



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (100)

TEXT: *Viaje a la Habana* (1844)

AUTHOR: Mercedes Montalvo (Condesa de Merlin)

EDITOR: Adriana Mendez Rodenas

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Mercedes Merlin: A Hybrid Romantic Figure

Mercedes Montalvo y O'Farrill, the Countess of Merlin (1789-1852), was a key figure of Hispanic American Romanticism. Born into the Cuban sacaro-cracy, she spent much of her life in Europe, becoming a renowned Parisian salonnière. Her *Viaje a la Habana* (1844), an abridged Spanish version of her French *La Havane* (also 1844), is a seminal autobiographical work, chronicling her emotional return to her native Cuba after over three decades of absence.

The Journey as a Constructor of Identity and Nation

Viaje a la Habana subverts the traditional European "Grand Tour" by making the traveler's homeland, Havana, the exotic destination. Merlin's journey is an "initiativ voyage," a poignant re-encounter with her childhood landscapes and a critical observation of colonial Cuban society. Through the evocation of relatives, characters (e.g., the African wet nurse, Creole elites, guajiros), and key city landmarks, Merlin constructs a "topography of the city" that is deeply personal yet also foundational for nascent Cuban national identity.

Colonial Critique and Early Nationalist Consciousness

The text subtly (and sometimes less subtly) critiques the enduring colonial condition of Cuba. While the French version, *La Havane*, contained strong political denunciations (including against colonial administration and slavery, as seen in her controversial "Lettre XX"), the Spanish *Viaje a la Habana* is notably stripped of overtly political content. This editorial decision reflects the volatile political climate in Cuba (e.g., the aftermath of the Conspiración de la Escalera) and Merlin's strategic role as a mediator between Spain and the colony. Nonetheless, the narrative reveals early signs of a Creole civic consciousness and a yearning for national self-definition.

Literary Reception and Gendered Discourses

The reception of Merlin's work in Cuba was ambivalent. While lauded for her talent, her dual nationality and European perspective often led to accusations of being an "outsider." Literary figures like Domingo del Monte criticized her Romantic approach, advocating for a more realist depiction of the island. Conversely, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's prologue to *Viaje a la Habana* (reproduced in this edition) praises Merlin's work, subtly establishing a literary sisterhood between two pioneering women writers and founders of a Cuban national discourse.

Literary Innovations and Archetypes

Viaje a la Habana is rich in literary devices. Merlin uses memory and nostalgia to idealize and "exoticize" the familiar Cuban landscape. Her "sentimental grand tour" employs hyperbolic rhetoric and sensory details to convey the tropical intensity. The text anticipates the "viaje a la semilla" (journey to the seed) archetype, later famously



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explored by Alejo Carpentier, highlighting a complex return to origins that acknowledges the impossibility of full recovery while affirming the necessity of the journey itself.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Dual Identity and Narrative Perspective:

How does **Mercedes Merlin's** hybrid identity (Cuban-born, European-educated, French salonnière) influence her perspective in *Viaje a la Habana*? Discuss the “doublure existencial” (existence in duality) and how it shapes her observations of Cuba.

Subverting the "Grand Tour":

Compare and contrast **Merlin's** journey to **Havana** with the traditional European “Grand Tour.” In what ways does her return to her homeland alter or subvert the conventions of 18th-century travel writing?

Colonial Critique and National Consciousness:

Discuss the subtle and explicit critiques of colonial administration and society in *Viaje a la Habana*. How does **Merlin** contribute to the awakening of a Cuban national consciousness, especially given the politically censored nature of the Spanish edition?

Memory, Nostalgia, and Topography:

Analyze the role of memory, nostalgia, and idealization in **Merlin's** depiction of **Havana**. How does she construct an “imaginary topography” of the city, blending personal recollection with exotic description for a European audience?

The Literary Landscape of Early 19th-Century Cuba:

Discuss the literary and intellectual context of **Merlin's** time, including the “tertulia del montina” and figures like **Domingo del Monte** and **Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda**. How did **Merlin's** work contribute to or challenge the developing Cuban literary canon?

Gender and Authority in Travel Writing:

As a woman writer in the 19th century, how does **Mercedes Merlin** assert her authority and voice in *Viaje a la Habana*? Consider the critiques she faced (e.g., from **Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel**) and the support she received (e.g., from **Gómez de Avellaneda**).

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Montalvo, Mercedes (Condesa de Merlin).** *Viaje a la Habana*. SpanishBookPress Edition.
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- **Merlin, la Comtesse de.** *La Havane*. (Original French edition).
- **Tanco y Bosmeniel, Félix.** *Refutación al folleto intitulado Viage a la Habana*.
- **Carpentier, Alejo.** *Viaje a la semilla*.



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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

Viaje a la Habana is an abridged Spanish version of which larger work by Mercedes Merlin?

- A) *Mes douze premières années*
- B) *La Havane*
- C) *Souvenirs et Mémoires*
- D) *Lola y María*

Correct Answer: B

The author, Mercedes Montalvo, held what noble title?

- A) Duchess of Alba
- B) Marchioness of Villena
- C) Countess of Merlin
- D) Baroness of Havana

Correct Answer: C

What was a primary motivation for Mercedes Merlin's return to Havana in 1840?

- A) To escape political persecution
- B) To secure financial inheritance after her husband's death
- C) To study indigenous cultures
- D) To establish a new literary salon

Correct Answer: B

Who wrote the prologue to the first Spanish edition of *Viaje a la Habana*, reproduced in this edition?

- A) Agustín de Palma
- B) Alejo Carpentier
- C) Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda
- D) Domingo del Monte

Correct Answer: C

The text implicitly critiques aspects of colonial Cuba, but the Spanish version notably omits strong direct criticism found in the French original, particularly concerning:

- A) The local cuisine
- B) The efficiency of postal services
- C) The colonial administration and slavery
- D) The architectural styles of Havana

Correct Answer: C

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