



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (145)

TEXT: *Las «locas» de postín; Los ambiguos; Lolita buscadora de emociones; El tonto*

AUTHOR: Alvaro Retana

Editors: Maite Zubiaurre / Audrey Harris / Wendy Kurtz

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Alvaro Retana: “The Most Handsome Novelist in the World”

Alvaro Retana (1890-1970) was a flamboyant and transgressive figure, often described as a “Renaissance man” who cultivated literature, painting, music, and set design. Born on a ship off Sri Lanka, he came to Madrid to become a central figure in the city’s bohemian and artistic circles. His life was as extravagant as his literary production, marked by conflicts with his father, early literary scandals, and periods of imprisonment under repressive regimes. Retana epitomized the sicalipsis movement, a vibrant, erotic, and irreverent popular culture that flourished in early 20th-century Spain.

The Sicalipsis and Cultural Revolution

The term sicalipsis refers to a cultural phenomenon in early 20th-century Spain characterized by erotic, obscene, and even pornographic literature and art. Retana’s work, alongside other “gallant” writers like Alberto Insúa and Felipe Trigo, contributed to a boom in short erotic novels that were widely read and sold in kiosks, challenging the “high” culture favored by intellectuals of the Generation of ’98. This popular culture was radically uninhibited, celebrating carnal delights and an urban, modern lifestyle, often in stark contrast to the rural, traditionalist views of canonical literature.

Challenging Gender and Sexual Norms

Retana’s novels are particularly notable for their audacious exploration of sexual ambiguity and gender performance. His characters include “sensual typists, precocious Lolitas, high-class courtesans, ambiguous young men, kept men and women.” Retana delighted in portraying diverse sexualities—homosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals, transvestites—with a unique empathy and humor. Works like *Las «locas» de postín* openly depict gay life in Madrid, showcasing flamboyant and witty gay characters who are proud and joyful, subverting the prevailing homophobic stereotypes of the era.

Las «locas» de postín: A Social and Sexual Commentary

Las «locas» de postín (1919) is a roman à clef that, despite its lighthearted tone, offers a somber reflection on the condition of gay men in a brutally homophobic Spain. Through characters like Rafaelito Hinojosa and the famous transvestite Egmont de Bries, the novel highlights the insults faced by homosexuals while also celebrating their resilience and dignity. It portrays the theatrical stage as a space for gay men to respond to prejudice and assert their identities, providing a “pedagogical tool” for normalizing homosexuality and challenging societal taboos.

Los ambiguos: Deconstructing Masculinity and Class

Los ambiguos (1922) continues Retana’s exploration of sexual fluidity with Julio, a “succulent and ambiguous demigod” and “guayabo” (effeminate young man), who becomes the object of desire and manipulation. The novel critiques the superficiality of high society and the commodification of beauty, particularly in the context of same-sex relationships for financial gain. It subtly questions rigid gender roles and the pursuit of conventional masculinity in a society that often valued physical strength and traditional male attributes.



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Lolita buscadora de emociones: Female Desire and Transgression

In *Lolita buscadora de emociones* (1923), Retana introduces a “tobillera” (precocious young girl) as the protagonist, Lolita Cotollano de Vivar. This novel explores female desire and sensuality with unapologetic frankness. Lolita’s journey of sexual awakening, from incestuous games with her brother to scandalous encounters, portrays a liberated and pagan eroticism. The narrative defies the conventional “guilty sexuality” often found in Spanish literature, presenting heroines who enjoy sex without remorse and challenge societal expectations of female purity.

El tonto: Satire and Anti-Heteronormativity

El tonto (1925), which led to Retana’s imprisonment, is a satirical work that further pushes boundaries. Through Aurelia, a “Scheherazade modern style” who entertains with erotic tales, and characters like Polín, a kept man, Retana dissects the hypocrisy of conventional morality. The novel is a critique of heteronormative sexualities, suggesting that “making a fool of oneself” (the titular “tonto”) can be a liberating act that challenges rigid gender roles and celebrates pleasure beyond procreative purpose.

Retana’s Enduring Legacy

Despite efforts by “official” history and orthodox literary criticism to ignore him, Alvaro Retana’s work represents a true sexual revolution in early 20th-century Spain. He was praised by figures as diverse as Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cejador y Frauca, who called him “the most mischievous, libertine, and uninhibited writer...and the most elegant, amusing, and delicate in form; he is the Spanish Petronius of our time.” His novels, though often censored, celebrated youth, beauty, and unrestrained pleasure, offering a vital counter-narrative to the prevailing conservative discourse of his era.

PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

The Sicalipsis as a Cultural Phenomenon:

Discuss the significance of the sicalipsis movement in early 20th-century Spain. How did Alvaro Retana’s works contribute to this cultural revolution, and what aspects of society did it challenge?

Challenging Gender and Sexual Ambiguity:

Analyze how Retana’s novels portray characters who defy traditional gender roles and sexual norms (e.g., “guayabos,” “tobilleras,” transvestites). How did these representations contribute to a more open discussion of sexuality in Spain?

Social Critique through Satire:

How does Retana use satire, humor, and roman à clef to critique the hypocrisy and moral decay of Restoration Spain? Provide examples from *Las «locas» de postín* or *Los ambiguos*.

The Role of Madrid in Sicalipsis:

Discuss Madrid as a backdrop for Retana’s novels. How does the urban setting, with its cafes, theaters, and bohemian life, reflect and enable the modern, transgressive behaviors depicted?

Retana’s Literary Style and Legacy:

Examine Retana’s prose style, characterized as agile, dynamic, and tragicomic. How does his “frivolous” art offer a valuable historical and sociological document of its time?

Censorship and Transgression:

Discuss the impact of censorship on Retana’s career, particularly his imprisonment. How did his works, despite suppression, continue to challenge authority and influence later generations (e.g., in the Post-Franco era)?



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PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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PART 4: QUIZ BANK

1. Which literary and cultural phenomenon is Alvaro Retana primarily associated with?

- A) Modernismo
- B) Naturalism
- C) Sicalipsis
- D) Realism

Correct Answer: C

2. Retana's works are often described as roman à clef. What does this term mean?

- A) A novel based on a historical event.
- B) A novel that blends fantasy and reality.
- C) A novel that disguises real people and events under fictional names.
- D) A novel focused on philosophical debates.

Correct Answer: C

3. The characters "guayabos" and "tobilleras" refer to:

- A) Exotic fruits from the Caribbean.
- B) Types of traditional Spanish dancers.
- C) Ambiguous young men and precocious young women in Retana's novels.
- D) Political factions in early 20th-century Spain.

Correct Answer: C

4. Alvaro Retana was imprisoned for his writings under which regime?

- A) The Second Republic
- B) The Restoration monarchy
- C) Primo de Rivera's dictatorship
- D) The Franco dictatorship

Correct Answer: C

5. Unlike the tragic or moralizing view of homosexuality in some literature, how does Retana generally portray gay characters in “Las «locas» de postín”?

- A) As tragic victims destined for suicide
- B) As villains corrupting youth
- C) As humorous, flamboyant, and integrated into the entertainment world
- D) As invisible and repressed

Correct Answer: C

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