



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (146)

TEXT: *Antología: Cuentos de la «nena terrible»*

AUTHOR: Silvina Ocampo

EDITOR: Patricia Nisbet Klingenberg

Overview for Instructors

This anthology offers a guided introduction to the short fiction of **Silvina Ocampo (1903–1993)**, one of the most original voices of twentieth-century Hispanic literature and a central figure within the **Sur** circle (Borges, Bioy Casares, Bianco).

The volume selects stories from each of Ocampo's collections published during her lifetime (1937–1988), arranged in **chronological order** to highlight the evolution of her style:

Early surreal and dream-like narratives (*Viaje olvidado*, 1937)

Philosophical and formally tighter stories (*Autobiografía de Irene*, 1948)

Canonical texts from her mature period (*La furia*, *Las invitadas*, *Los días de la noche*)

Late, more experimental pieces (*Y así sucesivamente*, *Cornelia frente al espejo*)

The editorial apparatus (vocabulary notes, cultural and historical references) is designed with **U.S. students** in mind, especially those encountering Argentine culture and Ocampo's work for the first time.

2. Why This Text Works in the Classroom

Short, powerful stories

Ideal for courses with limited time; many stories can be read closely in a single class meeting.

“Nenas terribles” and disruptive female voices

Girls and women who refuse conventional roles, transgress social and moral norms, and destabilize the idea of the “innocent” child.

The fantastic inside the everyday

Carefully realistic Buenos Aires settings where ambiguity, metamorphosis, ghosts, and magical objects appear almost without explanation.

Perspective and voice

First-person child narrators, unreliable points of view, and mixed manuscript forms (diaries, letters) that invite discussion of **narrative voice, focalization, and ambiguity**.

Rich intertextual context

Easy to connect with **Borges, Bioy Casares, Sur**, and with other women writers such as Bombal, Somers, Castellanos, Garro, and Lispector.



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Suggested course contexts:

- Latin American Short Fiction
- Women's Writing in Latin America
- The Fantastic in Hispanic Narrative
- Borges and His Circle
- Advanced language or composition courses (close reading, style, narrative voice)

3. Suggested Reading Sequences

• **A. "Nena terrible" and gender transgression**

Focus on girls as protagonists who resist, misread, or rewrite adult norms.

• **Recommended core stories:**

- «La furia»
- «El vestido de terciopelo»
- «El diario de Porfiria Bernal»
- «El pecado mortal»
- «La hija del toro»

• **Questions to frame the unit:**

- How do child narrators perceive class, gender, and family power structures?
- In what ways do these girls become "malvadas", victims, or both?
- How does Ocampo use literal misunderstandings of language (double meanings, idioms) to create humor and horror?

• **B. The fantastic and ambiguity inside the domestic sphere**

• **Recommended core stories:**

- «Autobiografía de Irene»
- «La sibila»
- «Las vestiduras peligrosas»
- «El fantasma»
- «Clotilde Ifrán»

• **Angles for discussion:**

- What counts as "fantastic" in Ocampo? Is there a clear supernatural event, or is interpretation left open?
- How do objects (clothing, photographs, perfumes) become agents in the narrative?
- In what ways does ambiguity force the reader to participate in "completing" the story?



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- **C. Family, class, and cruelty**
- **Recommended core stories:**

- «El retrato mal hecho»
- «Las fotografías»
- «La continuación»
- «Las esclavas de las criadas»
- «Las invitadas»

- **Discussion axes:**

- Representations of bourgeois mothers and family expectations.
- Servants, children, and “mad” characters as marginal observers of power.
- Humor, cruelty, and violence: why do these stories often provoke laughter and discomfort at the same time?

4. Sample Discussion Questions

- You can adapt these as in-class prompts, online forum questions, or short response assignments.

1. **Perspective and power**

Choose a story with a child narrator (for instance «El vestido de terciopelo» or «La boda»).

- What does the child understand that adults do not?
- What does the child fail to understand, and how does the reader “read beyond” the narrator?

2. **Gender and the body**

In stories such as «La cara en la palma», «Las vestiduras peligrosas» or «El automóvil», how does Ocampo link the female body to love, desire, or escape?

- How do these stories challenge conventional romantic plots?

3. **Fantasy vs. realism**

Compare a story where the fantastic element seems clear («Isis», «Keif») with one where it remains ambiguous («El vestido de terciopelo», «Las fotografías»).

- What strategies does Ocampo use to keep the reader uncertain?
- How does that uncertainty relate to her critique of family, gender, or class?

4. **Humor and discomfort**

Identify moments of black humor in «Las fotografías», «La venganza» or «Malva».

- Why might readers feel they “should not” be laughing?
- How does this discomfort contribute to the story’s impact?



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- **5. Short Written Assignments**

- **1–2 page close reading (Spanish or English)**

Ask students to select a single paragraph where a child narrator misinterprets language or social codes. They should:

- Explain the misunderstanding.
- Analyze how Ocampo uses that misunderstanding to reveal social hierarchies or gender expectations.
- Connect the passage to the overall tone of the story (humorous, cruel, uncanny, etc.).

- **Comparative mini-essay (3–4 pages)**

Compare one Ocampo story with a short text by Borges, Cortázar, Bombal, or Palma (if used in the same course).

Possible prompts:

- Treatments of the fantastic.
- Representation of women and girls.
- Use of narrative voice and unreliability.

6. Assessment Ideas

- **Reading journal:** brief weekly entries where students track recurring motifs (children, clothing, doubles, transformations, letters/diaries).
- **Group presentation:** each group presents one story, focusing on a specific critical lens (gender, class, the fantastic, narrative theory).
- **Creative response:** students rewrite a scene from another character's point of view (for instance, an adult character observing the "nena terrible"), followed by a short reflection on what changes and what remains.

7. Additional Context for Instructors

- Ocampo's early training in **painting** (Fernand Léger, Giorgio de Chirico) informs the visual precision and surreal touches in her prose.
- Her participation in the **Sur** group places her at the center of the same renewal of Hispanic narrative often attributed solely to Borges.
- Critical reception was late and uneven; today she is increasingly taught alongside major Latin American women writers (Bombal, Somers, Castellanos, Garro, Lispector).
- This anthology thus offers not only a rich set of stories but also an excellent entry point for discussing **canon formation, gender, and the boundaries between realism and the fantastic** in twentieth-century Hispanic literature.



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