STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (053)



TITLE: Stella
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EDITOR: Mary G. Berg
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Subject Areas: Turn-of-the-Century Latin American Literature, Argentine Cultural History, Women's Writing & the Female Bildungsroman, Fin-de-Siècle Modernity, Bestseller Studies

I. OVERVIEW & SIGNIFICANCE

Published in Buenos Aires in 1905 to immediate critical and commercial acclaim—reaching nine editions of one thousand copies within months, inspiring translations across Europe, and later a 1944 film adaptation directed by Benito Perojo—Stella stands as Argentina's first modern literary bestseller. Written by Emma de la Barra (1861–1947) under the masculine pseudonym Cesar Duáyen, the novel opens with the arrival in Buenos Aires of two orphaned sisters following the death of their father, a renowned Norwegian polar explorer: the frail, paraplegic child Stella, and her twenty-year-old sister Alejandra (Alex), rigorously educated in Norway in science, mathematics, and modern languages. Taken into the opulent household of their maternal uncle's family (the Maura Sagasta/Quirós clan), Alex's practical work ethic—editing her father's memoirs, founding a rural school on the family estancia, and secretly rescuing her relatives from financial ruin and embezzlement—clashes with the prejudices, silences, and idle materialism of the porteño oligarchy. Unfolding largely through the limited, conflicted perspective of Máximo Quirós—a wealthy, educated, yet paralyzed and cynical Argentine heir who repeatedly misreads Alex's honorable actions before awakening to her worth—Stella operates simultaneously as an Austenian drama of pride and misperception and as a clinical dissection of pre-Centennial Argentina. Featuring a landmark critical introduction by Mary G. Berg (Harvard/Brandeis), this Stockcero edition provides an indispensable text for seminars examining the emergence of the Mujer Moderna, the limits of positivist modernization, and the subversion of traditional nineteenth-century foundational romances.

II. CONTEXT & CRITICAL APPROACHES

• The Female Bildungsroman and the Unresolved "Foundational Fiction":

Engaging Doris Sommer's paradigm of Latin American national romances and Francine Masiello's reading of the female bildungsroman, instructors can examine how Duáyen resists the easy reconciliation of erotic desire and nation-building.
Rather than smoothly integrating into the patriarchal state, the country's most talented modernizers (Alex and Máximo) experience profound alienation, culminating in an ambiguous ending in which Alex returns to Christiania (Oslo) to teach natural sciences and geography before a last-page, almost ironic suggestion of reconciliation.

• Narrative Focalization, Mirrors, and Social Masquerade:

A central formal achievement of Stella is its narrative focalization through Máximo's flawed consciousness. Surrounded by carnival balls, literal and metaphorical masks, and distorting mirrors, the aristocratic household misconstrues the modern educated

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woman—mistaking Alex for an English governess or a calculating seductress—exposing a society governed by "ubiquitous silences" and appearances rather than rational transparency.

• Transatlantic Cosmopolitanism and Linguistic Hybridity:

Stella captures a Buenos Aires undergoing dizzying demographic and cultural transformation—swelling from 180,000 inhabitants in 1870 to 1.3 million by 1910. The text bristles with Italian immigrant songs, English stewards, German doctors, and multilingual dialogues (with Alex and Máximo discovering they can only speak frankly to one another when conversing in English), allowing students to analyze how European pedagogical models both empower and estrange the Argentine modern woman.

• Veiled Eroticism and Modernist Symbolism:

Drawing on Diane E. Marting's scholarship on female desire, courses can explore how Duáyen channels intense physical and emotional longing through modernist visual contrasts—light and shadow, black and white butterflies, birds, and unspoken gazes—within the constraints of upper-class decorum.

• Paired Pedagogical Module (Stella & Mecha Iturbe):

Because Stockcero's catalog also includes Duáyen's 1906 novel Mecha Iturbe (likewise edited by Mary G. Berg), instructors can pair both works to trace Emma de la Barra's own reformist passions—as co-founder of Argentina's Red Cross, its first professional school for women, and a model workers' neighborhood in Tolosa—across two distinct portraits of female autonomy amidst strikes, factories, new hospitals, and aristocratic resistance.

Classroom Discussion Questions:

- How does Duáyen's decision to filter much of the narrative through Máximo Quirós's partial and often mistaken perspective (reminiscent of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice) heighten suspense and force the reader to decode the difference between social masks and moral reality?
- Why do Alex's European education and practical competencies—accounting, financial management, and teaching rural children—provoke hostility and suspicion among her wealthy porteño relatives rather than admiration?
- In what ways do Alejandra (rational, scientific, self-controlled) and her disabled younger sister Stella (pure affect and spiritual warmth) function as complementary doubles, and how does Alex's duty to protect Stella trap her within a "system of gray insinuations"?
- How does the novel's ending—with Alex returning to Norway to teach natural sciences and geography at the Women's Higher School of Christiania, followed by a brief, ambiguous hint of reunion with a reformed Máximo—challenge the conventional happy ending of romantic melodrama?

III. ADVANCED DISCUSSION & RESEARCH PROMPTS

• Rewriting the National Romance at the Centennial:

Using Doris Sommer's Foundational Fictions and María Inés de Torres's analysis of erotic-patriotic rhetoric as theoretical frameworks, write a research paper examining why the romantic union between the modernizing woman (Alex) and the potential national

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leader (Máximo) is repeatedly thwarted in Stella. What does Máximo's abulia and cynicism diagnose about the Argentine ruling class in 1905?

• The Gaze, the Mirror, and the "Modern Woman":
Analyze the recurring motifs of mirrors, carnival masks, and visual misinterpretation in Stella (such as Máximo misreading Alex's reflection in the mirror or Montero mistaking her for a servant). How does Emma de la Barra use visual distortion to critique patriarchal anxieties surrounding female intellectual and sexual agency? • Comparative Study—Emma de la Barra's Diptych of Modernity (Stella and Mecha Iturbe): Conduct a comparative study of Stockcero's critical editions of Stella (1905) and Mecha Iturbe (1906), both edited by Mary G. Berg. Compare how Alex's Nordic scientific education and Mecha Iturbe's European widowhood equip—or fail to equip—both protagonists to navigate Argentina's transition from a traditional agrarian oligarchy to an industrializing nation of strikes, factories, and social reform.

IV. SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

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V. RELATED STOCKCERO RESOURCES

A comprehensive collection focusing on female protagonists, writers, and the shifting societal roles of women in Latin America. Included titles: *Sacrificio y Recompensa, Stella, La gozadora del dolor, Mecha Iturbe, Eleodora - Las consecuencias, A Dead Rose, La Vida manda, y otros textos,* and *Roque Moreno*.

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