894), she quickly fixes on Carlos as object of desire: "Before two months you will be mine or I will be dead." Their relationship grows almost entirely through letters.



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“Passion of the obstacle”: Morán’s central thesis is that Juana’s true passion is not simply love, but the obstacle that makes love impossible. In Casal, the obstacle is the cold, marble-like figure who cannot be seduced. In Carlos Pío, it is the paternal prohibition, the political commitments, the imminence of war and exile. Juana is erotically drawn to what is blocked, forbidden, unreachable.

Eros, death, and the dagger: The letters (collected in *Epistolario*) are suffused with suicidal and homicidal imagery: daggers, pistols, rivers, scenarios of murder and double suicide. Juana repeatedly says she is “capable of crime” to keep Carlos, fantasizes about killing rivals, and narrates dreams where she stabs a woman at Carlos’s side only to discover “that woman was myself.” The same dagger symbolically links Casal’s gift, the poem “Dolorosa,” and Juana’s fantasies. Morán reads this as an “annihilating eros” that always presses beyond the pleasure principle, toward self- and other-destruction.

#### **PATRIOTISM, EXILE, AND THE NATION AS RIVAL**

José Martí and New York: In 1892, Juana travels to the U.S. with her father. In New York, José Martí presents her to the Cuban exile community as the “niña prodigiosa.” She writes the sonnet “Apolo” during this trip and leaves small paintings as gifts. Her artistic and political consciousness deepen, as does her involvement in pro-independence circles.

War and impossible farewell: When Carlos Pío decides to join the independence war, a new, absolute obstacle appears: the possibility of his death. For Juana, Cuba (the patria) is both the stern father demanding sacrifice and the rival woman she cannot compete with. She writes: “You are my homeland. You are worth more than it to me.” Her jealousy extends to the nation itself: she resents being judged for not sharing the war enthusiasm she sees around her.

Exile and death: Political circumstances force the Borrero family into exile in Key West (Cayo Hueso) in 1896. Juana, already very ill, continues to write urgent, fevered letters that intertwine physical decline and emotional abandonment (“Convinced that I will live very little...”). She dies in Cayo Hueso on March 9, 1896, dictating her “Última rima.” Carlos Pío dies in combat the following year (1897).

#### **REASSESSING JUANA BORRERO: MODERNISTA, NOT MARGINAL**

Critical marginalization: For decades, Juana was treated as a late Romantic, or as a “child genius” defined primarily by her connection to Casal (or to Martí, in later reinterpretations), often infantilized as “Juanita” and relegated to an appendix of male figures. Her works were hard to access: Cuban editions of *Poesías* (1966), *Poesías y cartas* (1978), and the two-volume *Epistolario* are rare and long out of print.

Eroticism and modernismo: Morán and more recent critics argue that her intense, transgressive representations of eroticism, jealousy, homoerotic undertones, and suicidal desire place her in the vortex of modernismo rather than its margins. Poems like “Apolo” and “Última rima” dramatize the collision between absolute desire and insuperable obstacle through striking bodily imagery (kisses on cold marble, impossible demands to be kissed “without fire, without fever and without yearning”).

Body, writing, and modern subjectivity: For Morán, the core of Juana’s modernity lies in the prominence of the sensory experience of the body and writing as the trace of that body. Her poetry and letters do not simply “reflect” inner feelings but enact a



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performance where desire, gender, and nation are interrogated and destabilized. Rather than a derivative “shadow of Casal,” she is a crucial, if belatedly recognized, modernista voice.

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## PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

### *Desire and the Obstacle*

How does Morán’s idea of “la pasión del obstáculo” change our reading of Juana Borrero’s life and work? Identify scenes (from poems or letters) where the impossibility of fulfillment seems more central than fulfillment itself. How does this compare to other modernista treatments of frustrated desire?

### *Casal, “Virgen triste,” and Scripted Early Death*

Analyze the role of Casal’s poem “Virgen triste” in Juana’s imagination. Is the poem a prophecy she feels compelled to fulfill, or a text she reappropriates for her own purposes? How does internalizing another poet’s script affect her own voice?

### *Eros, Violence, and the Dagger*

Consider the recurring motifs of the dagger, pistols, rivers, and blood in Juana’s letters. How do erotic and violent impulses intersect? In what ways do these fantasies challenge or complicate traditional images of “innocent” feminine love in 19th-century literature?

### *Nation, Father, and Rival*

Discuss how the figure of the patria (Cuba) functions in Juana’s letters when Carlos Pío joins the independence war. How does she position herself vis-à-vis nationalist discourse? In what ways is the homeland simultaneously father, rival, and absent lover?

### *Modernismo and Gender*

To what extent does Juana Borrero’s treatment of eroticism, jealousy, and homoerotic desire align her with modernista contemporaries like Delmira Agustini or Alfonsina Storni, rather than with earlier Romantic poets or with G. Gómez de Avellaneda? How does gender shape her reception within Cuban literary historiography?

### *Editing, Canon, and Access*

What is the significance of Morán’s critical edition for the study of Borrero? How do availability of texts, editorial choices, and national literary narratives influence which authors are canonized or marginalized? How might a course syllabus change if Borrero’s work is placed alongside Casal, Martí, and other modernistas?

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### PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)**

*According to Francisco Morán, what is the true “passion” that structures Juana Borrero’s life and writing?*

- A) Wealth and social status
- B) Travel and adventure
- C) The obstacle—the impossibility that sustains desire
- D) Religious devotion

**Correct Answer: C**

*What role does Julián del Casal’s poem “Virgen triste” play in Juana’s imagination?*

- A) None; she never read it.
- B) It is a purely political allegory she ignores.
- C) She internalizes it as if addressed to her, especially its prediction that some “must die young,” and repeats its verses obsessively.
- D) It convinces her to abandon poetry.

**Correct Answer: C**

*Which of the following best describes Juana’s letters to Carlos Pío Uhrbach, as read by Morán?*

- A) Conventional romantic correspondence, free of conflict
- B) Calm political essays about Cuban independence
- C) Texts suffused with suicidal and homicidal fantasies, where eros and death are inextricably intertwined
- D) Primarily religious meditations

**Correct Answer: C**

*Why has Juana Borrero often been marginalized in Cuban literary history, according to the introduction?*

- A) Her work was written in English and not considered Cuban.
- B) She published too many volumes and overshadowed male poets.
- C) She has been infantilized as a “girl genius,” seen as an appendix to male figures (Casal, Martí, her father), and her texts remained hard to access.
- D) She wrote only prose, not poetry.

**Correct Answer: C**

*In poems like “Apolo” and “Última rima,” what key modernista feature does Morán highlight?*

- A) Strict adherence to classical meters with no erotic content
- B) The centrality of the sensory body and writing as the trace of that body, staging desire as a confrontation with an impossible or “cold” object
- C) Total rejection of any personal emotion
- D) Simple patriotic themes with no psychological complexity

**Correct Answer: B**

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