



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (125)

TEXT: *Las Hortensias y otros cuentos*

AUTHOR: Felisberto Hernández

EDITOR: Ana María Hernández

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

1. FELISBERTO HERNÁNDEZ: "A WRITER'S WRITER" AND THE "MYSTERY":

Often dubbed "a writer's writer," Felisberto Hernández is lauded by colleagues for his unique approach to narrative, which deliberately breaks from conventional literary norms. Influenced by figures like Hoffmann, Gogol, Poe, and Kafka, his seemingly eccentric narratives form a coherent system of allusions and correspondences.

Hernández's core mission was to redefine the human being and replace accepted notions of material reality with what he called "the mystery"—the profound, often overlooked realities that fall outside the narrow, utilitarian focus of conventional understanding.

2. MUSICALITY AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN HIS WORK:

As a trained musician and composer, Felisberto's literary compositions are often analogous to musical structures, emphasizing the relationships between "notes" (symbols, themes) and "phrases" (narrative segments). His work is deeply intertextual, creating subtle correlations through synesthesia, simile, synecdoche, and metonymy.

Recurring symbols like the horse, plants, green color, dolls, machines, water, the house, and "animated" objects (often contrasted with black and white or light and shadow) gain evocative intensity through repetition and recontextualization across his stories, often taking precedence over the characters themselves.

3. EXPLORING THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE "MULTIPLE SELF":

Hernández consciously delves into the mysteries of the unconscious, using a symbolic system that rejects the static notion of the individual. His characters are often "dividuos"—multiple, unbound by traditional personality—and become entangled with the objects and elements that surround them.

Stories like "Las Hortensias" and "La casa inundada" are prime examples where characters' desires and psyches are projected onto objects, dolls, or the very environment, challenging conventional boundaries between self and non-self, mirroring philosophical concepts of personality change (Novalis, Bergson) and psychological theories of the double (Freud).

4. CRITIQUE OF "LA GRAN COSTUMBRE" AND WESTERN CIVILIZATION:

Despite his conservative political leanings, Felisberto's work (like that of Hoffmann and Cortázar) subtly subverts what Cortázar termed "La Gran Costumbre"—the established norms of organized society. He presents a world where the lines between good and evil, moral and immoral, normal and morbid are blurred.



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His narratives implicitly critique the mechanization and dehumanization of the industrial age, portraying civilization as a "long and painful exile." This is evident in the hostile counterpoint between the natural world (plants, water) and the modern world (machines), which are often depicted as malevolent and destructive forces.

5. KEY STORIES IN THE COLLECTION:

"El caballo perdido":

Explores memory and recollection, with the horse symbolizing the unconscious and freedom from social restrictions.

"Explicación falsa de mis cuentos":

A theoretical meta-narrative, using the metaphor of literary creation as a plant, rejecting logic in favor of sensory immersion.

"La mujer parecida a mí":

Continues the horse metaphor, associating it with the defiant spirit of the protagonist, Tomasa.

"El comedor oscuro":

Develops themes of the double and reflection through the relationship between Mrs. Muñeca and Dolly, prefiguring the dolls in "Las Hortensias."

"El balcón":

A poignant tale from a pianist narrator, where the color green and plants attempt to compensate for the sterility of the environment.

"Nadie encendía las lámparas":

Correlates a sensual girl with a statue, exploring the displacement of sexual content onto surrounding objects.

"Menos Julia":

Intensifies the correlation of sensuality with objects, focusing on the protagonist's obsession with touching faces and objects in darkness, using musical structures.

"El acomodador":

Centers on the theme of "vision"—both literal and metaphorical—exploring the narrator's voyeurism and challenging social norms.

"Las Hortensias":

A masterpiece employing an aristocratic protagonist (Horacio) and his elaborate, doll-filled fantasies, critiquing societal constraints and the boundaries of the self.

"La casa inundada":

Felisberto's final, most complex work, a "symphony of water" that integrates all his recurring themes and symbols (water, plants, horse, isolated house) in a contrapuntal structure, hinting at the "mystery" of origin and a fragmented reality.



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PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Felisberto's Unique Narrative Voice:

Discuss how Felisberto Hernández challenges traditional narrative structures and character development. How does his approach differ from more conventional short story writers you have read?

The Role of Objects:

Analyze how inanimate objects, dolls, or animals take on psychological significance and agency in Felisberto's stories (e.g., the dolls in "Las Hortensias," the horse in "El caballo perdido"). What does this reveal about his view of reality and human consciousness?

Musicality in Prose:

Given Felisberto's background as a musician, identify and discuss how musical concepts (like counterpoint, repetition, variations on a theme) are reflected in the structure, rhythm, and thematic development of his stories.

The "Mystery" vs. Reality:

How does Felisberto explore the "mystery" of existence, replacing conventional material reality with a deeper, often unsettling, dimension? Provide examples from the stories where this "mystery" is most evident.

Subversion of Norms:

Despite his conservative politics, how does Felisberto's writing implicitly subvert societal norms related to personality, morality, and human identity? Consider how his work challenges conventional notions of "pornography" or "perversion" by transcending them.

Symbolism and Intertextuality:

Choose a recurring symbol (e.g., water, green, horses) and trace its evolution and meaning across several stories in the collection. How does the intertextual nature of his work enrich its overall meaning?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

Which statement best characterizes Felisberto Hernández's literary mission, as described in the introduction?

- A) To strictly adhere to the conventions of traditional realist fiction.
- B) To redefine the human being and explore a deeper "mystery" beyond material reality.
- C) To meticulously document Uruguayan social and political history.
- D) To solely focus on biographical elements in his narratives.

Correct Answer: B

How does Felisberto Hernández's musical background influence his writing?

- A) He primarily writes stories about musicians.
- B) His narratives often feature harmonious, conventional plots.
- C) He incorporates musical structures like repetition and counterpoint in his literary compositions.
- D) He uses highly descriptive language to evoke sound.

Correct Answer: C

The recurring symbol of "machines" in Felisberto's work, particularly in "Las Hortensias," often represents:

- A) The progress and advancement of modern society.
- B) Elements of humor and playful experimentation.
- C) Malevolent, destructive forces and the dehumanization of the contemporary world.
- D) A celebration of industrial innovation.

Correct Answer: C

According to the introduction, which concept is most central to understanding Felisberto's characters?

- A) They are singular, well-defined individuals.
- B) They are "dividuos"—multiple, unbound by traditional personality, and intertwined with objects.
- C) They consistently embody moral virtues.
- D) They serve primarily as allegorical figures for political ideologies.

Correct Answer: B

"La casa inundada," Felisberto's last story, is characterized as a "symphony" or "palimpsest" primarily because it:

- A) Features a large number of musical characters.
- B) Combines and structures recurring themes (water, plants, horse, isolated house) in a complex, contrapuntal way.
- C) Is divided into distinct movements like a classical symphony.
- D) Was intended to be performed with musical accompaniment.

Correct Answer: B



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