



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (116)

TEXT: *Cien botellas en una pared* (2002)

AUTHOR: Ena Lucía Portela

EDITOR: Iraida H. Lopez

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

A Postmodern Cuban _Noir_

Ena Lucía Portela's (b. 1972) *Cien botellas en una pared* (One Hundred Bottles on a Wall, 2002) is a masterful example of postmodern Cuban detective fiction. Set in Havana during the "Special Period" of the 1990s—a time of severe economic crisis following the collapse of the socialist bloc—the novel dissects a double homicide through the eyes of its narrator, Zeta, an aspiring writer surviving by illicit means. It is a work deeply intertwined with the "neo-policia" genre, challenging classic detective fiction tropes.

Critique of Utopia and Societal Decay

The narrative critically engages with the collapse of revolutionary ideals and the ensuing societal challenges in Cuba. Zeta's relationship with Moisés, a former Supreme Court magistrate whose story is linked to "the twilight of a world and the fall of the gods," symbolizes the disillusionment and moral ambiguities of the era. The novel delves into marginalized urban spaces, such as La Esquina del Martillo Alegre, revealing a Havana often excluded from tourist guides.

Metafiction, Intertextuality, and Humor

Portela employs extensive metafiction, intertextuality, humor, irony, and parody. The novel often reflects on the act of writing itself, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. The narrative voice of Zeta, seemingly ingenuous but sharply observant, allows Portela to deliver incisive critiques of societal absurdities and political realities without direct confrontation. References to authors like Dashiell Hammett, Agatha Christie, and Umberto Eco highlight its self-awareness within the genre.

Violence, Marginality, and Generational Divide

Cien botellas en una pared frankly portrays violence—both physical and systemic—and explores the Cuban underworld. It examines themes of racism, prostitution ("jineterismo"), surveillance, corruption, and social discrimination, all against a backdrop of deep generational divides. The "novísimos" generation of Cuban writers, to which Portela belongs, prioritizes formal experimentation and explores the darker side of human existence, often with humor and irreverence, rejecting ideological burdens.

Justice, Impunity, and the "Post-Detective" Era

In line with the "post-detective" trend, Portela's novel questions the traditional role of the detective and the certainty of justice. Crimes often remain unsolved, or the perpetrators unpunished, reflecting a world where "justice is a moral and legal concept that is not always present in the reality of life" (Leonardo Padura). The work ultimately makes a radical call for human autonomy and liberation, challenging limiting epistemological systems and societal prejudices.



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PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Postmodern Noir in Cuba:

Discuss how *Cien botellas en una pared* exemplifies postmodern detective fiction. How does it subvert or redefine classic *noir* tropes regarding crime, truth, and justice?

The "Special Period" as Literary Context:

Analyze how the economic and social crisis of Cuba's "Special Period" in the 1990s shapes the narrative, characters, and themes of the novel. What specific challenges of that era are depicted?

Narrative Voice and Humor:

Examine the role of **Zeta** as the narrator. How does her "ingenuous" perspective and **Portela's** use of humor, irony, and satire contribute to the novel's critical edge? How does this allow for social commentary?

Marginality and Urban Spaces:

Discuss the depiction of marginalized urban spaces in Havana, such as La Esquina del Martillo Alegre and the "islotos dentro de la isla." How do these spaces foster a unique blend of languages, discourses, and social behaviors?

The "Novísimos" Generation:

Explore **Portela's** place within the "novísimos" generation of Cuban writers. What are their shared characteristics, and how does **Portela's** work distinguish itself, particularly in its focus on violence and criminality?

Challenging Master Narratives:

How does **Portela** use the novel to critique official narratives (e.g., political propaganda) and challenge deeply ingrained societal fictions? Discuss the concept of "the other story, the subterranean one" and its significance in the novel.

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Portela, Ena Lucía.** *Cien botellas en una pared*. SpanishBookPress Edition.
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- **Araújo, Nara.** "Escenarios del cuerpo en la narrativa de **Ena Lucía Portela**."



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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

Cien botellas en una pared is set in Havana during which significant period of Cuban history?

- A) The Cuban Revolution (1950s)
- B) The "Special Period" (1990s)
- C) The pre-revolutionary era (1940s)
- D) The present day (2020s)

Correct Answer: B

What literary genre does Ena Lucía Portela's novel primarily engage with, but also subvert?

- A) Science Fiction
- B) Romantic Novel
- C) Detective Fiction (*noir* / policial)
- D) Historical Epic

Correct Answer: C

The narrator and protagonist of the novel is named:

- A) Linda Roth
- B) Alix Ostión
- C) Zeta
- D) Moisés

Correct Answer: C

The novel's narrative style is characterized by extensive use of:

- A) Formal academic language
- B) Poetic verse and allegories
- C) Cuban colloquialisms, slang, and intertextuality
- D) Historical documents and testimonials

Correct Answer: C

According to the introduction, what was one of the primary reasons for the literary innovations by the "novísimos" generation in Cuba?

- A) To strictly adhere to socialist realism
- B) To purge literature of ideological burdens and focus on formal experimentation
- C) To promote a unified national identity
- D) To avoid any mention of social problems

Correct Answer: B

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