

STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (083)

TITLE: Mecha Iturbe
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EDITOR: Mary G. Berg
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Subject Areas: Turn-of-the-Century Latin American Literature, Argentine Cultural & Labor History, Women's Writing & Early Feminism, History of Medicine & Science, Utopian & Industrial Fiction

I. OVERVIEW & SIGNIFICANCE

Published in Buenos Aires in 1906 in an unprecedented initial print run of 6,000 copies—earning author Emma de la Barra (writing as Cesar Duáyen) a record 5,000-peso advance from Maucci Hermanos following the triumph of Stella—Mecha Iturbe is the most expansive and sociologically ambitious of Duáyen's novels.

Set amidst the dizzying demographic and technological boom of pre-Centennial Argentina (which absorbed over three million European immigrants between 1880 and 1905), the narrative follows the return to Buenos Aires of Mecha Iturbe, a wealthy, charismatic young widow shaped by a decade in traditional Madrid aristocracy.

Though possessing total financial and personal independence, Mecha struggles to integrate into an effervescent new Argentina defined by factories, labor strikes, medical congresses, and social reform.

Her internal paralysis contrasts sharply with three agents of national modernization: Marco Silas, a prominent physician and public health reformer whom Mecha loves; Pablo Herrera, an idealistic engineer and labor leader who establishes the utopian industrial community of Ciudad Obrera de Itahú; and Hellen Buclerc, an English-educated ophthalmic surgeon of Finnish-Argentine descent who embodies the professional Mujer Moderna.

Restoring the complete 526-page text of the 1906 first edition (subsequent twentieth-century reprints were heavily abridged) alongside a critical introduction by Mary G. Berg, this Stockcero edition is an essential resource for seminars on Latin American modernization, women in science, and turn-of-the-century labor utopias.

II. CONTEXT & CRITICAL APPROACHES

• Two Paradigms of Womanhood—The Aristocratic Widow and the Woman Surgeon:

Mecha Iturbe stages a compelling juxtaposition between two female archetypes in transition. While Mecha is witty, generous, and socially dazzling, her traditional Spanish formation leaves her unable to engage directly with modern scientific labor—fainting into cerebral fever upon accidentally witnessing an anatomy lesson, and ultimately dying in a tragic case of mistaken identity at a charity masquerade ball. Conversely, the surgeon Hellen Buclerc—modeled on pioneering Argentine women physicians such as Cecilia Grierson (1859–1934) and Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane (1867–1954)—renounces her passion for sculpture to perform sight-restoring eye surgeries at the workers' hospital in Itahú.

• Industrial Utopias, Labor Reform, and Class Tensions:

Drawing directly on Emma de la Barra's own experience co-founding a model workers' neighborhood in Tolosa near the La Plata railway workshops in 1882, the novel depicts

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the utopian Ciudad Obrera de Itahú, where factories manufacture everything from textiles to automobiles. Instructors can guide students in analyzing the ideological contradictions of this patrician reformism, culminating in the novel's dramatic Easter finale: as thousands of factory workers gather in the square, Dr. Marco Silas tears the aristocratic lace from his newborn daughter's baptismal gown to erase class distinctions, even as the child is christened "Mecha" ("Mecha no ha muerto: ¡Mecha ha recomenzado!").

• The Limits of Positivist Masculinity and the Unresolved National Romance:

Engaging Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions* and María Inés de Torres's scholarship on nation-building, courses can examine how Duáyen exposes the lingering patriarchal prejudices of progressive men. Despite Marco Silas's scientific idealism, he rejects Mecha as "useless" for the modern project yet also bypasses his intellectual equal, the surgeon Hellen, choosing instead to marry a docile, unformed young assistant who worships him.

• Cosmopolitanism, Immigration, and the Press (Caras y Caretas & El Búcaro Americano):

The text immerses readers in the linguistic and material hybridity of 1906 Buenos Aires—populated by Belgian engineers, French technicians, English loanwords ("*chauffeur,*" "*coach woman,*" "*flirt*," "*leader*"), and debates over whether European industrial imports retard moral progress.

• Paired Pedagogical Module (Mecha Iturbe & Stella):

Paired with Stockcero's critical edition of *Stella* (1905, also edited by Mary G. Berg), *Mecha Iturbe* allows instructors to trace Duáyen's evolution from the domestic microcosm of the oligarchic estancia in *Stella* to the macro-social canvas of hospitals, industrial towns, and public health congresses in *Mecha Iturbe*.

Classroom Discussion Questions:

• Mecha Iturbe enjoys everything nineteenth-century heroines typically lacked: wealth, widowhood, health, and freedom from parental or marital guardianship. Why does her absolute personal independence fail to bring her fulfillment or allow her to connect with modernizing Argentina?
• How does the character of the ophthalmic surgeon Hellen Buclerc—dressed in white, possessing an "almost virile gaze," and operating on patients' eyes in the Ciudad Obrera—reflect both the triumphs and the personal sacrifices required of Argentina's first generation of professional women?
• What does Marco Silas's quote—"Europa exporta sus excesos en ideas, en hombres, en manufacturas, que nosotros acogemos sin análisis... El progreso moral se retarda"—reveal about elite anxieties regarding mass immigration and technological consumerism in 1906?
• How should readers interpret the deeply ambivalent final scene at the church of the Ciudad Obrera de Itahú, where Marco strips the luxurious lace from his infant daughter before presenting her to the workers under the name "Mecha"? Does this ending celebrate egalitarian renewal or reinforce patrician paternalism?

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III. ADVANCED DISCUSSION & RESEARCH PROMPTS

• Women, Medicine, and the Public Sphere in Fin-de-Siècle Argentina:

Research the historical emergence of female physicians and feminist reformers in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires (such as Cecilia Grierson, Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane, and Clorinda Matto de Turner's journal El Búcaro Americano). How does Emma de la Barra use the hospital and the anatomy theater in Mecha Iturbe to demarcate the boundary between the traditional upper-class lady (Mecha) and the modern scientific professional (Hellen)?

• Utopian Industrialism and Patrician Reform (From Tolosa to Itahú):

Analyze the representation of the Ciudad Obrera de Itahú and the engineer Pablo Herrera in light of Argentine labor history and Tulio Halperín Donghi's studies on immigration. How does Duáyen negotiate the tension between emerging working-class organization (strikes, factories) and top-down philanthropic paternalism?

• Comparative Study—The Masquerade of Modernity in Stella (1905) and Mecha Iturbe (1906):

Conduct a comparative analysis of Stockcero's critical editions of *Stella* and *Mecha Iturbe.* Examine the recurring motif of the masquerade ball in both novels—culminating in Mecha's accidental murder while in costume at a charity ball—as a metaphor for the disjunction between outward social performance and inward psychological paralysis in the Argentine ruling class.

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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