



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (143)

TEXT: *El año del desierto*

AUTHOR: Pedro Mairal

EDITOR: Susan Hallstead / Juan Pablo Dabove

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

1. THE "INTEMPERIE" AS THE AGENT OF DISSOLUTION:

The novel is driven by a mysterious force called the "Intemperie" (The Elements/Outdoors). It acts as an agent of a triple dissolution: the disintegration of the protagonist's (María) consciousness, the literal destruction of the city of Buenos Aires, and the collapse of the Argentine nation.

The nature of the Intemperie is ambiguous—it is never fully explained whether it is a natural, supernatural, or political phenomenon. Its effects are seen in the accelerated decay of buildings, infrastructure, and all traces of human culture, mirroring apocalyptic narratives but with a distinct local flavor.

2. A HISTORICAL REGRESSION AND NATIONAL ALLEGORY:

As the Intemperie advances, the timeline of the novel moves forward (over one year), but society undergoes a rapid historical regression. Argentina devolves from a modern, 21st-century capitalist society back to a nomadic, barbaric state, echoing its colonial past and the era of the Spanish conquest.

This regression can be read as a powerful allegory for Argentina's "narrative of crisis and failure" (1930-2001). The novel reflects the collective trauma of economic collapse, institutional instability, and the feeling that the nation's best days are in the past, culminating in a chaotic, pre-civilizational state.

3. THE "DESERT" AND THE CIVILIZATION VS. BARBARISM DICHOTOMY:

The title evokes the foundational Argentine concept of the "desert" (la pampa), traditionally viewed by 19th-century intellectuals (like Sarmiento) as the locus of "barbarism" that needed to be conquered by urban "civilization."

In Mairal's novel, the desert reclaims the city. The civilized center (Buenos Aires) is overwhelmed by the barbaric periphery (the "Provi," or province). The novel forces a re-evaluation of this classic dichotomy, as the surviving remnants of "civilization" within the city (like those in the Garay building) ultimately resort to the ultimate barbarism: cannibalism.

4. THE PROTAGONIST AS A MODEL SUBJECT:

María Valdés Neylan is intentionally ordinary—a middle-class urban woman with no exceptional skills or passions, beyond her remarkable resilience. Her triviality makes her a representative figure for the decline of the Argentine middle class.

Her forced, erratic journeys throughout the shrinking city parallel the disintegration of the nation. She loses her family, her boyfriend, her social status, and eventually her languages (Spanish and English), surviving only by adopting the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous "Ú" tribe.



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5. LITERARY INTERTEXTUALITY (CORTÁZAR AND BORGES):

The novel is deeply intertextual. It explicitly nods to Julio Cortázar's "Casa tomada" by housing the displaced siblings, Irene and her brother, in María's apartment, drawing a parallel between the nameless threat of "They" and the Intemperie.

Jorge Luis Borges's influence is ubiquitous, though often implicit. Mairal uses Borgesian techniques, such as the rewriting of national classics (referencing *Martín Fierro*, *La cautiva*, *Facundo*), the blending of real and fictional elements, and the treatment of time where chronological progression masks a cyclical or allegorical eternity.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Defining the "Intemperie":

Based on the introduction, what is the "Intemperie"? Discuss its ambiguous nature. Is it a metaphor for a specific historical event (like the 2001 economic crisis), or does it represent a broader philosophical or existential threat?

The Allegory of Regression:

Analyze how the novel portrays the devolution of society. What specific historical periods of Argentina does María experience in reverse as the city decays? How does this critique the idea of continuous national progress?

Civilization vs. Barbarism Reversed:

How does Mairal play with the traditional Argentine dichotomy of "Civilization" (the city) and "Barbarism" (the desert)? Discuss the irony of the final scenes in the Garay building where the "civilized" survivors resort to cannibalism.

The Role of the Protagonist:

Why do you think Mairal chose an ordinary, somewhat passive character like María to narrate this apocalyptic event? How does her focus on material objects (clothes, makeup) contrast with the massive dissolution happening around her?

Intertextual Echoes:

Discuss the connections between *El año del desierto* and Julio Cortázar's "Casa tomada." How does the presence of Irene and her brother deepen the allegorical meaning of Mairal's novel?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- **Mairal, Pedro.** *El año del desierto*. Ed. Susan Hallstead & Juan Pablo Dabove. Stockcero, [Year of publication].
- **Borges, Jorge Luis.** *Ficciones / El Aleph*. (For intertextual context on Argentine literature and time).
- **Cortázar, Julio.** "Casa tomada" in *Bestiario*. (Crucial intertext for understanding the encroaching threat).
- **Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino.** *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie*. (For the foundational dichotomy explored in the novel).



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- **Svampa, Maristella.** *El dilema argentino: civilización o barbarie*. Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2006. (For socio-political context on the Argentine crisis).
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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

In El año del desierto, what is the "Intemperie"?

- A) A highly organized political rebellion led by the provinces.
- B) A mysterious, unstoppable force that causes the rapid physical and social decay of Buenos Aires.
- C) A newly discovered disease that only affects the urban elite.
- D) The name of the indigenous tribe that ultimately rescues María.

Correct Answer: B

How does time function in relation to history within the novel's narrative?

- A) The story jumps hundreds of years into a highly technological future.
- B) Time stands completely still, trapping the characters in a single day.
- C) While a chronological year passes, society rapidly regresses through previous historical eras back to its origins.
- D) The narrative strictly follows the historical events of the 2001 Argentine economic crisis day by day.

Correct Answer: C

The title of the novel refers to the "desert." In classical Argentine literary tradition (like in Sarmiento's Facundo), what does the "desert" symbolize?

- A) The pinnacle of urban civilization and intellectual thought.
- B) A place of vast agricultural wealth and peaceful farming.
- C) The vast, "uncivilized" plains (pampa) associated with barbarism, violence, and nomadic life.
- D) A literal wasteland completely devoid of any human or animal life.

Correct Answer: C

According to the editors' introduction, why is María's character portrayed as relatively ordinary and trivial?

- A) Because she is meant to represent the successful, highly educated elite of Argentina.
- B) To emphasize her role as a fearless, action-hero leader fighting against the Intemperie.
- C) Because her lack of distinctiveness makes her an allegorical "model subject" representing the decline of the Argentine middle class.
- D) Because the author wanted to focus entirely on the male characters in the story.

Correct Answer: C

The presence of the characters Irene and her brother in María's apartment is a direct literary homage to which famous Argentine short story?

- A) "El Aleph" by Jorge Luis Borges.
- B) "Casa tomada" by Julio Cortázar.
- C) "El matadero" by Esteban Echeverría.
- D) "La lluvia de fuego" by Leopoldo Lugones.

Correct Answer: B



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